Exchanges

The Interdisciplinary Research Journal

Volume 9, Issue 3 (Summer 2022) - Special Issue

Issue Highlights:

- Blerds, Loneliness & Representation in Psych
- Everybody can be a Hero…& a Dork in Ms Marvel
- Loneliness & Popularity in Dear Evan Hansen
- Social & Spatial Nerd Representations in Donnie Darko
- Summer Wars & conceptions of the Lonely Male Otaku

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Volume 9, Issue 3 (Summer 2022) - Special Issue

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Exchanges is a scholar-led, peer-reviewed, diamond open access, interdisciplinary, online-only journal dedicated to the publication of high-quality work by researchers in all disciplines for a broad scholarly audience. No author fees or subscription charges are levied, and contributors retain their author rights. Since 2013, the title has attracted innovative research articles, critical essays and interviews from emerging domain experts and early career researchers globally. The title also publishes scholarly work by practitioner authors and independent scholars.

A Managing Editor-in-Chief based at the University of Warwick oversees development, policy and production, while an international Editorial Board comprised of early career researchers provide advice and practically contribute to editorial work. Associate editors are recruited to participate in producing specific special themed issues. Exchanges usually publishes two issues annually, although additional special themed issues are periodically commissioned in collaboration with other scholars.

Exchanges' twin missions are to encourage intellectual exchange and debate across disparate research communities, along with developing academic authorial and editorial expertise. These are achieved through providing a quality assured platform for disseminating research publications for and by explicitly cross-disciplinary audience, alongside ensuring a supportive editorial environment helping authors and editors develop superior academic writing and publishing skills. Achieving enhanced contributor esteem, visibility and recognition within these broader scholarly communities is a further goal.

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Going Where My Heart Will Take Me: Editorial, Volume 9, Part 3

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It's been a long road, Gettin' from there to here.
It's been a long time, But my time is finally near.
I will see my dream come alive at last, I will touch the sky.
And they're not gonna hold me down no more,
No they're not gonna change my mind (**Warren & Watson, 2001**)

Introduction

Welcome to the twenty second edition of *Exchanges: The Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, and our first special issue this year. If you have never read *Exchanges* before, then you are obviously most welcome, as it is always a pleasure for us to have new readers. Naturally, you also as welcome if form part of our ever-growing community of regular readers too. As always, this editorial piece provides an overview of the pieces published within the main body of the issue, alongside offering some reflections spurred by its contents. Moreover, if you read on you will also find I have once more highlighted the various ways readers can contribute to future *Exchanges* issues: especially as part of our 10th birthday issue. There is also a guide to engaging with the journal via our social media presences, which where you will frequently find myself holding forth on quotidian developments and matters of relative import to the title.

It's Been a Long Road

Technically speaking this issue of *Exchanges* you hold in your, figurative, hands was the third special issue we began preparatory work on. Although, with developments in the interim it actually comprises the fourth one to reach publication. From my perspectives this issue started its life as a conversation over coffee at SOAS, London between myself and the two issue leads, Ben Schaper and Filippo Cervelli. Outline plans were made to host an event mid-2020 to which we would gather scholars from around the world to contribute to both the workshop and then subsequently the special issue. We all left that first meeting with a strong consensus that we would likely see a publication of the issue somewhere early to mid-2021.

Oh, what sweet summer children we were in those pre-COVID days.

As everyone reading this will be acutely aware, the events of 2020 happened and our plans for the issue, like so many others that year, suddenly went awry. Thankfully, the shift to remote working and dealing with the lifestyle impacts arising from the pandemic only introduced a delay to our proceedings rather than bringing them crashing to an end. Nevertheless, with the sudden new working arrangements, additional responsibilities and precautionary challenges faced by ourselves and our potential contributors, the special issue took somewhat of a longer gestatory trajectory before it could emerge into the light of day. Incidentally, if you have a desire to learn more about the genesis of this project, you can hear myself in conversation with Ben and Filippo in an episode of the *Exchanges Discourse* podcast from last year (**Exchanges, 2021**).

I am glad to report that by 2021 we were able to bring things back on track. Alongside successfully hosting the workshop over two days and receiving the subsequent manuscript submissions, we were able to also recruit another willing cohort of associate editors to assist in the issue's development. All of which means as articles have begun in recent months to emerge from their editorial and review cycles, and certainly since the publication of our April issue (v9.2), getting this issue ready for launch has been increasingly my central focus. While I always experience elevation and relief with any issue's publication – what editor wouldn't - given the lengthy duration of this particular project I suspect the sense of satisfaction upon its completion and release will be a markedly greater.

In keeping with my own disciplinary research traditions of making one's bias abundantly clear, I should state the issue's theme is one directly of personal interest to me. I guess, in describing my editorial experience on the issue, Jen Barber probably phrased it best:

> *I am one of them. That's why you need me. I am your conduit. I am your bridge. Ich bin ein nerd!* (**'Tramps Like Us', 2008: 17:07**)

Consequently, editing the issue, reading the manuscripts and undoubtedly working alongside my two special issue leads and contributing authors has been a particular pleasure. We routinely refer to *Exchanges* as a journal 'by and for early career researchers', although it's noticeable we have increasingly received more content from established scholars in recent years. Nevertheless, given this special issue's title theme – *the lonely nerd* and our examinations of their cultural representations – combined with the wonderful exchanges enjoyed back at our instigating 2021 workshop (**Johnson, 2021**), I am half tempted to suggest for one issue only we are a journal by and for nerds. However, I might also be inspired to suggest in their heart of hearts – are not all scholars nerds when it comes to their disciplinary and subject passions?

That aside, developing this issue has been an undoubtedly genuinely, fascinating and rewarding experience for myself and I hope this has also been as true for all those who have contributed to its creation in any manner. Certainly, I can only thank my two collaborators for instigating this project on that frosty November day and wish them every success for their future ambitions too.

Papers

Enough self-congratulatory prose! Let us turn to consider the actual intellectually nutritious morsels within this issue, as we turn to consider the contents in a little detail.

Introduction

While I will be highlighting the volume's contents here, I would strongly encourage readers seeking a more contextualised introduction to the issue's theme, to consult **Filippo Cervelli** and **Benjamin Schaper**'s excellent introductory essay. In it the authors contrast the prior reductive, stereotypical representation of the 'lonely nerd' as being recontextualised as 'cool' within a technological age. They highlight how within this special issue, the collected authors works can be viewed as a move away from a predominantly Anglo-American 'hegemony' of interpretation to better encompass the nerd experiences of many nations. This introductory paper concludes by offering by way of interpretive lens a 'five analytical category' system to represent a more diverse positioning of the modern 'nerd' (1).

Articles

Moving to the major articles within the issue, we begin with **Benjamin Schaper**'s *Conquering the Meatspace* wherein he explores conceptions of the lonely nerd within the films *The Social Network* and *Who Am I*. With the modern, public-sphere conception of the 'lonely nerd' as embodied by 'tech-bro' figures such as Zuckerberg and Musk, such examinations continue to make such an examination a timely consideration. In particular the paper explores the disparities and contrasts between these 'lonely' conceptions as presented within both movies, in presenting a more nuanced and even positive image of the nerd (11).

Next, an article which strongly inspired me to seek out the media in question is **Janée Burkhalter**'s piece entitled *'Gus, don't be the comma in Earth, Wind & Fire'*. The paper expands scholarly discourse concerning the representation of the black nerd 'blerd', *Burton 'Gus' Guster* in the American TV programme *Psych*. Burkhalter considers how Gus can reveal much about nerds, Blackness and types of loneliness throughout his portrayal in the series. The author notes especially how despite a lengthy show (8 seasons), how the character is not able to embrace an intimate,

committed relationship to alleviate his 'most painful' type of loneliness (30).

With its recent MCU (Marvel Cinematic Universe) debut, **Alena Cicholewski**'s exploration of loneliness within the *Ms. Marvel* comic books feels like a particularly timely addition to our discourse. In *'A place where everybody is a legendary hero… and a total dork'*, Cicholewski considers the role 'nerddom' plays within the series, and how the community presents a safe space of likeminded individuals for the titular hero to escape interpersonal conflicts and familial pressures. While acknowledging its community as idealised, the author nevertheless heightens an awareness of the diversity of nerd culture as going beyond that comprised solely of a 'white, socially inept young men'. Furthermore, the author argues such work encourages greater understanding between diverse communities through its positive exemplars (46).

In *Within So Many Ways to be an Outsider*, **Sharon Coleclough** examines concepts of loneliness within popular television cultural, specifically as framed within the French TV series *Caïn* and the lead character *Nassim Borel*. The author notes that while nerds may be often perceived as outside the cultural norm, they are often presented within media as possessing qualities which convey a highted value on them. Hence while they are still typically positioned as 'outsiders', such a detached status allows insightful exploration, counterpointing and exposure of more 'typical norms' and mores within their counterparts (62).

For **Rebecca Lewis** musical theatre is an oft neglected area of cultural studies investigations. Correcting this omission, the author offers a psychoanalytic exploration of *The Simultaneity of Loneliness and Popularity in Dear Evan Hansen*. In doing so Lewis draws parallels between the titular character's experiences and those of many in American society. Alongside an examination of the play's acts, the author further considers how its motifs of loneliness and social belonging can stimulate conversations. In this way, musical theatre can within audiences serve to engender reconsiderations of its themes while simultaneously engaging them in its narrative (84).

In *From Misfit to Guide*, author **Daniele Durante** addresses themes of social alienation and perceptions of the *otaku* and *hikikomori* within Japanese culture. At times perceived 'nonconformists', threats to national 'cohesion', Durante highlights how issues of personal anxiety and dejection may be drivers for their societal isolation. It is this latter view, as exemplified through the game Persona 5, that the piece explores to a greater depth: focussing on the character *Sakura Futaba*. As such, the author argues Persona 5 constructs a revisionist and more positive socialised representation of these 'hermit' social groups (104).

Natakua Rumak's article *Sherlock And Shārokku: Nerdy Detectives* meanwhile explores the 'archetypal features' of Sherlock Holmes, in the context of his evident 'nerd-like' characteristics. When viewed through a post-modern lens, the paper argues how modern depictions of such characters seek to explore them from original angles, and thus provide fresh depictions. By introducing shifts in focus, established characters can be naturalistically transplanted into new environments. In this manner, Rumak explores recent British and Japanese representations of Sherlock and how despite the 'drastic changes' from the original source materials, the detective's 'archetypical identity' is maintained and recognisable (124).

In *Social and Spatial Representations of the Nerd in Donnie Darko* **Kwasu Tembo** tackles questions relating to nerds and their interactions with social and personal space. Acting as a close reading of the outstanding film Donnie Darko, the paper considers the titular character, and what their experiences reveal concerning socio-spatial relations as a nerd representative. It concludes by challenging assumptions of disaffected and dissociated 'others' as occupying spaces as nerds, and in particular positions Donnie himself as occupying more of a cultural outside space (145).

Carolin Fleischer-Heininger takes as her central thesis *Loneliness as the New Human Condition in Murakami Ryū's In za miso sūpu*. Beginning with an overview loneliness within early Heisei Japan (largely contemporaneous to the 1990s), the paper progresses to consider Murakami's literary contributions. Through hermeneutically considering the titular work, Fleischer-Heininger considers how loneliness of the period is emblematic of the cultural characteristics recognisable within 1990s Japanese society (162).

Christopher Smith expands on the themes of lonely nerds by considering its intersection with queer identities and nonconforming gender expressions. In *Consumable Bodies, Consumable Self* the author explores the queer potential and otaku subjectivity within the manga *Genshiken*. Smith argues that Genshiken frames the otaku subculture as a social space ready, willing and able to accept such nonconforming gender and sexual identities, because their media and social relationships. Nevertheless, the author sounds a note of caution in accepting such positive conceptualisations as they may diverge from the authentic experiences of queer otaku (185).

Finally, we arrive at **Filippo Cervelli**'s piece, *Saved by the Nerd*, which casts its analytical lens upon Hosoda Mamoru's anime *Summer Wars* and its conceptions of the 'lonely male otaku'. Cervelli argues that Summer Wars acts as counternarrative to such stereotypical perceptions, through offering an otaku-centric which is tale riven with interpersonal riches. Additionally, with a shift to a rural setting, this further dissociates its narrative from that more frequently encountered 'lonely nerd' embedded within an urbanised and technologically-enabled cultural base (**203**).

Calls for Papers

I would be remiss if even in this special issue, if I let our two principal calls for papers to pass-by unhighlighted.

Authentic Interdisciplinarity: Anniversary Issue Call for Papers

Tying into the 10th anniversary issue of *Exchanges: The Interdisciplinary Research Journal* (October 2023) we are seeking contributions which seek to celebrate, challenge or define ideas around authentic interdisciplinarity. Authors may wish to draw on their own research practices and activities or adopt a more holistic stance in engaging with the prior literature and activities within this broadly demarcated field. As is *Exchanges*' tradition, we will potentially consider any work which its authors choose to present which seeks to address the themes evident within this call.

Contributing authors may wish to draw upon methods or methodological practices within a variety of field. Alternatively, they may consider explore if there are discrete or disparate audiences for interdisciplinary rather than unitary disciplinary work in academia today. Additionally, pieces considering, rationalising or amplifying cross-disciplinary discourse concerning centring on the concepts of authentic interdisciplinarity would be warmly received.

Potential authors looking for further inspiration to frame their articles are encouraged to download the full text of the call, which is available on the journal's site (**Exchanges, 2022a**).

Open Calls for Paper

Thematic call aside, you will be pleased to know the journal welcomes submissions throughout the year on any subject, with no deadline. Articles which pass our review processes and are accepted for publication will subsequently appear in the next available issue. As *Exchanges* has a core mission to support the development and dissemination of research by early career and post-graduate researchers, we are especially pleased to receive manuscripts from emerging scholars or first-time authors.

However, contributions from established and senior scholars are also welcomed. Further details of our open call requirements can be found online (**Exchanges, 2022b**).

Submissions may be made under our peer-reviewed articles or review articles format, or alternatively our editorially reviewed shorter critical reflections and conversation formats. [i] There are no submission deadlines and manuscripts are accepted for consideration throughout the year. Manuscripts which pass our review requirements will be published in the next available regular journal issue. Regular issues of *Exchange*s are typically published in late April and October.

Informal Approaches

The Editor-in-Chief welcomes approaches from authors via email, or video-call, to discuss prospective articles for themed and regular issues of the journal.[ii] However, abstract submission or editorial discussions ahead of a submission are not a requirement, and authors may submit complete manuscripts without any prior communication. Authors are encouraged to include a note to editor indicating the format of their work (e.g. article, critical reflection etc.).

All submitted manuscripts will undergo editorial review, with those seeking publication as research articles additionally undergoing formal peer-review by external assessors. Editorial decisions on manuscript acceptance are final, although unsuccessful authors are normally encouraged to consider revising their work for later reconsideration.

Advice for prospective authors appears frequently in our podcasts, editorials and throughout the *Exchanges* author portal pages (**Exchanges, 2022c**). *Exchanges* is a diamond open access, scholar-led journal, meaning there are no author fees or reader subscription charges (**Fuchs & Sandoval, 2013; Bosman et al, 2021**). Authors retain copyright over their work but grant the journal first publication rights as a submission requirement.

Forthcoming Issues

Our next regularly scheduled issue (v10.1) will hopefully be arriving in late October 2022. However, progress towards our other two special issues - relating to the Anthropocene and pluralities of translation – continues apace. As of this editorial's writing I couldn't estimate if they will see publication ahead of the next regular issue, but at the same time I wouldn't entirely bet against this eventuality! Nevertheless, I am happy with the progress being made on them both.

Behind the scenes I have been talking with collaborators concerning calls for further special issue contributions to be launched in 2023 and 2024. While these discussions are well advanced, it is perhaps too soon to talk about these in any detail as of yet. Nevertheless, I hope to be able to enlighten our readers further in the October issue.

As always, keeping a close watch on the journal's announcements page and social media accounts will ensure you see any notifications, new initiatives or calls as they are announced.[iii]

Naturally, as EIC I continue to welcome further approaches and exploratory discussions for further special issues from our contributor community both home and abroad.

Acknowledgements

My thanks as always firstly to all our authors and reviewers for their vital intellectual contributions towards this issue. Without you, producing a quality-assured, peer-reviewed, scholar-led publication would not be possible.

Especial thanks undoubtably goes to Ben Schaper and Filippo Cervelli, for instigating this special issue in the first place, alongside being two of the most gracious and enthusiastic collaborators it's been my pleasure to work alongside. It has been a wonderful have our fantastic associate editors working on the issue too. A round of applause therefore for Anna Rivers, Jo Parsons, Pallavi Joshi and Valentino Paccosi. Each of Your contributions has been deeply appreciated by myself, the special issue leads and I have no doubt your respective authors too. Thank you!

My continued thanks to the members of our Editorial Board for their suggestions for suitable reviewers during the production of this issue. While none of them worked directly on the manuscripts for this issue, nevertheless they have remained valuable source of insight. In a similar vein my gratitude too to Rob Talbot and Yvonne Budden at the University of Warwick for their technical support. My thanks as well to the IAS' John Burden and Sarah Penny for their various conversations and suggestions relating to the journal's progress.

Finally, my grateful thanks as always to our publisher, the Institute of Advanced Study at the University of Warwick for their unceasing financial and strategic backing for *Exchanges* and our related activities. Notably, I'd like to especially salute our outgoing Director, Prof Peter Scott for his unfailing support and enthusiasm throughout my tenure on the journal.

Continuing the Conversation

Exchanges has a range of routes for keeping abreast of our latest news, developments and calls for papers. In-between issues to continue the interdisciplinary exchange of experience underlying our operations you may wish to listen to our growing range of podcasts or read our blog posts. Please do contribute as we value hearing the thoughts of our author and readership communities.

Editorial Blog:	blogs.warwick.ac.uk/exchangesias/
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Twitter:	@ExchangesIAS

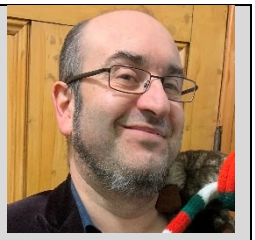
As Editor-in-Chief I am also always pleased to discuss potential publications, collaborative opportunities or invites to talk further about *Exchanges* and our activities. Contact me if you would like to arrange a consultation via Teams – or even (dare I say it) on campus!

The Exchanges Discourse

More new episodes of the companion podcast series, *The Exchanges Discourse*, have appeared over the past few months. As always, episodes continue to include a focus on including advice for new academic authors. Once more with the publication of this issue, I will be inviting our latest authors to appear as guests on the podcast over the coming months, as a compliment to their written work.

I heartily encourage all readers of the journal, and especially first-time authors, to like, share and subscribe to our episodes: available on all major podcast platforms, and specifically hosted on the *Anchor.fm* site.[iv] All episodes are free to stream or download and listen to at your leisure. Naturally, we also welcome approaches from potential guests or suggestions for topics we could address as part of future episodes too.

Podcast:	anchor.fm/exchangesias



Gareth has been *Exchanges'* Editor-in-Chief since 2018. Along with a doctorate in cultural academic publishing practices (Nottingham Trent), he also possesses various other degrees in biomedical technology (Sheffield Hallam), information management (Sheffield) and research practice (NTU). His varied career includes extensive experience in running regional and national professional bodies, academic libraries, project management and applied research roles. His professional and research interests focus on power-relationships within and evolution of scholarly academic publication practice, viewed from within social theory and political economic frameworks. He has extensive skills in areas including academic writing, partner relationship management and effective communication practices. He is an outspoken proponent for greater academic agency through scholar-led publishing. Gareth is also a Fellow of the *Higher Education Academy*, and hosts a number of podcasts, including *The Exchanges Discourse*.

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Endnotes

[i] **Word counts**: We do not include abstracts, references, endnotes or appendences for the purposes of establishing a submissions word count. While submissions just over or under their word count will still be initially considered for review, those significantly in excess of these numbers will be declined and returned to their authors with advice for revision.

[ii] **Contact Details**: The EIC's address is given at the head of this article, and on the Exchanges Contact pages. https://exchanges.warwick.ac.uk/index.php/exchanges/about/contact

[iii] **Initiating Special Issues:** If you are seeking a suitable home for a dedicated volume of the journal we certainly welcome outline discussions for the ways in which *Exchanges* could become your publication partner. While our facilities are modest, we have been excited to work with various scholars on special issues past and future (**Exchanges, 2022b**). You are warmly invited to contact myself as Editor-in-Chief to discuss any prospective ideas, without commitment. You may also wish to listen to a past episode of *The Exchanges Discourse* (**Exchanges, 2020**) wherein I discuss the thinking and pragmatic concerns around initiating a special issue collaboration with our journal.

[iv] **Podcast**: The podcast is also streamed on Spotify, Apple and Google Podcasts and other podcasting platforms. Search for it by name.

Socially Inept? The perceived loneliness of nerds

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Editorial review: This article has been subject to an editorial review process

Abstract

This introduction establishes the main perspectives of the special issue on the relationship between loneliness and nerds. We argue that the stereotype of the lonely nerd is becoming increasingly reductive in the technological age at the turn of the 21st century, in which being a nerd is not only perceived as cool but in which nerds also occupy central positions of power. We also stress the transnational perspective of the special issue. While the majority of studies on fictional representations of nerds focuses on the Anglo-American context, the issue moves away from this hegemony, also engaging with studies on narratives of nerds produced in other cultural contexts, ranging from Europe to Asia. This informs the issue's interdisciplinary approach, whereby intersections between different cultural contexts are reflected in connections across various media that have shaped the perception of lonely nerds. Finally, we challenge the traditional perception of the nerd as white, male, heterosexual, and middle class and establish five analytical categories that will help us to present a more diverse image of the nerd, particularly with regard to race, gender, and sexual orientation.

Keywords: nerds; loneliness; perceptions; special issue; introduction

The idea for this special issue originated from a series of informal conversations on a potential future collaboration that we had both at Durham and Oxford. Discussing an interdisciplinary project that would bring together our different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and our research interests in literature, film, and popular culture across distinct regions, nerds and loneliness soon emerged as a common denominator. Whilst the topic of fictional representations of lonely nerds initially – arguably due to the presumed infantility and lowbrow character of nerd culture – rather seemed to be a *Schnapsidee*,[i] it soon became apparent that nerds are a much more complex cultural reality. Fiction on the one hand plays a crucial role in the formation of nerd networks: As avid consumers of popular culture, nerds around the globe can be connected through a shared fandom, so that the appreciation of fiction establishes the basis for new meaningful relationships. On the other hand, nerds represent a global cultural reality that, through its variegated fictional representations, articulates critical visions of momentous issues in contemporary society. Analysing especially representations of nerds in the arts allows to interrogate a plethora of intersecting aspects, such as gender, race, sociological implications, consumer culture, and enables to understand how fiction itself may posit transgressive recombinations of the lonely nerd archetype. Thus challenging long-standing assumptions, this special issue uses the lonely nerd archetype to interrogate the formation and dissolution of social bonds in 20th and 21st century societies.

The association of nerds with loneliness proves particularly crucial in light of the connotations surrounding the definitions of nerds. For example, the 2016 entry in the Oxford English Dictionary defines a 'nerd' as 'an insignificant, foolish, or socially inept person; a person who is boringly conventional or studious. Now also: specifically a person who pursues an unfashionable or highly technical interest with obsessive or exclusive dedication.' The use of a dictionary entry attests to the term's popularity in the public domain. While a nerd may be perceived as such because of specific interests or intellectual prowess, the association of the category with a lack of social skills is fundamental. Studies have highlighted how in schools high-achieving students, although they may be appreciated by their families, fear to be identified as 'nerds' exactly because of the widespread understanding of the term's derogatory implications and indications of unpopularity (**Brown, Mory & Kinney, 1994; Pelkner & Boehnke, 2003; Pelkner, Günther & Boehnke, 2002**). Rentzsch, Schütz and Schröder-Abé (**2011: 144**) illustrate that in such environments the label 'nerd' includes traits of 'being ambitious, intelligent, having good grades, studying a lot, displaying success publicly, being shy, having few friends, not wearing fashionable clothes, not being athletic, and not being

physically attractive'; being considered a nerd then 'goes along with a lack of acceptance and being rejected.'

On the other hand, the widespread identification of nerds as social outcasts extends also outside of the school environment, and can involve serious consequences beyond popularity in a group of peers. Japan is a prime example of this as the birthplace of the phenomenon of *otaku* who, while not emphasising intelligence and studiousness like 'nerds', still are perceived as 'dedicated, even obsessive fans, most commonly of *anime* (Japanese animation), *manga* (comic books) and computer/console games' (**Slater & Gailbraith, 2011**), are inextricably linked with a generic lack of social common sense (**Kam, 2013**), and are therefore included in the broad transnational approach to nerds in this issue. *Otaku*'s perceived social inability has put them on the spot for a wide range of social debates surrounding their propensity for anti-social behaviour and perverse sexuality. This escalated emblematically with the media response to the incident of Miyazaki Tsutomu, a young man who was arrested in 1989 for molesting and murdering four elementary-school girls. After the police found over 5,000 videotapes, manga and anime-related materials, and pornographic items in his room, he was labeled an 'otaku' by the media, and made to symbolise a whole category in the ensuing moral panic which spread in Japan, and which, Kinsella writes, implicated larger concerns on contemporary youth such as the negative influence of popular culture (especially manga) on their sexuality, and their extreme individualism impeding social relationships with others (**1998: 313-14**). Therefore, wherever they may be coming from, both in terms of geography and socio-cultural backgrounds, the discourse on nerds can hardly be separated from notions of asociality or anti-social behaviours.

Despite shifting particulars, the trope of the anti-social or socially inept nerd carries over in the fictional representations across cultures; audiences expect this too (**Bednarek 2012: 203**). A foremost example of this is the popular comedy show *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-2019), that plays exactly on the above elements of intelligence, obsessive popular culture interests, and lack of social skills. Even though a group of high-achieving nerdy scientists are not isolated, but come to the foreground as protagonists, still in most situations they are characterised as deviating from a widespread connotation of social normality, both because of their skills and interests, since the 'sitcom reflects and perpetuates an understanding of scientific knowing as explicitly divorced from (and even opposed to) sociality' (**Willey & Subramaniam, 2017: 17**), but also for the way they speak (**Bednarek, 2012**).

Following the perceived exclusion from and opposition to sociality, identifying and particularly being labelled as a nerd – which equals being

rejected from or even victimized by a peer group for not conforming to its rules – is a main cause for loneliness (see e.g. **Juvonen, Nishina & Graham 2000** or **Rentzsch, Schütz & Schröder-Abé, 2011**). The loneliness of the nerd stemming from social exclusion can then lead to further mental (e.g. **Prinstein & La Greca 2002; Erzen & Cikrikci 2018** or **van den Brink et al. 2018**) and physical ailments (e.g**. Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008** or **Hawkley et al. 2010**) so that loneliness can be understood as embodied, which transcends earlier notions of loneliness that defined it as a purely psychological condition (for the development of various notions of loneliness see **Bound Alberti, 2019**). In this respect, it does not surprise that loneliness enters the public interest as a crucial societal health issue and is increasingly understood as a mass disease or epidemic (e.g. **Monbiot, 2014** or **Spitzer, 2018**) at the turn of the 21st century. Public discourse hence centres around a pathologisation of loneliness, which follows breakthroughs in medical research on loneliness – e.g. by US neuroscientist John T. Cacioppo – that proved that loneliness can pose a severe health risk (e.g. higher risks for cardiovascular diseases, stroke, and obesity) and leads to an increased mortality rate. Societies around the world have started to react to the problem. In the UK, for example, the government created a Ministry for Loneliness in January 2018, in order to fight the real and diagnosable scourge of loneliness that particularly affects teenagers, the elderly and the disabled (**Prime Minister's Office, 2018**); in Sweden, housing projects such as the Sällbo experiment with new forms of communal living, bringing together various generations and nationalities (**Robertson 2020**); in Israel and Japan, companies are testing social robots as a cure for loneliness (**Rosenzweig, 2020**), just to name a few examples. What becomes clear is that particularly in the past decade, which also saw the publications of various self-help companions such as Cheryl Rickman's *Navigating Loneliness: How to Connect with Yourself and Others* (2021) or popular scientific works such as Olivia Laing's *The Lonely City* (2016), loneliness is not only recognised as acute societal issue but is also actively fought.

If we follow Cacioppo et al., who suggest that 'efforts to reduce loneliness in society may benefit by aggressively targeting the people in the periphery to help repair their social networks and to create a protective barrier against loneliness' (**2009: 989**), it becomes clear that nerds, who are positioned in the periphery or outside of their peer groups, represent an ideal test case in early 21st century debates on loneliness, when particularly new technologies such as the internet and social media are complicating traditional notions of loneliness when we are constantly connected through social media and still feeling lonely (see e.g. **Turkle, 2011** or **Papacharissi, 2018a**). Whilst nerds are perceived to be lonely, they are not only creating the technologies that connect people globally but

also engaging in virtual and non-virtual social networks based on the passion for a shared interest. Eventually, this special issue on fictional representations of loneliness and nerds will ask whether nerds, as the public stereotype suggests, are necessarily lonely or whether particular nerd communities united by enthusiasm – be it, for example, for science, technology, or a specific cultural fandom – indeed create the barrier against loneliness and provide the nerd with meaningful social bonds.

Especially in times when the psychological and physical tolls of loneliness are highlighted by the pandemic and lockdown experiences, early 21st century societies have been forced to rethink notions of loneliness, the value of unmediated human interaction in our daily lives, and the desire for connection in embodied or virtual spaces. Focussing on fictional representations of nerds, our special issue aims to intervene in contemporary debates on loneliness and social bonds via an analysis of the nerd's positionality within or outside of society. Nerds provide an ideal test case for critically engaging with these societal processes as questions of intergroup behaviour dynamics, belonging, and loneliness – both derived from physical and/or emotional isolation – are inherent to the nerd's cultural and societal perception. Hence, this intersection with relevant societal discourses on loneliness and social bonds bestows debates about nerds with cultural and societal significance so that the articles on the representations of lonely nerds in various artforms contained in this special issue not only allow us to challenge the perception of the nerd as the lonely 'other' but also to interrogate relevant phenomena of isolation and loneliness in general.

Another important feature of the special issue is its transnational perspective. Whilst academic studies on nerds as the subjects of artistic representations are increasing, most of them remain firmly anchored in North America, for example Kathryn E. Lane's edited anthology *Age of the Geek* (**2018**), analysing the influence of television, film, and social media on spreading the stereotype in the US. On the other hand, studies on comparable phenomena outside of this region, such as Galbraith, Kam and Kamm's edited volume *Debating Otaku in Contemporary Japan* (**2015**), apply a variety of approaches, but equally consider the phenomenon as inherently rooted in the East Asian country's specific cultural context. Conversely, while still acknowledging cultural specificities, our issue's focus on nerds' defining association with loneliness highlights a transnational aspect in their representations which allows a comprehensive comparative approach that exceeds specific regions, ultimately identifying relevant parallels with marginal identities across different traditions and formats. Thus, at a broad level, the articles included establish an overarching dialogue that moves between cultures (from France to Japan, from the US to Germany), also showing crucial

intersections between genres and media that have traditionally influenced perceptions of nerds (superhero comics, science fiction, TV, animation), and those not usually associated with (re)articulations of the lonely nerds (detective stories, biopics, novels, musicals).

These dialogues underscore our overall approach that brings together objects of analysis from various media and regions under wider thematic analytical categories in order to broaden the scope of how sociability can be construed beyond archetypical representations of the young, white, middle-class, and male lonely nerd. To show the alternative potential for connections across different cultures and media, the articles in this issue to varying degrees address the following five analytical categories: The *first category* focuses on works that productively engage with prior nerd-narratives to subvert traditional notions of the lonely nerd and that enable us to re-read the fictional predecessors through the lens of nerds' ability to form social bonds. The *second category* highlights gender aspects in the formation of nerds' spaces and interactions. Articles examine alternative constructions moving away from clear-cut notions of stereotypical masculinity and heteronormative practices. The *third category* examines the relationship between loneliness and mental health. Nerd identities and stories are deeply intertwined with emotional and psychological challenges, ranging from the lonely exceptionality of genius, to the ramifications of traumatic experiences that need to be worked through to firmly ground the nerd amongst peers. The *fourth category* explores nerd communities' capacity to encompass kindred spirits from ethnic minority groups, which are marginalised within predominantly white societies because of their skin colour or religious beliefs. Articles analyse both processes of othering but also how a shared nerddom has the potential to instigate a reconsideration of the marginality of the non-white nerd. Studies on the *fifth category* explore how nerds' potential for sociability is articulated through navigating space, a space that can be intended in multiple iterations, from the ideological and technological divide between the city and the countryside, to a liminal space that may be physica within the same city, or emotional and social, inhabited by individuals at the margins.

The five analytical categories should not be understood as compartmentalised units but are in dialogue with each other – highlighting the overlaps in the various treatments, and the complexity of the nerds' identity. Thus, the scholarly approach of the issue reflects exactly the hybridity of the lonely nerd trope, one that cannot be read in isolation from comparable interactions, but which should be considered within a network of multi-faceted societal processes. At the end of this journey, what started as a *Schnapsidee* has become a volume that, while engaging with themes acutely debated across various disciplines and public

discourses, reinforces the capacity of fiction to rearticulate and shape social and cultural realities, and to envision future social communities providing tangible alternatives to the nerds' perceived loneliness.

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Endnotes

[i] The beautiful German term for a foolish idea and literally one born out of liquor.

Conquering the Meatspace: The lonely nerd in David Fincher's The Social Network (2010) and Baran bo Odar's Who Am I (2014)

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Abstract

This article analyses how Baran bo Odar's film Who Am I: Kein System ist sicher (2014) productively engages with its US predecessor The Social Network (2010), directed by David Fincher, to undermine the notion of the lonely nerd. Both films revolve around the distinction between social connections in real and virtual life: on the one hand, this separation allows them to examine the validity of an online community as a remedy for loneliness and a potential catalyst for relationships in embodied meatspace; on the other hand, this enables them to self-reflexively discuss the workings of film narratives. The article will demonstrate how Fincher's film challenges the notion of the lonely nerd by highlighting its constructedness, while presenting a nerdy protagonist who is not able to overcome his real-life isolation. Who Am I, in contrast, takes on the lonely nerd as a transnationally recognisable archetype mediated through Hollywood's cinematic hegemony, moulds it into a specifically German context, and establishes firm social bonds for the nerd in meatspace.

Keywords: The Social Network; Who Am I; German film; Facebook; loneliness; nerds

Introduction

In the early twenty-first century, computer nerds and loneliness have gained high public visibility in association with the tech industry's increasing economic, political, and societal prowess. On the one hand, computer nerds such as Facebook's founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg occupy powerful positions not only within their companies, but also within political decision-making and public discourses around social media and social bonds. On the other hand, loneliness has been described as a modern pandemic (e.g. **Spitzer, 2018; Monbiot, 2014;** and **Bound Alberti, 2019**), with the illness metaphor highlighting the centrality of loneliness as a contagious mental and physical ailment with potentially lethal outcomes, and emphasising its status as an acute social issue in the early decades of the new millennium. Loneliness, nerds, and technological advancement intersect where traditional definitions of nerds associate anyone displaying social awkwardness/isolation and technological affinity as one particular branch of nerddom (e.g. **Eglash, 2002; Kendall, 2011; Bodner 2018;** and **Lane, 2018a**). As several recent publications on cultural representations of nerds, loneliness, and social media point out (e.g. **Earnest, 2018; Kohout, 2022; Lane, 2018a; Lane, 2018b;** and **Vrooman, Sia, Czuchry & Bollinger, 2018**), the increasing influence of technology – in particular of social media–on daily life and a greater variety of cultural representations of nerds (**Lane, 2018b**) have initiated a diversification of traditionally negative stereotypes of nerds as their 'almost superhuman ability to control the inner workings of technology' was now seen as 'badge of honor' (**Ibid: 10**). Using social media and other virtual social environments to connect, nerds were able to form online nerd networks that more and more frequently also led to offline equivalents so the nerd was less othered in opposition to a heterogenous society (**Lane, 2018b**) – not the least also because of current economic demands that enable nerds to make a career in embodied life out of their seemingly lonely endeavours in the virtual (**Earnest, 2018**).

If we follow historian Fay Bound Alberti's definition that contemporary loneliness is a 'social phenomenon' that depends on a version of the self developed in relation to an 'external, secular identification with peer groups and communities that share, and outwardly perform, rituals of belonging' (**Bound Alberti, 2019: 37-38**), then this impacts our discussion of nerds, loneliness, and technology in two ways: first, whilst nerds traditionally tended to be seen as social outsiders, they often have a strong connection with a small peer group of like-minded people, whose connection might well be their passion for technology; second, the internet and social media can also easily provide the platform for performing the relevant rituals of belonging to maintain connection within a peer group. In this context, social media sites such as Facebook have

entered public discourse as a potential cure for loneliness. Meanwhile, their creators have become global icons who create social bonds through global connectivity and who inspire fictional works such as David Fincher's Zuckerberg-biopic *The Social Network* (**2010**) or Danny Boyle's *Steve Jobs* (2015). Recent sociological research on loneliness and social media, however, has been divided over whether the technology in question can fulfil the desire for human connection that is projected onto it. *In Alone Together* (**2011**), Sherry Turkle recognises the arrival of a 'robotic moment' in which people demonstrate willingness to accept machines as romantic partners and friends, so that technology becomes the tool with which loneliness can be defeated. She also asks whether performed virtual intimacy is a sufficient substitute for real-life interaction (**Cf. Turkle, 2011: 9–10 and 12**). In the introduction to *A Networked Self and Love*, Zizi Papacharissi states that 'Facebook does not cure loneliness' (**Papacharissi, 2018a: 4**), meaning that solely relying on technology to resolve a lack of social bonds will not prove to be successful. Moreover, Bound Alberti states that the 'paradox of social media is that it produces the same isolation and loneliness that it seeks to overcome' (**Bound Alberti 2019, 38**). In line with this assessment that social media can both alleviate and foster loneliness, films such as Fincher's *The Social Network* or Baran bo Odar's *Who Am I: Kein System ist sicher* (**2014**) tap into the creative potential of nerds, technology, and loneliness in fiction. What is crucial in their depiction of the issue is the validity of real-life and virtual networks and their relation to each other. Turkle argues that new technologies have created a 'new state of the self…split between the screen and the physical real, wired into existence through technology' (**Turkle 2011, 16**). The films explore this tension between relationships in real and virtual life, ask whether virtual relationships represent a lack of companionship, or if the simplification of real-life relationships via virtual simulation is the desired ideal (for the latter see **Turkle 2011, 17**).

In the two films to be considered in detail here, *The Social Network* and *Who Am I*, the computer nerds Mark Zuckerberg and Benjamin Engel emerge as test cases for lonely protagonists that navigate the challenges of the real and the digital world in their search for human connection. My comparative analysis will focus on the German film's engagement with the American predecessor and which aims to deconstruct preconceived assumptions about the stereotype of the lonely nerd. Even the term 'nerd' did not circulate widely in Germany until the late 2000s and particularly prominently only when the *Piratenpartei* – Pirate Party Germany – was founded in 2009 (**Kohout, 2022: 18 and 122**). Both the term and the corresponding social role then had significant social impact with the huge success of the US-sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* (2007–2019; in Germany the series only premiered in July 2009), which further coincided with a more

widespread acceptance of technology and of popular culture (**Ibid: 210 and 126–7**). Last, Germany supposedly became a 'Nerdrepublik' (republic of nerds) during the Covid-19 pandemic (**Ibid: 235**) – a time when technology played a major role in connecting people kept apart by protective measurements such as social distancing. With regard to the fictional representation of nerds, *Who Am I*'s productive engagement with its Anglo-American predecessors illustrates what Randall Halle calls a 'broader trend in German and European filmmaking, which is toward a diversification of genres, themes, production values, and aesthetic qualities' (**Halle, 2020: 522**). *Who Am I* is a coproduction between the German companies Wiedemann & Berg and Seven Pictures, and the German branch production arm of Columbia Pictures, which thematically and economically links Hollywood and the German film industry. Through the Danish actress Trine Dyrholm as Hanne, as well as episodes set in New York and the Hague, the film presents an international network of investigators and hackers, which is further emphasised by the frequent use of English rather than German as the hackers' *lingua franca*. Moreover, the film premiered in the Toronto Film Festival's section on Contemporary World Cinema in 2014, whose guiding principle promises 'compelling stories, global perspectives' (**Toronto, 2020**), which suggests an international appeal that transcends the German film market. *Who Am I* is a hybrid transnational film not only on a production level, but also on a visual and a content level: Whilst its main setting is never explicitly named, Berlin's landmark television tower can be seen in the background when Benjamin states that the city was not interested in him (**bo Odar, 2014**). Associations with German institutions such as the Bundesnachrichtendienst – BND (Federal Intelligence Service), well-known television stations and news anchors covering the hacker group CLAY's actions further augment the distinctly German setting. Mirroring possibilities for connection created by the internet, the film thus adapts internationally popular narratives whereby the lonely computer nerd functions as a recognisable archetype from the Anglo-American context, which in turn provides a means of transcending the Germanophone context to make the story palatable for a broad audience.[i] In this article, I will show how Baran bo Odar and Antje Friese use the established narrative of the digital native unable to find connection in real life to mislead its audience and to establish a more positive image of a nerd firmly grounded in real-life friendships, which in line with this special edition's overall agenda not only provides a more nuanced image of the nerd in their social environment but also a transnational study of nerddom that transcends dominant Anglo-American narratives.

Status Update: The Social Network's Mark Zuckerberg and the quest to belong

In *The Social Network*'s final scene, Marylin Delpy (Rashida Jones) – a member of a team of lawyers for Mark Zuckerberg (Jesse Eisenberg) – points to the mechanics of the film's narrative on a meta level. Telling Mark about her specialism in jury selection, she states that her most important task is to fashion 'what a jury sees when they look at a defendant. Clothes, hair, speaking style, likability' (**Fincher 2010**). Marylin's function within the lawsuit is hence similar to that of a film director who, in collaboration with an actor, creates a particular image of their protagonist. The film's portrayal of the Facebook founder matches many typical aspects of the nerd: Foundas, whose article – echoing the 1984 film *Revenge of the Nerds* directed by Jeff Kanew and the narrative trope it established – is entitled 'Revenge of the Nerd', describes Zuckerberg as pale and slight in his signature hoodie and 'fuck-you flip-flops' (**Foundas, 2010: 42**), which resembles the stereotypical appearance of a nerd; Jones hints at typical non-physical features of nerds when he says that Eisenberg's Zuckerberg is 'socially awkward' because he mimics functions of the internet when interacting with the people around him (**Jones, 2010: 35**). This image was emphasised in *The Social Network*'s marketing campaign, particularly the film's trailer, in which Scala and the Kolacny Brothers' cover of Radiohead's *Creep* (1992) offers 'a dynamic performance of Facebook's bedrock of isolation' (**Benson-Allott, 2011: 58; Tyree, 2011: 54**). This highlights the nerd's status as a lonely social outsider, who is unsuccessful in romantic matters and hence has a tendency towards obsession, often discomfortingly so. The film's playing with the public image of the real Mark Zuckerberg and the socially established image of the nerd has hence been read by several academics not only as a narrative about Facebook as such, but also about life in the digital age, with the computer nerd as its main protagonist.

Whilst this is true, I would argue that Fincher and screenwriter Aaron Sorkin further demonstrate their awareness of the constructed nature of these narratives by discussing the effect on the audience within the film itself. In the final scene, Marylin claims that she can get a jury to believe anything, no matter if it is the truth or not: 'Doesn't matter, I asked the question and now everybody's thinking about it. You've lost your jury in the first 10 minutes' (**Fincher, 2010**). Within the constellation of a trial, the jury occupies the same position as the film's audience. The film's ability to take fictional liberties in the depiction of the real-life entrepreneur Mark Zuckerberg enables *The Social Network* to manipulate the audience's perception, which also mimics the identity performance of a social network profile – Turkle compares Facebook profiles to 'being in a play.

You make a character' (**Turkle, 2011: 183**). This conflation of various processes of fictionalisation is further demonstrated when Mark appears from the perspective of a diegetic camera filming him, with him rendered a tiny, highly fictionalised profile of his real-life equivalent, removed from the real Mark Zuckerberg by one more diegetic level. In doing so, the film reveals the complexities of constructedness. In relation to the cultural preconception of the socially awkward lonely nerd, likeability emerges as the decisive factor upon which the jury/audience will base their verdict.

When Marylin suggests that creation myths need a devil, she highlights the fictionality of the portrayal which puts the nerd in the position of a villain (**Foundas, 2010**). Within the context of Fincher's oeuvre, Tyree speaks of 'Fincher's isolated freaks': 'almost all of them, like Mark, are portrayed as male loners without close family or successful love relationships, many are independently wealthy and incapable of enjoying their money, and more than a few develop ambitious schemes that are obsessive if not deeply antisocial or murderous' (**Tyree, 2011: 46**). Particularly on the part of the audience, this perception is, of course, heavily influenced by Mark's story being told from the perspective of his plaintiffs, the Winklevoss twins (Armie Hammer) and Eduardo Saverin (Andrew Garfield). That Mark is not a traditional villainous antagonist[ii] is particularly clear from his interaction with the former. Tyree argues that with the exception of Marylin, Eduardo, and Mark's ex-girlfriend Erica Albright (Rooney Mara) everyone in the film is an asshole, especially the twins (**Tyree, 2011: 48**). Indeed, with their inherited privilege, physical strength, and condescending attitude towards Mark (e.g. they receive him in the entrance area of their club thereby denying him access), they are the 21st-century version of the nerd's traditional opponent, the jock, and appear as pompous snobs steeped in the privileged atmosphere of New England, as is drastically evident in Cameron's exclamation: 'Let's gut the frigging nerd' (**Fincher, 2010**). Mark's triumph over them demonstrates a crisis of toxic masculinity that is overcome by the tech-savvy intelligence of the physically feeble Mark, which is obvious in the highly stylised scene of the Henley boat race, as the video of the twins' defeat comes to circulate on Facebook (**Schreiber, 2016**).

Whilst Mark does appear sympathetic in comparison with the twins, the ousting of Eduardo, who is tricked out of the company by Mark and Sean Parker (Justin Timberlake), eventually discredits Mark, as he has betrayed his 'only friend' (**Fincher, 2010**) and one of the film's few characters with social competence and warmth. When Marylin advises Mark to aim for an out-of-court settlement because the jury will not take his side, it becomes obvious that however good or bad his intensions might have been, it is his lack of social skills and the inability to form proper attachments, presumably typical for a nerd, which become the main aspect of Mark's

villainousness and turn the audience against him. As Marylin says, 'You're not an asshole, Mark. You're just trying so hard to be' (**Fincher, 2010**). Marylin's statement about Mark closes the narrative circle of the plot as it echoes a remark made by Erica in the opening break-up scene.

The film's first scene can be read as a *mise en abyme*: it establishes the central conflicts of the film's portrayal of social networks and functions as the origin scene for the creation of Facebook. The central question that *The Social Network* asks is about the interplay between Mark's identity in real and virtual life. Turkle calls the engagement with social media 'identity work', which 'can take place on social-networking sites as well, where one's profile becomes an avatar of sorts, a statement not only about who you are but who you want to be. … They … ask you to compose and project an identity' (**Turkle, 2011: 180**). For Mark, the identity work primarily concerns projecting a certain status of belonging and social connectivity, whereas his real life is characterised by rejection and exclusion. This first happens in the real world: the film opens within the most common setting of social life and connectivity at university: a student bar. Mark would normally not be able to participate in this social setting due to the United States' drinking laws – only Erica's social connections help him to get past the mechanism for inclusion and exclusion which he cannot control.

This setting frames the main topic of conversation, which leads to the break-up of the young couple: the prestigious, exclusive clubs at Harvard, which – according to Mark – guarantee social advancement and to which Erica needs to gain access in order to form social networks. Particularly when their conversation concerns these exclusive clubs, cinematographer Jeff Cronenweth's camerawork isolates Mark from Erica in her role as a down-to-earth student at Boston University. The film opens with a two-shot of Mark and Erica in profile, then follows the dialogue's rhythm via shot/counter-shot medium close-ups of the speaker in one corner of the frame, with the other's back in the picture on the opposite site (always the left side for Erica, and the right side for Mark). It becomes clear that they do not really fit into one another's picture. This is stressed when both of them are shown in separate close-ups when they first mention the clubs and discuss Mark's chances of getting accepted. The film visually performs the break-up between the two, which leaves Mark isolated.

Mark never really shares the screen with anyone in the film – be it during the meeting in the Winklevoss twins' club, or during the party in the house rented for Facebook in Palo Alto, which he watches alone in the garden through the window as a screen that separates his world. Whilst this might appear as a clear separation between the nerd living in virtual space and real life, *The Social Network* does not present this as so clear-cut. Erica wraps up the opening scene with a damning assessment of Mark: 'Listen,

you're probably gonna be a very successful computer person. But you're gonna go through life thinking that girls don't like you because you're a nerd. And I want you to know, from the bottom of my heart, that that won't be true. It'll be because you're an asshole' (**Fincher, 2010**). The narrative of the romantically unsuccessful lonely computer nerd is central here. Mark's nerddom will be beneficial for a tech-based career that will bring financial success and social status as an entrepreneur. In private matters, nerddom is distinguished from social isolation, with the notion of the lonely computer nerd debunked as a rhetorical strategy to excuse appalling social behaviour and to blame social isolation on others, rather than engaging with its more complex personal aspects and isolating processes.

Let us turn back to Turkle's question about how far simulating social bonds online is enough to not feel lonely and to compensate for failures in real life. Turkle perceives this to be true for many internet users who use the virtual as practice for the real (**cf. Turkle, 2011: 193**) and achieve a crossover effect, in which a rich virtual life with people one would not ordinarily meet enters the real (**Ibid: 214f**). For Mark, this initially works the other way around with Erica's rejection – tellingly, the song played in the bar, The White Stripes' *Ball and Biscuit* (2003), includes the lyrics 'And right now you couldn't care less about me / But soon enough you will care, by the time I'm done', which clearly sets Mark on the trajectory of the revenge-trope of traditional nerd-narratives (see **Kohout, 2022: 62–73** and **159–68**), where at the end the lonely High School nerd would not only take revenge on the male rival of the jock, but also on the women who rejected him once their tech-skills made them successful entrepreneurs. Moreover, his inability to join a club serves as an impetus to create his own virtual one, much bigger and more illustrious. A further rejection by Erica, during which she states that she has never heard of Facebook, increases his ambition to expand the reach of his website, which she condescendingly describes as a 'computer game' (**Fincher, 2010**), further removing the nerd Mark from the social interactions of the adult world.

Nevertheless, the creation of Facebook is not portrayed as a solitary achievement, as Mark has support from not only the suave Eduardo but also other 'Harvard undergraduates, who are depicted as geeks in Gap hoodies, drinking light beer and doing shots', which is to say 'not just as the social media network-to-be, but as always-ready socially and cultural embedded practices' (**Dinnen, 2018: 22**). This shows that the shared interest of the computer nerds and the performance of rituals of belonging online can be manifest in real-life interactions and connections (see **Turkle, 2011: 220– 221**). Processes of connection and isolation – in public and private – influence the functions of Facebook when Mark states that his goal is 'taking the entire social structure of college and putting it online'

(**Fincher, 2010**). For the more public side, the film's intercutting and parallelising highlight Mark's ambition to create a virtual club, e.g. the initiation rituals and work parties of Facebook versus the clubs, or the creation of Facemash and Mark's blogging versus a party at a final club, where women are subjected to the male gaze with equal brutality (see **Tyree, 2011; Schreiber, 2016;** and **Dinnen 2018**). In private, Mark loses intimate relationships as the film progresses – Erica, his only friend Eduardo, and Sean Parker, who stumbles upon Facebook, and ends up enabling the public sharing of 'every mistake and false step' (**Turkle, 2011: 186**), replicating real-life behaviour and multiplying it through the net's global reach. The rapidly increasing number of Facebook users from around the world – virtual friends that are joining Mark's club – contrasts with his increasing social isolation.

At the end of the film, and with his success at a peak, Mark is alone in front of a screen showing Erica's page on Facebook, incessantly refreshing the page to check whether she has accepted his friend request. Mark thus projects his desire for human connection onto his creation. High user numbers remain insignificant for his longing, since Facebook is a 'world in which fans are "friends". But of course, they are not friends, they have been "friended". That makes all the difference in the world, and [it isn't possible to] get high school out of [one's] mind' (**Turkle, 2011: 182**). Turkle's assessment of Facebook matches the website's effect on Mark in the film: in Eduardo's terms, Mark has millions of 'groupies' (**Fincher, 2010**), but he lacks real-life social connection. The social isolation of college is replicated: 'social media and digital technologies do not transform social relations but reproduce them; how people engage on social media tends to sit alongside existing forms of connection, reproducing the patterns and habits of interacting that already exist' (**Bound Alberti, 2019: 161**). Mark's website cannot fulfil his desire for connection; it replicates his lonely college experience. The website does not function as a compensational tool for loneliness: 'it is inherently destructive to the utopian conception of the Internet as a nerd's interzone' (**Tyree, 2011: 52**). In the end, it cannot help Mark to reconnect with Erica, who is the one person in real life that he hopes to connect with through the success of his virtual social network (for feminist implications of Erica appearing as a virtual version in comparison to the embodied version of her in the opening scene, see **Schreiber, 2016: 17**). In a reversal of the traditional revenge trope the nerd thus still triumphs over his rival the jock – at least in economic terms – but he cannot form the profound social bonds in adult life that were denied to him in his adolescence. Hence, *The Social Network* challenges the stereotype of the lonely nerd on a meta level but eventually emphasises how loss, trauma, and loneliness lie at the very basis of Facebook's creation, and are replicated in the virtual

community that the website creates: Mark gains prestige and financial prowess, but he does not surpass the status of the lonely nerd, a point further emphasised at the end of the film by The Beatles' *Baby, You're a Rich Man* (1967), released as the B-Side of All You Need Is Love.

It's Just a Magic Trick: Social Engineering in Who Am I

Baran bo Odar's film *Who Am I* adopts *The Social Network*'s basic character constellation. Like Mark, the protagonist Benjamin Engel (Tom Schilling) is a computer-savvy, socially awkward outsider who engages in hacking[iii] in order to win the affection of his teenage love Marie (Hannah Herzsprung), who occupies the same catalytic function for Benjamin's online endeavours as Erica does for Mark. Composer Michael Kamm's musical score of the scenes with Marie is strikingly similar to the Trent Reznor's and Atticus Ross's theme which accompanies several scenes in *The Social Network*, most importantly Mark 'running his lonely way across America's most venerable campus in his hoodie, jeans and flip-flops' (**Jones, 2010: 36**) after Erica leaves him, establishing the tone of romantic failure and the social exclusion of the nerd that is carried forward in *Who Am I*. Similar to Eduardo and the roguish Sean Parker in *The Social Network*, the charismatic and socially connected Max (Elyas M'Barek) functions as a counter-image of Benjamin, who invites him not only to join the hacker group that becomes CLAY, but also helps him to overcome social awkwardness and isolation. Hence, *Who Am I* distinguishes between social connection in the virtual and the real but, unlike *The Social Network*, does not establish the virtual as compensation for the real. This is obvious in the super-hacker MRX's third rule, which becomes the mantra for Benjamin's group: 'Have fun in Cyberspace and Meatspace' (**bo Odar 2014**).[iv] Here, the virtual and the real are presented as equals that – ideally – co-exist in a productive symbiosis to ensure the nerd's social connections in both realms.

Whilst *The Social Network* never portrays the virtual space with more than brief shots of website content, *Who Am I* presents it as a highly stylised embodied space that, befitting of the topic of the dark web, resembles a sombre underground train carriage. The players in cyberspace, albeit anonymous because of masks, have a big physical presence that is very different from the limits of Facebook profiles, so their criminal actions in the virtual world have as much gravitas as those in the real world, as the link between cyber- and meatspace becomes more pronounced. This leads to a second crucial difference: whilst both films focus on interrogation scenes, their narrative situation differs strikingly, as Benjamin is in control of the narrative throughout and can powerfully manipulate the perception of the Europol prosecutor Hanne Lindberg (Trine Dyrholm), as well as the audience by extension. This is relevant for a supposed distinction between

social connections in cyberspace and meatspace, as Benjamin's efforts to trick Hanne rely on the preconception of the lonely nerd in meatspace as established in *The Social Network*. To pull off the trick, the screenwriter Jantje Friese and bo Odar engage with the audience's familiarity with the trope of the lonely nerd and draw upon interfilmic references to Fincher's *Fight Club* (**1999**) and Christopher Nolan's *The Prestige* (**2006**). In doing so, they expose the notion of the lonely nerd as a fabricated stereotype with no basis in reality, and ground Benjamin within a community of friends in meatspace.

Benjamin is the only hacker that is given a surname. Engel ('angel' in German) is a telling name because the metaphor of the angel has significance for the relationship between the virtual and the real. Analysing the connection between angels in angelology and bots called Ashley's Angels which mingle with human profiles on the Ashley Madison website for adult hook-ups, Tero Karppi states that the bots, just like biblical angels, only exist in the moment of interaction so they become intermediaries between the divine and the earthly, the virtual and the real (**Karppi, 2018: 179–180**). Benjamin originates in the virtual world as a digital native who can interact with the real – indeed, his career as a hacker begins with Marie, for whom he wants to hack into a university server to steal her upcoming exam, which resembles the impetus that Erica gives Mark to start his tech career – but is firmly grounded in cyberspace. As the success of Benjamin's trick depends on him making Hanne believe that his friends from CLAY never existed and that Marie never dated him, his surname becomes another misleading sign which would allow him to be classified as a lonely nerd along the lines of *The Social Network* and its lonely Mark.

From the beginning of the interrogation, Benjamin appears as a typical isolated computer nerd, wearing a hoodie which is evocative of *The Social Network*. This is not the only interfilmic reference to 'Fincher's isolated freaks' (**Tyree, 2011: 46**). With his short brown hair and youthful, pale, everyman appearance, Tom Schilling's Benjamin resembles Edward Norton's physique as The Narrator in Fincher's *Fight Club*. A poster of that film can be seen in the background when Hanne enters Benjamin's room and there is a sense of anti-establishment sentiment along the lines of *Fight Club*'s Project Mayhem (**Tyree, 2011; 46/50; Dinnen, 2018: 46**), which is also far more characteristic of the hacker than of rather apolitical entrepreneurial second-generation Silicon Valley nerds such as Mark Zuckerberg. After founding the hacker group CLAY, Benjamin, Max, Stephan (Wotan Wilke Möhring), and Paul (Antoine Monot Jr.) target political, social, and economic institutions such as the convention of a neo-Nazi political party, a porn website, stock-exchange reports on television, and a pharmaceutical company. Media platforms and social networks

allow their videos to spread rapidly and widely so that they become stars, and Marie becomes a fan without knowing that Benjamin is behind it. The success is linked with the notion of the superhero who can come to Marie's rescue in stealing the exam paper or presenting his vehicle to her.

Benjamin starts his narrative by telling Hanne about the trauma of his mother's suicide, relating it to the origin stories of prominent superheroes such as Spider Man, Superman, or Batman, with the latter being redolent of the director Christopher Nolan, whose narrative in *The Prestige* is integral to Benjamin's trick in *Who Am I*. Just like the actions of Batman and Project Mayhem, the group's break-ins at the Federal Intelligence Service (*Bundesnachrichtendienst – BND*) and Europol drift into criminal territory. The death of Benjamin's mother due to a dissociative identity disorder is akin to The Narrator and Tyler Durden being the same person in *Fight Club*. Just when Hanne begins to suspect that Benjamin might have inherited his mother's condition, which would exclude him from the witness protection programme, the poster of Fincher's film appears in the background. Along with the audience, Hanne begins to consider an alternative narrative, in which Max, Stephan, and Paul are products of Benjamin's imagination. The references to Fincher's *Fight Club* and *The Social Network* combine with the isolating effect of mental illness (see e.g. **Klein, 1963; Turkle, 1995/2011**) to foster the perception of Benjamin as a lonely nerd, who has connections in virtual or imaginative space but is isolated in meatspace. This wins him pity and compassion from Hanne and the audience.

A reading revolving around the idea of a lonely, mentally ill outsider is one of the two possibilities that the film offers. From the very beginning, there is a counterbalancing reference to Christopher Nolan's *The Prestige*, when Benjamin performs a magic trick for Hanne in which he shows four pieces of sugar, makes three disappear, and then brings them back: 'Hacken ist wie Zaubern. Bei beiden geht es darum, andere zu täuschen. / Hacking is like magic. Both are about deceiving others' (**bo Odar 2014** [my translation]). The three-part-trick mirrors the three-act structure of magic tricks established by the magic engineer Cutter (Michael Caine) in Nolan's film:

> *1. the pledge, in which something ordinary is presented, e.g. an animal or a person;*
>
> *2. the turn, in which something extraordinary happens to what was presented in the pledge, e.g. it disappears;*
>
> *3. the prestige, in which you bring back the thing* (**Nolan 2006**).

In Nolan's film, this is the structure of the central trick – The Transported Man – and the narrative structure, whereby magic becomes a metaphor for the creation of art, a device employed in many works from the literary and cinematic canon such as William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1610–1611) or Thomas Mann's *Mario und der Zauberer* / *Mario and the Magician* (1929). This in turn also echoes the artistic aesthetic aspect of hacking. Nolan highlights film's powers as a manipulation machine, with the magician standing in as proxy for the filmmaker: 'you are not really looking; you want to be fooled' (**Nolan, 2006**). In *Who Am I*, this metaphorical notion is projected onto the hacker, who is the narrator of the piece, and aims to mislead the audience over the ontological status of the crucial image of his dead friends in the hotel after the Europol disaster. In order to escape persecution, he has to convince Hanne that he is mentally ill and a lonely nerd, so that she is willing to help him hack into the witness protection database to regain anonymity. This contradicts the classical revenge-of-the-nerd narrative which typically concludes with the nerd gaining high popularity and visibility. In this attempt at social engineering, a human hack, Benjamin (unlike Mark) keeps control over the course of the narrative and the interpretation of the presented images.

Benjamin does not really manipulate his story in many ways, except when he has to hammer a nail through his hand to re-create a scar that Max got in Benjamin's story. Here, the body acts as a referent that has to be marked, and that grounds Max and Benjamin in meatspace. This is similar to the twin magicians portrayed by Christian Bale in *The Prestige*, who have to cut off one twin's fingers to maintain the illusion of a single magician after the other twin has two fingers shot off. The main reason why Benjamin's trick works is that the stereotype of the lonely computer nerd stands in contrast to the story he tells Hanne. Unlike Mark, who cannot take part in the parties with Facebook employees at Silicon Valley, Benjamin celebrates with the group, who acknowledge him as one of their own. In the words of Paul, 'Du bist einer von uns. Wir lassen dich nicht im Stich. / You are one of us. We won't let you down' (**bo Odar, 2014** [my translation]). Moreover, in contrast to Mark and Eduardo, Benjamin and Max reconcile after Max kisses Marie and they acknowledge their respective weaknesses in the real and the virtual world. They are thus able to engage with each other to improve their skills, fostering their competence in meat- and cyberspace. In addition, Benjamin and Marie connect in meatspace, whereas Mark futilely hits refresh to connect with Erica. Hence, whilst Mark's revenge of the nerd succeeds in economic terms, Benjamin renounces his career as a hacker but fulfils the revenge-trope by entering a relationship.

Hanne, not believing that online avatars have the ability to 'boost real-life confidence' (**Turkle, 2011: 192**), does not look closely but sees what she

wants to see, just like the spectators in *The Prestige*. Since she cannot get beyond the established narrative of the lonely nerd, she settles on the explanation of mental illness, which is more plausible to her. This is emphasised brought to the fore when Benjamin has manipulated her enough to help him escape and he puts the four pieces of sugar on the dashboard of her car:

> *Benjamin: Keine Zaubertricks mehr. / No more magic tricks.*
>
> *Hanne: Warte. Eine Sache noch. Wie geht dieser Trick? / Wait. One more thing. How does this trick work?*
>
> *Benjamin: Wenn man weiß, wie's funktioniert, dann ist es fast enttäuschend. / When you know how it works, it's almost disappointing.*
>
> *[One piece remains visible, then he shows her the other three hidden behind the thumb of his other hand, before bringing all four back.]*
>
> *Jeder sieht nur, was er sehen will. / Everyone only sees what they want to see.*
>
> *[A person with a CLAY mask is noticeable in the background.]* (**bo Odar, 2014** [translations my own]).

Similar to *The Prestige*, the trick is played out at the end of the film, where the amount of cubes equals the members of CLAY. Whilst Hanne has stayed focused on Benjamin, the other three have disappeared – only on the boat to Copenhagen in the concluding scene do they reappear. Whilst Hanne did not believe his story, Benjamin's 'Jeder sieht nur, was er sehen will' extends to the audience.

Although Benjamin declares the trick to be over, the actual trick of the film is not over. When Benjamin reunites with Max, Stephan, Paul, and Marie, he has dyed his hair blonde and is dressed fancily – if we think of *Fight Club*, he appears more similar to Tyler than The Narrator. This demonstrates that his nerdy appearance was part of the act to fool the audience and that in order to pass as a nerd he has to project a more emasculate gender identity that is neither compatible with more traditional forms of masculinity nor the hypermasculinity of Tyler Durden.[v] In the very last line of the film, he repeats his line about no more magic tricks and thus reconnects with the social hack involving Hanne, which leaves the audience to judge the ontological status of the narrative. Just like Hanne's assessment, the audience's verdict depends on its belief in the social skills of the nerd and whether he can translate community in cyberspace into community in meatspace. Whereas Mark in *The Social Network* remains lonely, *Who Am I* suggests that there is an offline community ready to accommodate the computer nerd. Through engaging

with the narrative established by The Social Network, the German film thwarts stereotypes by positioning Benjamin as a social being in the meatspace, able to form meaningful relationships to defeat loneliness.

Conclusion

Responding to the recent re-evaluation of the nerd, my analyses of *The Social Network* and particularly of *Who am I* have shown a more nuanced and, at times, positive image of the nerd. The Social Network's Mark to a great extent embodies the traditional privileged white male nerd who takes his revenge on the jocks by becoming one of the most prominent and successful second-generation Silicon Valley entrepreneurial nerds. Despite building the world's most popular social networking side, Mark eventually replicates his lonely college experience in his online social network as he is unable to translate the multitude of online connections into meaningful offline relationships that would help him overcome his loneliness. Although Fincher's film implicitly exposes that the lonely nerd stereotype as a social construct on a meta level, it still relies heavily on the trope to criticise the isolating effects of social media. Entering cinema screens a few years after its North American predecessors, *Who am I*'s Benjamin represents a development in fictional representations of the nerd which brings together traditionally unreconcilable character traits: Whilst initially an outsider just like Mark before him, growing up an orphan, barely making a living with odd jobs, and taking care of his ill grandmother, he is definitely not privileged; he combines an air of child-like innocence with the idealistic ambition of first-generation nerds (**Kohout, 2022: 140–1**) and the nerd's traditional counterpart of the socially popular rebel (**Ibid: 33–35**) using sensationalist social media to increase the public popularity of CLAY; and lastly, with his technological prowess being compared to the special powers of superheroes that can make a difference for society, his hacking activities increasingly enter the realm of crime, which suddenly makes the nerds social isolation appear to be desirable again. *Who am I* thus presents a complex nerd masculinity that combines previous antagonistic stereotypes in the fight for popularity and social connections. Thereby, the traditional North American nerd identity is merely a performance, a means to an end, that has no bearing in reality, whilst contemporary nerd identities seem to be much more open to various intersecting – and at times contradictory – identity traits, which makes it easier for the nerd to integrate into various social contexts.

Finally, this brings me back to loneliness and technology. Unlike Mark, Benjamin does not create the virtual social network that is supposed to guarantee for social connections, which means that his lonely experience cannot influence the creation of the tool that is supposed to function as cure. For Benjamin, it is rather his outstanding skills – which happen to be

technological and ideally complement the requirements of the hacker group – that gain him respect, friendship, and love. In his case, online contact facilitates relationships in meatspace and his digital nativity eventually translates into real-life confidence to engage in social connections. Hence, Baran bo Odar and Antje Friese succeed in subverting the notion of the lonely nerd epitomised in *The Social Network* through their adaptation into the German cultural context, in which the happiness of the individual is found in community with others, in keeping with Enlightenment ideals.

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Endnotes

[i] In this respect, it is no surprise that *Who Am I* qualified Baran bo Odar and Jantje Friese to helm Netflix's first German production, *Dark* (2017–2020), whose transnational production network and subscribers helped the show to gain international popular and critical success (**see Jenner 2018**).

[ii] Following Kohout's pop cultural history of the nerd, this would also not be coherent with the nerd archetype since nerds, particularly second-generation Silicon Valley tech-entrepreneurs, tend to be rather conservative and to project the image of a cool capitalist (**Kohout 2022, 148–9 and 219–21**).

[iii] Hackers can be seen as a sub-category of the nerd, who distinguish themselves from the nerd in so far as they create the tools required for online activity themselves, have aesthetic ambitions, and by the virtuosity of their skills that are reminiscent of the artistic genius (**Kohout 2022, 110-18**).

[iv] The online dictionary Merriam-Webster provides a short history of the term 'meatspace', which emerged as counter term to cyberspace in the early 1990s (**see Merriam-Webster 2021**).

[v] For analyses of nerds and gender/masculinity see the relevant articles within this special issue.

'Gus, don't be the comma in Earth, Wind & Fire': Understanding Psych's (sometimes) lonely blerd Burton Guster

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Abstract

Whereas Black identity is the standard for cool, nerds are typically seen as anything but. Nerd identity is exemplified by characters who are awkward, highly intelligent, lonely and undoubtedly uncool. This article seeks to extend scholarship on nerd identity by critically examining the fictional representation of the Black nerd Burton 'Gus' Guster, a lead character in the American program Psych (2006 – 2014) and subsequent made-for-television movies. Gus both embodies and extends our understanding of nerdiness by considering not only Blackness, but also types of loneliness. Despite meaningful friendships and a close-knit family, Gus experiences loneliness throughout the series. It is not until the made-for-television movies that we see Gus enter into a long-term, committed intimate relationship, thereby addressing the most painful type of loneliness.

Keywords: Black American; blerd; identity; loneliness; nerd; Psych

Introduction

Psych is a buddy detective comedy that 'features as its primary relationship a Black-white friendship '(**Thornton, 2011: 425**). The American series aired for eight seasons (2006 – 2014)[i] on the USA Network spawning one made-for-television musical during the show's run and three made-for-television movies after the series concluded (**Del Rosario, 2021**). As of this writing, *Psych* is available via streaming platforms such as Peacock, Amazon Prime and iTunes. Most, but not all, episodes begin with a flashback to the late 1980's or early 1990's to provide insight into the lead characters 'origin stories, highlighting relationships and experiences from their childhoods and teenage years.

Burton 'Gus 'Guster is the show's lead Black character and his best friend Shawn Spencer is the lead white character. The series begins when the buddies are in their 30's and open a private detective agency called Psych. While Shawn is the actual 'psychic' detective, Gus is his partner and plays an integral role in solving their myriad cases. Unlike characters such as Dr. John Watson, the sidekick of Sherlock Holmes, Gus does not simply stand in awe of his detective counterpart (**Leone, 2012**). Instead, he brings his vast pharmaceutical knowledge via his career as a pharmaceutical sales representative as well as his worldly knowledge to bear case-to-case.

Gus is another character in the growing collection of fictional Black nerds, or 'blerds, 'depicted in American television (**Flowers, 2018**). Like other blerds before him, Gus is an 'exception to the normative presentation of the straight white male nerd '(**Flowers, 2018: 169**) and serves as the focus of this article. Analyzing this character affords the unique opportunity to study the life of a blerd across almost five decades thanks to *Psych*'s use of flashbacks and the movies released after the show's conclusion thereby offering a fuller picture of Gus's life as compared to previously studied fictional blerds as discussed in the next section.

In the remainder of the article I first review literature about nerds, blerds and loneliness. I then present two research questions before detailing my methodology. Next, I provide a critical analysis of the character, identifying major themes that emerged. I conclude by examining Gus's status as a lonely nerd and how he embodies the Black nerd.

On Being Nerdy

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, nerd is a 'mildly derogatory ' term and is defined as 'an insignificant, foolish or socially inept person; a person who is boringly conventional or studious. Now also: *specifically* a person who pursues an unfashionable or highly technical interest with obsessive or exclusive dedication '(**OED Online, 2020**). These stigmatized

individuals embrace the world of education and knowledge and are at once intellectual overachievers and social underachievers (**Bucholtz, 2001**). Nerds are good with computers and bad at sports. They are frail, eye-glass wearing consumers of media – especially science fiction (**Kendall, 1999, 2000**). Awkward, math-savvy, sexual failures (**Quail, 2011**), nerds seldom use slang, possess a poor fashion sense and explicitly reject coolness (**Bucholtz, 2001, Flowers, 2018**).

To be cool is to 'diverge from the norm in a way that seems appropriate ' (**Warren & Campbell, 2014: 557**). Though commonly discussed in terms of adolescent development and rebellion (**Bucholtz; 2001; Dar-Nimrod et al., 2012**), coolness has its roots in Black American culture as keeping cool was a key survival tactic and required one to exert control (**Bucholtz, 2001; Majors & Billson, 1992; Morgan, 1998; Zimmerman & Griebe, 2014**). Staying cool began as a 'form of resistance to the denial of life opportunities generally and of recognition and respect in particular ' experienced by Blacks in America and manifested through casual improvisation, creative expression and self-control (**Zimmerman & Griebe, 2014: 27**). Restraint was exerted both emotionally and physically with Black Americans often hiding or redirecting their emotions. To be cool, to keep cool, to improvise, then, was to be at once rebellious and aloof and became deracialized as coolness was adopted by other cultures (**Bucholtz, 2001; Zimmerman & Griebe, 2014**).

Since cool comes from Black culture and is inherent in Black identity (**Bucholtz, 2001; Eglash, 2002; Flowers, 2018**), the rebuff of cool is seen as the rebuff of Black culture (**Bucholtz, 2001**) thus entangling nerds ' rejection of cool with a rejection of Blackness. It is easy to see then how nerd identity became associated with whiteness (**Flowers, 2018; Kendall, 2000**) and in opposition to Blackness. Blacks then are stereotypically anti-nerd (**Eglash, 2002**). And so, with few exceptions, nerds have been portrayed in American television as white males (**Kendall, 2000; Flowers, 2018; Quail, 2011**). Notable exceptions include Dwayne Wayne (*A Different World*), Carlton Banks (*Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*), Geordi LaForge (*Star Trek: The Next Generation*) and Steve Urkel (*Family Matters*).

Commonly referred to as Urkel, Steve Urkel is perhaps the most-studied Black nerd from American television because he highlights the tension between Black identity and nerd identity (**Flowers, 2018**). The 'spitting image of nerddom, '(**Quail, 2011: 463**) Urkel conformed 'strictly to the iconic image of the American nerd '(**Flowers, 2018: 178**) aside from being Black. Urkel's Blackness presented a conundrum because he never came across as cool and was distanced from Blackness (**Flowers, 2018**). Too Black to be nerdy and too uncool to be Black, Urkel was a highly-intelligent young man who spoke in a high-pitched voice and lacked fashion sense,

social graces and sexual prowess. Urkel, like other blerds, existed outside of both Black and nerd spaces as he did not clearly belong in either (**Eglash, 2002; Quail, 2011**). Whether a blerd intentionally distances himself through, for example, the use of superstandard vernacular (**Bucholtz, 2001**) or this distance is imposed by others who may diminish his Blackness or reject him for his dark skin, blerds exist in a liminal space (**Quail, 2011**) and may experience a heightened sense of loneliness.

On Being Lonely

Loneliness is a common and distressing discrepancy between one's actual and desired levels of social contact that can result from perceived deficits in one's relationships (**Perlman & Peplau, 1981; Russell et al., 1984; Weiss, 1973**). There is consistent evidence that individuals who lack friendship, community and/or intimate romantic relationships perceive insufficiency in their lives and consider themselves to be lonely (**Perlman & Peplau, 1981; Stokes, 1985**). Lonely individuals tend to inflate the meaning of minimal cues, misinterpreting or exaggerating 'the hostile or affectionate intent of others '(**Perlman & Peplau 198: 36**). This misinterpretation may result from a social ineptitude which predisposes individuals to become lonely overtime. As social failures who lack relational skills and sexual prowess, it is no wonder that nerds are perceived to be lonely.

According to Weiss (**1973**), there are two forms of loneliness: emotional and social. Whereas emotional loneliness results from the absence of an intimate personal relationship, social loneliness results from a lack of community or social connection (**Perlman & Peplau, 1981; Russell et al., 1984**). Emotional loneliness drives individuals to be vigilant and consistently appraise 'others for their potential as providers of the needed relationships '(**Weiss, 1973: 21**). This is supported by work from Schmidt & Sermat (**1983**) which found that married people experienced significantly less loneliness than those who were single, separated, divorced or widowed. However, Schmidt & Sermat (**1983: 1043**) also found that 'deficiencies in the friendship area showed the highest correlation with self-reported loneliness 'as friendships are important in coping with loneliness as people turned to friends when other relationships were in crisis. Building strong social networks may be another way to combat loneliness as there is evidence to suggest that the stronger one's community (e.g., the denser their social network), the less lonely one tends to be (**Stokes, 1985**). Other coping mechanisms may range from focusing on solitary activities to entering into a series of romantic relationships (**Perlman & Peplau, 1981**).

This essay continues with a discussion of Gus's status as a blerd, his experiences with loneliness and his liminal existence throughout the series and post-series movies. I focus on understanding how Gus's character echoes or disrupts our understanding of the blerd character in American television as well as how the character may challenge or uphold the idea of the nerd as the 'lonely other.'

Gus's Black Identity

Gus's Black identity is something that we are introduced to over the course of *Psych*. This occurs through a mixture of self-presentation and comments from others. For example, Shawn constantly compares Gus to Black actors such as Sidney Poitier, Omar Epps, Blair Underwood and Taye Diggs as an implication of Gus's coolness in various situations. Also, in *Psych: The Movie* (**2017**), his future girlfriend Selene encourages him to 'Get Out! ' before leaving him alone in a room full of white people – a reference to the 2017 American horror film by the same name in which a Black character finds himself in danger when spending the weekend with a white family.

Shawn has also chided Gus for using a distinctly different voice when imitating a white person. For example, in the episode 'Death is in the Air' (**Season 4, Episode 13**) Shawn says to Gus,'First of all, you have to stop using the banana in the tailpipe voice every time you imitate a white person.'

With respect to self-presentation, Gus is adamant about being connected to Blackness again in the form of Black entertainment. For example, as both a child (e.g., Lando, Billy Dee Williams's character from *Star Wars*) and an adult (e.g., the titular character from the Blaxploitation film *Blacula*), with only one exception, Gus chooses a Black character when it was time to don a costume. Notably, there were even occasions when Gus specifically chose to pay homage to blerds from American television including the aforementioned Dwayne Wade of *A Different World* and Geordi LaForge of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Even when he was dressed as the white character Harry Potter in the episode 'Lock, Stock, Some Smoking Barrels and Burton Guster's Goblet of Fire' (**Season 8, Episode 1**), he refuses to allow Shawn to call him 'The Wizard 'during their time undercover, instead insisting that he be referred to as 'The Whiz – 'a reference to the 1978 American musical film based on characters from the children's novel *The Wizard of Oz* featuring an all-Black cast. Finally, while in college, Gus and three of his Black friends founded an acapella group called Blackapella. Thornton (**2011**) highlights this singing group as perhaps Gus's clearest connection to his Black identity.

Gus also is clear about the stereotypes he faces as a Black man in America and is conscious of protecting himself. In 'Death is in the Air' (**Season 4, Episode 13**), Gus keeps reminding his colleagues that the potential viral outbreak they're facing is of a 'rare virus that targets people in Africa – which makes it racist by the way.' He even makes indirect reference to racial profiling – a common and deadly problem for Black men in America – before the episode ends. When visiting a small town in the 'Dual Spires' episode (**Season 5, Episode 12**), Gus immediately feels his otherness and realises he is the lone Black person in town (**Gordon, 2012**). Before he can convince Shawn that he's right, a young girl comes up to him and asks him if he is Frederick Douglass. In the 'Office Space' episode (**Season 7, Episode 11**), Gus is indignant when Shawn suggests that they call the police. 'You're talking like a real white guy right now, Shawn,' Gus says. 'Brothers don't get the benefit of the doubt. I will not rot in a cell.' Gus highlights stereotypes as they arise such as being paired with the only other Black person in the episode '100 Clues' (**Season 7, Episode 5**) or noting that, as the only Black contestant, there is no way he would be kicked off his first appearance on a reality show in the episode 'Shawn & the Real Girl' (**Season 6, Episode 12**).

Gus's Black identity is something he embraces throughout the series. While there are times when Shawn has questioned Gus's Blackness (e.g., 'Man, I wish I knew you when you were Black,' in the episode 'High Top Fade Out,' (**Season 4, Episode 7**), Gus never shies away from his Blackness. However, as we see below, he also embraces his nerdiness which may be seen as a direct affront to his Blackness. Further, '[as] a consequence of racism, Black masculinity in the United States … has long been ideologically associated with a hyperphysicality that involves physical strength, hyper(hetero)sexuality and physical violence' (**Bucholtz, 1999: 444**) none of which are characteristics which Gus displays in any heightened sense.

This is particularly notable in Gus's case as nerds are typically depicted as physically weak characters with small bodies who lack sports skills. Though Shawn often teases Gus about not being athletic, Gus demonstrates his physicality in various ways throughout the series. We see Gus race against Shawn on a horse track as adults and with him in a 3-legged race as a child. We also see Gus play softball, baseball and golf and learn that Gus is better than Shawn when in the softball league in which they compete. In the episode 'Earth, Wind and … Wait for It,' (**Season 3, Episode 12**) we see Gus carry a heavyset man out of a burning building. Though it is not an easy task, it is one that Gus accomplishes successfully, bringing the man to safety.

Gus's Nerd Identity

In his analysis of blerds in American television and film, Flowers (**2018**) notes that 'appropriately Black' nerds use slang, engage in sexual banter with and about women and demonstrate their physicality while those who are not appropriately Black lack fashion sense, social graces and sexual prowess. Interestingly, Gus reflects aspects of each. Throughout the series, he uses slang and proper English, engages in sexual banter – though at times awkwardly – and has demonstrated his physicality on various occasions.

Again, nerds are highly intelligent individuals who excel in and enjoy school, living in a world of school, books and knowledge. Gus excelled in school from grade school through college and refers to himself as the brains of the operation and regularly reminds Shawn that he is the only one who went to college. In the episode 'Shawn & Gus Truck Things Up' (S**eason 8, Episode 11**), we learn that Gus has never earned a D grade. In the episode 'Lassie Jerky,' (**Season 7, Episode 3**) upon learning that Shawn has enrolled him in a class about hermeneutics because he thinks the class is about *Harry & the Hendersons*, Gus gets extremely anxious saying, 'Shawn, hermeneutics is the study of theory … Oh my gosh! I could have an exam on Friday! I need to find a syllabus!'

Knowledge of science and math are common characteristics of nerds. Gus is adept in both fields. In our first introduction to adult Gus in the Pilot episode, he is sitting in front of a computer, playing video games – both characteristics associated with nerds and their deep connection with technology. We also quickly learn that he has a love of science as he is thrilled to hear that 'forensics guys 'will likely be at the crime scene. Throughout the series we come to know that Gus possesses vast knowledge about a variety of topics. While his knowledge of pharmaceuticals is likely assumed due to his career as a pharmaceutical sales representative (**Leone, 2012**), Gus also shares facts about paleontology, mummies, federal law, fruit, film speeds, local fire code, taxidermy, diseases, medical trials, math, cars, local publications, the Dewey decimal system, planetary science and medical science including childbirth. With respect to math, in the episode 'Shawn & Gus in Drag (Racing),' (**Season 5, Episode 5**), Gus explains that Detective Lassiter can determine where the shooter's car was by extrapolating based on how long it took for the car to coast to a stop. Gus also subscribes to a publication all about opening safes and vaults and is an avid watcher of the History Channel.

While Gus does use slang, it is not uncommon for him to choose more formal language. For example, in the Pilot (**Season 1, Episode 1**), he talks about having something in his 'esophagus' when the more common

statement would have used 'throat' instead. In the episode 'Dis-Lodged,' (**Season 2, Episode 14**), via a flashback to 1987, we learn that Gus also has a love of proper grammar when he and Shawn begin a club for boys under the age of 12 and are each allowed to have one special rule. Gus's rule? Members must have a love of correct grammar:

> 'That's not a rule!' Shawn yells.
>
> 'You said we could have one special rule – that's mine,' Gus responds.
>
> 'And that's the best rule you could think of?' Shawn asks.
>
> 'I think you mean "That's the best rule of which you could think,"' Gus responds.
>
> 'I'm not being in a club with this,' yells Shawn as he storms off.
>
> 'Fine. I don't need you and your misplaced prepositions!' Gus yells back. (**Season 2, Episode 14**)

Gus's focus on grammar is consistent and we see a present-day example in 'Disco Didn't Die. It was Murdered!' (**Season 3, Episode 5**) when he evaluates Chief Vick's grammar saying, 'You split an infinitive.'

Like other nerds, Gus is also an avid consumer of science fiction film and television. In addition to dressing like characters from *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*, Gus also attends sci-fi conferences such as Tri-Con, Comic-Con and Potter-Con. Gus also experiences teasing from his friends who use nerdy nicknames for him such as Chocolate Einstein and G-Whiz.

Though we never see Gus in the stereotypical high-water pants, glasses or pocket protector associated with nerds such as Urkel, his attire is consistently more formal than that of his best friend, Shawn. When we first meet adult Gus in the Pilot, he is at work and wearing a suit, button-down shirt and tie. When we first meet young Gus (**Season 1, Episode 2**), it is 1989 and he is on stage, competing in a grade school spelling bee wearing a button-down shirt tucked into a pair of khaki pants. The closest we see Gus come to more traditional nerdy attire is when he appears in a sweater vest while at the beach on Spring Break as a college student in 1997 in the episode 'There's Something About Mira' (**Season 2, Episode 11**). Though he sometimes appears in polo shirts and jeans, the suit or button-down shirt with khakis is essentially Gus's uniform throughout *Psych*. Gus is always coordinated and takes pride in his appearance.

Another way Gus deviates from the typical nerd is that he is not a virgin. Beyond simply dating various women throughout the series, Gus also speaks of knowing various women 'Biblically' and in the episode 'Gus's Dad May Have Killed an Old Guy' (**Season 2, Episode 10**) he blurts out, 'Trust me, I get mine … I mean I'm just waiting for Mrs. Right,' when his mother

questions why he is still single. And at the end of *Psych 2: Lassie Come Home* (**2020**), we learn that Gus and his girlfriend Selene are expecting their first child. While Gus has ample dating experience, we often see his awkwardness as well – a key characteristic associated with nerd identity. This awkwardness is most evident in heterosexual relationships. For example, in the episode, 'The Tao of Gus,' (**Season 6, Episode 8**), Shawn confronts Gus about the inappropriate way he sometimes approaches women:

> 'Dude you gave a necklace to the FedEx girl last week,' Shawn says to Gus.
>
> 'That's because she kept stopping by for no reason,' Gus responds.
>
> 'She kept stopping by to deliver our FedEx packages,' Shawn replies.
>
> 'Fine, fine,' says Gus, 'Maybe I want someone special in my life, too. Ever think of that? And if putting out a slightly stronger signal is gonna help well that's something I'm willing to do.'
>
> 'Not sure it's helping,' Shawn responds. (**Season 6, Episode 8**)

Though Gus does change the register of his voice from time-to-time by making it deeper when he is talking on the radio or trying to impress a woman, his regular voice is not high-pitched. In fact, we only hear a high-pitched voice when he is incredulous during an argument with Shawn, or when he is afraid. So, while the high-pitched voice is thought to be a standard of nerd identity on American television, it is not something that we consistently see from Gus.

Gus's Struggle with Loneliness

Loneliness is a relational deficit which 'typically results from a poor match between the individual's interests, social skills or personal characteristics and his or her social environment '(**Perlman & Peplau, 1981: 54**). According to Weiss (**1973**) two types of loneliness are social which is most connected to friendships and community, and emotional which is most related to intimate/romantic relationships. Though Gus has various relationships throughout the series, there is evidence that he indeed experiences loneliness.

In the episode '9 Lives' (**Season 1, Episode 5**), Gus notes that he would like to have a girlfriend and that Shawn is his only non-work friend. By episode 8 of that season, we are introduced to friends of Gus at a science fiction conference. And later in the series during the episode 'Ferry Tale,' (**Season 5, Episode 7**) we meet more of Gus's friends who are conservationists. This is especially important to note as deficiencies in friendships are highly correlated with loneliness. These newer relationships imply that Gus

established new friendships as a way to cope with his feelings of loneliness.

Another mechanism for coping with and alleviating loneliness is the pursuit of solitary activities (**Perlman & Peplau, 1981**). Gus's solitary activity is tap dance. As both a child and an adult, we see Gus tap dancing. In the episode 'Feet Don't Kill Me Now' (**Season 5, Episode 2**), young Gus is initially ashamed when Shawn finds him tap dancing alone in the backyard. However, Gus ultimately insists that tap is cool and suggests Shawn try it out, too. In present day, we learn that Gus still takes tap lessons – a revelation at which both Shawn and Detective Lassiter balk and to which Gus replies, 'I don't care that you and Shawn don't get it … I'm doing things for myself, getting back to things I love.' This highlights the gratification that Gus finds in the activity and is consistent with those who experience loneliness seeking out alternative forms of gratification (**Perlman & Peplau, 1981**). Gus's choice of tap dance is of particular importance as it has a direct connection to his Black identity. Tap dance possesses 'visible and palpable' African influences (**DeFrantz 2002: 1**) and was heavily influenced by Black music throughout the twentieth century. It is an often-solitary pursuit which has come to focus on an individual's interpretation of the music and is commonly associated with Black masculinity (**Pugh 2012**).

As discussed in the previous section, Gus was in constant pursuit of romantic connection throughout the series which is another way to cope with loneliness. As highlighted in the aforementioned FedEx example from season six, Gus inflates the meaning of minimal cues, exaggerating women's affectionate intention towards him as he consistently evaluates women as potential romantic partners. He does so to the point of desperation as exemplified by this exchange from the episode 'Chivalry Isn't Dead but Someone Is' (**Season 5, Episode 4**). After being rejected by Eugenia, a lesbian several years his senior who goes to prison for committing three murders, Gus visits her to figure out why she rejected him:

> 'It's just been bothering me,' Gus tells her from the other side of the glass.
>
> 'You know,' she replied, 'you should meet a nice girl and focus on her and never ever come back here.' (**Season 5, Episode 4**)

Notably, Gus only engaged with Eugenia as a result of the case he and Shawn were investigating in response to Shawn's insistence that Gus attend a double-date so Shawn could learn more about a suspect. Gus had no interest in Eugenia but became dismayed as she rejected every kindness he offered. Despite his lack of romantic interest in Eugenia, Gus

still sought her out in prison to find out why she rebuffed him. Due to his loneliness, Gus has a difficult time giving up control (**Horowitz & de Sales French, 1979**) and properly interpreting social cues sometimes to the point of bewilderment (**Weiss 1973**).

Without a doubt, his relationship with Shawn is most important. They have been friends since at least the age of three and share a small but interconnected community. Shawn and Gus both rely heavily on Shawn's father Henry Spencer for advice and guidance as they investigate cases. When Shawn's mother, Dr. Madeline Spencer, comes for a visit in the episode 'Ghosts,' (**Season 3, Episode 1**), both she and Gus express excitement about seeing one another and in 'Murder? Anyone? Anyone? Bueller? **(Season 3, Episode 2**), she makes a beeline to greet Gus upon seeing him at an event. Shawn briefly dated Gus's older sister, Joy, and though the buddies' closeness is a concern for Gus's mom, the friends have spent holidays with one another's families. Their dream, expressed in multiple episodes and two movies is to live next door to one another with a pool that stretches across both of their backyards. If that dream is realized, it will only serve to strengthen Gus's community as Shawn's wife, Detective Juliet O'Hara, and Gus's now-fiancé, Selene, refer to one another as best friends in *Psych 2: Lassie Come Home*.

Though Gus experiences emotional and social relationships over the course of the series and subsequent movies, he battles with loneliness throughout. Gus's markers of awkwardness and challenges with healthy heterosexual relationships are consistent with his nerd identity and his feelings of loneliness. Now that Gus is engaged and entering fatherhood, it is possible that he will experience less loneliness due to his growing and interconnected network and romantic relationship (**Jones et al. 1982; Schmidt & Sermat, 1983**). His relationship with Selene and the birth of their first child will be the focus of *Psych 3: This is Gus* (**Del Rosario, 2021**).

Discussion

I began this study with two central questions: (1) How does Gus's character echo or disrupt our understanding of the blerd character in American television? and (2) Does Gus's character challenge or uphold the idea of the nerd as the 'lonely other'? Based upon a character analysis conducted across eight seasons and two films, I find that Gus both echoes and disrupts our understanding of the blerd while also upholding the idea of the lonely other.

Whereas, Black identity is the standard for cool, nerds are typically seen as anything but. Black nerds, or blerds, then provide a unique opportunity to look at the juxtaposition of the two in order to understand how the identities might co-exist. My findings extend previous research about

blerds in American television in three key ways. First, this study introduces the *Psych* character Burton 'Gus 'Guster to collection of blerds previously studied. Second, since *Psych*'s storyline extends from the 1980s into the 2020s, we are able to see not just teen and adult blerds such as Steve Urkel and Carlton Banks, but also the child blerd, Young Burton 'Gus 'Guster. Third, I find that Gus echoes noted aspects of both Black and nerd identities and does so in ways that disrupt and extend what we know of blerds. By embracing and publicly displaying aspects of both identities, Gus does appear to span the boundaries of each (**Quail 2011**). Notably, Gus does not appear to distance himself from either. Despite this, he still appears to experience loneliness which is the focus of my second research question.

Aspects of Gus's nerd identity such as awkwardness, lack of friendships and sometimes poor social skills appeared to be antecedents to his bouts with both social and emotional loneliness. And, aside from his tap dancing, most of the ways that Gus copes with loneliness – from entering into numerous romantic relationships to finding more friends – are tied most directly to his nerd identity.

Gus may have also experienced loneliness due to his Black identity. As Thornton (**2011**) notes, aside from his family and his musical group, Gus is often the only Black person we encounter in an episode. Though Gus is never intentionally alienated because of his Blackness, it is notable that he did feel 'othered 'at times which could also lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation (**Gordon, 2012; Quail, 2011**). With the introduction of Selene, Gus's Black fiancé, and the potential for future movies (**Sorren 2020**), future research may extend the present study with a focus on the relationship between Gus's Blackness and his experiences with loneliness.

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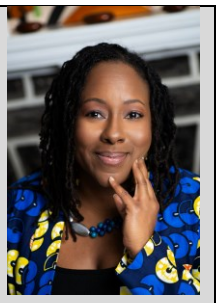

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Endnotes

[i] For all specific episodes referred in this piece, please see the **Media Bibliography** section.

'A place where everybody is a legendary hero… and a total dork': Representing the American nerd community as an antidote to loneliness in G. Willow Wilson's Ms. Marvel Comics (2014-2019)

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Abstract

Nerddom plays an important role in G. Willow Wilson's superhero comic books series 'Ms. Marvel': Its protagonist, Muslim Pakistani American teenager Kamala Khan is a comic loving, fanfiction writing, videogame playing nerd. The nerd community full of likeminded individuals provides her with a nurturing safe haven distracting her from the feelings of loneliness brought about by conflicts with her ambitious parents and by the Islamophobic bullying of her classmates. Reading this idealized representation of the American nerd community as a heterotopia of compensation in the Foucauldian sense, I argue that the diegetic nerds of 'Ms. Marvel' work to raise more awareness for the diversity of real-world nerd subculture by normalizing the presence of Muslim women of colour within it. Thus, 'Ms. Marvel's' reimagination of nerddom as an open, welcoming, and egalitarian space debunks traditional stereotypes of nerds as white, socially inept young men and simultaneously celebrates the potential of nerdy interests to encourage mutual understanding between people from diverse backgrounds, as my analysis of exemplary passages from the book series will show.

Keywords: comics; Ms. Marvel; nerddom; loneliness; popular culture; superhero

Introduction

In addition to its commercial success and critical acclaim, G. Willow Wilson's *Ms. Marvel* comic series (2014-2019) was favourably received by long-time comic book fans and new readers alike. At its centre is protagonist Kamala Khan, a Muslim Pakistani American teenager who also self-identifies as a nerd: She reads superhero comics, writes fanfiction and plays MMORPGs.[i] Kamala often experiences conflicts between her desire to meet her parents' ambitious expectations and her wish to be part of American mainstream society. A major source of conflict is Kamala's family's prioritization of her academic performance, whereas Kamala herself would rather spend more time engaging in (both online and offline) social activities. Misunderstood by her parents and confronted with the Islamophobic prejudices of her Anglo-American classmates, Kamala feels lonely. This condition becomes even worse after she adopts the superhero identity of Ms. Marvel which she must keep secret from both her family and her friends. Although Kamala at the beginning of the first issue feels like an outsider to mainstream American society because of her ethnicity and faith, she can always rely on her Turkish American friend Nakia Bahadir and her Italian American friend Bruno Carrelli.[ii] However, her new superhero identity creates a rift even within her tight-knit friend group (until she reveals that she is Ms. Marvel, first to Bruno and much later also to Nakia and her other friends). In contrast to the conflict-laden social spheres of Kamala's family and school life, the comics represent the nerd community as a nurturing safe haven that strengthens Kamala's confidence and ameliorates Kamala's loneliness by providing her with a sense of belonging. I argue that this representation of the (American) nerd community functions both as a way of creating more awareness for the actual diversity of nerd subculture and as a gesture of Utopian reaching – a reimagination of nerddom as an open, welcoming, and egalitarian space.

The term nerd is commonly understood as referring to individuals whose characteristic traits combine 'social awkwardness', 'obsessiveness' and 'knowledge of things having to do with technology' (**Lane, 2018: 3**). Although female versions of the nerd have been present in American popular culture since the late 1970s (**cf. Lane, 2018: 6**), nerddom 'still implies a certain level of traditional masculinity because technology is still a (primarily Caucasian) male-dominated field' (**Neterer, 2018: 119**). Marvel's Kamala Khan thus contributes to a normalization of the presence of Muslim American women of colour in (comics and videogame) fandom and as such can work to 'challenge dominant visual framings of Muslim women as oppressed victims or exotic others, to formulate a distinct cultural and religious identity, and to assert […her] rightful place in the fabric of American life' (**Peterson & Echchaibi, 2017: 155**). This attempt at normalization forms a counterpoint to 'the large numbers of pejorative

representations of Muslims in [American] popular culture' (**Arjana, 2017: 97**) that are also prevalent in comic books (**cf. Strömberg, 2011**) and seems to be particularly timely considering how widespread islamophobia among the general American public still is (**cf. Gottschalk, 2015: 508-509**). Although the *Ms. Marvel* comic books acknowledge the existence of Islamophobia (as well as misogyny and racism), they locate it firmly outside of nerd subculture.

In Foucauldian terms, the nerd community as represented in *Ms. Marvel* might be understood as possessing heterotopic qualities. It constitutes a safe place for 'individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm' and thus might be considered a 'heterotopia of deviation' (**Foucault, 1986: 25**). In accordance with Foucault's fifth principle, this 'heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public place' and in order to gain access, each individual is required to 'make certain gestures', in this case read certain comic books, play certain videogames, write and read fanfiction or similar actions that prove one's legitimacy (**Ibid: 26**). The Foucauldian concept of heterotopias enables me to better grasp the potential functions of the nerd community as represented in Wilson's *Ms. Marvel* by providing me with terminology to aptly describe its spatiality. This is particularly useful for analyzing the relationship between nerd subcultures and American mainstream society (as represented in the comics). Overall, the nerd community in *Ms. Marvel* is not completely idealized and the narrative acknowledges the existence of certain problems such as bullying – which are subsequently resolved through collaboration and solidarity between its members. This idea of nerddom as a protective space that offers room to work through social problems in ways that might not be possible in mainstream society resonates with Foucault's concept of the 'heterotopia of compensation' whose 'role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled' (**Ibid: 27**). This applies to the diegetic nerd community insofar as the *Ms. Marvel* comic books explicitly portray it as a space that is free of the misogyny and racism that plague mainstream society.

While most previous scholarship on Wilson's *Ms. Marvel* recognizes Kamala's nerdiness as part of her identity, its focus usually lies elsewhere, exploring issues of gender (**Gibbons, 2017, Khoja-Moolji and Niccolini, 2015**), race (**Dagbovie-Mullins and Berlatsky, 2020**) or religion (**Peterson, 2020**). One exception is Aaron Kashtan's book chapter on the representation of female comics fandom in *Ms. Marvel*. Reading Kamala as representative of an increasingly diverse comics fandom that contradicts older stereotypes of comic fans as 'teenaged to middle-aged, socially inept, white men', Kashtan contextualizes Kamala's performance of fandom within the history of representations of nerds in American

comics (**Kashtan, 2020: 191**). My article builds on his conclusion that 'Kamala's fandom is depicted in a way that normalizes both nontraditional fan practices and participation in fandom by people who do not match the standard comic book fan stereotype' (**Ibid: 201**). I argue that the positive representation of Kamala's nerdiness serves not just to celebrate a comics fan-base that continues to expand and now includes broader levels of the general population (such as people of colour, Muslim people and/or young women), but that the book series also intervenes in discourses surrounding fandom practices thereby countering stereotypes of lonely nerds with its own reimagination of the American nerd community as a space that is open and welcoming. The real-world impact of this representation of nerddom can already be seen with many fans starting their own creative projects in response to *Ms. Marvel* (for examples, see **Peterson, 2020: 185-186**). My article will combine close readings from the *Ms. Marvel* comic books with research on Muslims in nerd subculture from religious studies (**Gittinger, 2018; Hammer & Safi, 2013; Peterson & Echchaibi, 2017**) and media studies (**Kashtan, 2020; Lane, 2018; Peterson, 2020**) to illustrate how *Ms. Marvel* is both representing nerddom and participating in the discourses surrounding it. First, I will outline how far Kamala Khan is represented as lonely before I explain how her nerdiness functions as a tool to build social connections and overcome prejudices. Afterwards, another section will analyse Kamala's fight against the sentient computer virus Doc.X in detail, to show how *Ms. Marvel* engages with issues of cyberbullying while simultaneously representing a diverse gamer community. A third section will examine how the comic uses videogame aesthetics and lingo to both emphasize the characterization of Kamala as a nerd and to appeal to nerdy readers by giving them a feeling of belonging through its references to videogame franchises.

'Everybody else gets to be normal': Kamala as an outsider

Right from the beginning of Wilson's *Ms. Marvel*, Kamala's nerdiness is shown to be an essential part of her personality: This starts with the title page of the first issue which features Kamala wearing a *Ms. Marvel* fan shirt that classifies her as a superhero comics fan and references the practice of wearing fan shirts to self-identify as a member of American nerd subculture.[iii] As I have argued elsewhere, this cover page (more specifically, the books that Kamala is holding) depicts Kamala's comics fandom alongside her Americanness and her Muslim faith as equally important parts of her identity (**cf. Cicholewski, 2021: 28**). This direct juxtaposition of a book that is representative of Kamala's Americanness with one that represents her Muslim faith is insofar remarkable, as Americanness and Islam are often perceived as potentially incompatible identities by American mainstream society (**cf. Hammer & Safi, 2013: 3**). Kamala's look on the front page can be read as indicative of the growing

trend (that is particularly visible on social media) of Muslim 'women [who] incorporate hybrid styles to present themselves as complex individuals who are creative, fun, active, strong, and assertive without abandoning their faith or cultural backgrounds' (**Peterson & Echchaibi, 2017: 152**). Thus, the book cover already hints at the protagonist's efforts of reconciling those possibly conflicting parts of her personal life – implying that a failure to accomplish this might result in a personal crisis including feelings of loneliness.

A few pages later, Kamala is writing Marvel superhero fanfiction, much to the dismay of her mother who would prefer her to work on school projects. Throughout the whole series, the readers can see that Kamala's room is decorated with superhero comic merchandise such as a Captain Marvel poster or a Hulk inspired cuddly toy which reinforces the impression that comics fandom is an important part of Kamala's life. Another recurring theme in the first issue, apart from Kamala's nerdiness, is her loneliness: Kamala feels misunderstood by her parents who do not support her passion for writing fanfiction and who do not allow her to attend a classmate's party. Sitting in her room after arguing with her parents about the party, a voice-over tells readers how excluded and lonely Kamala feels: 'Why am I the only one who gets **signed out of health class**? Why do I have to bring **pakoras** to school for lunch? Why am I stuck with the **weird holidays**? Everybody else gets to be normal. Why can't I?' (**Wilson et al. 2016a: issue 1**, emphasis in original). Frustrated with those (perceived) limitations that her ethno-religious identity as a Muslim Pakistani American girl entails, Kamala decides to sneak out of her parents' house to go to the party that her parents disapprove of. Wearing a jacket with the characteristic *Ms. Marvel* lightning bolt at the front, Kamala finally arrives at the party, but her hopes of increasing her popularity are disappointed when her classmates bully her in Islamophobic and racist ways and trick her into drinking alcohol. At the party, Kamala is bullied because of her ethno-religious identity, while her nerdiness does not seem to influence her classmates' reaction to her.

It is not uncommon for superhero comics to feature nerdy protagonists, however, when these characters experience bullying, it is often a direct result of their nerdiness, as is the case with Peter Parker alias Spider Man (a recurring theme in many of his incarnations) or Barry Allen alias Flash (in the eponymous *CW* TV series). This might also be connected to questions of gender, as nerdiness for Peter Parker and Barry Allen entails a failure to conform to traditional ideals of masculinity (e.g., Peter Parker's lack of confidence and his prioritization of academic achievements or Barry Allen's decision to literally run away from his bullies instead of fighting them). In contrast to that, traditional ideals of femininity are not as much at odds with what is commonly considered typical nerd behaviour;

particularly shyness, lack of confidence and showing their emotional attachment (regarding certain fandoms) is generally considered to be socially acceptable for girls and women.

After realizing that her classmates do not accept her because of her ethno-religious identity, Kamala leaves the party thinking: 'Who was I kidding? I can never be one of them, no matter how hard I try. I'll always be poor Kamala with the weird **food rules** and the **crazy family**' (**Ibid**, emphasis in original). The accompanying images convey Kamala's sense of isolation, as she is the only character shown on the following two pages. Due to her preoccupation with her lack of popularity among her classmates, Kamala at first does not notice that a mysterious mist has appeared. Shortly afterward, Kamala has a (mist-induced) vision of her favourite superheroes Captain Marvel, Captain America and Iron Man who reveal to her that she has superpowers that have just awakened. Here, the presence of the three superheroes in this pivotal moment of Kamala's life reaffirms the high importance of her comic fandom for her personal identity. The scene is depicted on a splash page whose iconography is reminiscent of religious [i.e., Christian] Renaissance art which seems to endow the event with somewhat messianic undertones.[iv] When her vision of Captain Marvel asks Kamala 'Who do you **want** to be?', Kamala's answer is: 'I want to be beautiful and awesome and butt-kicking and **less** complicated. I want to be you' (**Ibid**, emphasis in original). Consequently, as soon as she has learned about her shapeshifting abilities, Kamala's first action is to modify her body to look like a white, conventionally attractive woman, rejecting the parts of herself that her classmates bullied her for and striving towards the conventional ideals of feminine beauty embodied by her favourite superhero Captain Marvel. This shape remains her superhero costume until mid-issue 4, when Kamala confides in her best friend and superhero-sidekick Bruno Carrelli that she does not feel comfortable in the revealing outfit. Encouraged by him, she subsequently designs her own costume consisting of an old burkini (with its hood removed) combined with a red dupatta – a shawl-like scarf popular on the Indian subcontinent – that flows behind her reminiscent of a superhero cape.[v] With the support of Bruno, Kamala develops her own Ms. Marvel superhero persona as a person of colour who acts in accordance with her Muslim faith. Whereas her first costume led to Kamala being perceived as a bland copy of the previous Ms. Marvel, Kamala's new costume that honours her South Asian heritage and reveals her as a person of colour is much more enthusiastically received (though nobody on the diegetic level explicitly comments on the new Ms. Marvel being a Muslim and/or South Asian American). Becoming Ms. Marvel brings Kamala closer to her local community with the people of New Jersey embracing her as their own superhero, but simultaneously creates more distance between Kamala

and her family and friends, because she keeps her new identity a secret (at first).

'Unique is not the same as alone': Building connections through shared nerdy interests

In contrast to Kamala's secret superhero identity that paradoxically causes her to feel simultaneously more connected to her Jersey City neighbourhood but also alienated from her family and friends, Kamala's nerddom is represented as having an exclusively positive impact on her personal life. Taking Aaron Kashtan's suggestion that '[Kamala] Khan uses geek identity as a means of transcending differences in other parameters of identity' (**Kashtan, 2020: 194**) as a starting point, my article will expand on the social function of Kamala's nerddom and illustrate how Kamala's nerdy interests help her to connect to other characters. My analyses will first focus on Kamala's best friend Bruno Carrelli, second on Kamala's crush and later antagonist Kamran and third on Kamala's future sister-in-law Tyesha Hillman. Those three examples show how Kamala's nerdiness enables her to overcome her initial prejudices and to form close connections to the three characters in question. The fact that all three characters also belong to marginalized groups (Bruno is an impoverished Italian American, Kamran is a Muslim Pakistani American and Tyesha is a Muslim African American) further works to inscribe those minority groups into public discourses of nerddom.

Bruno is present in Kamala's story from the first issue onward that introduces him as Kamala's friend (and potential love interest). A flashback in a later issue reveals that Kamala and Bruno's first meeting takes place while they are both in elementary school where – as Kashtan points out – 'they bond over their shared love for Tween Mutant Samurai Turtles, that is, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles' (**Ibid: 194**). A closer look at the panels in question reveals how young Kamala is reluctant to go to school at all, yelling 'Nooo! This is so **embarrassing**! I wanna go home and watch **Tween Mutant Samurai Turtles**!' (**Wilson et al. 2016c: issue 10**, emphasis in original). Thus, Kamala's geeky interests at first seem to create a distance between her and other children. However, after Kamala's parents notice Bruno – who is treated as an outsider because parental neglect has resulted in him having an unpleasant body odour and his impoverished background prevents him from participating in field trips – they feel sorry for him, so they offer to pay for his fees and pressurize Kamala to play with him. In the five panels that depict their first encounter, Kamala grudgingly approaches Bruno, averts her gaze, and remains short-spoken in the first two panels. In the third panel, she recognizes the logo of her favourite TV show on Bruno's shirt and now not only directly looks at his face, but also moves closer to him. In the fourth panel, Bruno mirrors Kamala's posture

by pointing at and inquiring after her bracelets. This conversation brings the two children closer together which is also reflected on the visual level through the final panel on the page that takes the form of a splash panel. Thus, Kamala's fandom has made it possible for her to connect to Bruno despite not sharing his experiences of poverty and parental neglect. Compared to how social inequality is perpetuated by Kamala's elementary school teachers who only allow students to participate in field trips if they can afford the fee, Bruno's and Kamala's interaction constitutes a counter-site and shows how such social divides can be overcome (at least on an individual level). After their first encounter, Bruno and Kamala become best friends. The flashback to their first meeting is incorporated into a storyline that has Bruno severely injured after an argument with Kamala, so that worry concerning Bruno's fate permeates the readers' perception of this sentimental childhood memory. Eventually, both Bruno and his friendship to Kamala recover because of their close emotional connection that is built on their common nerdy interests.

Similar to her initial meeting with Bruno, Kamala is not enthusiastic at first when her parents tell her that their friends Bushra and Irfan are coming to visit with their son Kamran. Remembering Kamran as 'that kid who used to pick his nose' when she saw him eleven years ago, Kamala tries to talk her parents into letting her go to the *Funtimes Arcade* instead of spending time with their visitors. Her parents, however, insist on Kamala joining them and Kamala eventually leaves the room pouting and announcing that she is 'not going to be nice to the nosepicker' (**Wilson et al. 2016a: issue 13**). Kamala's attitude towards Kamran shifts radically when she hears Kamran talking about the videogame *World of Battlecraft*. This happens at the final panel of a page and the readers – just like Kamala – have only seen Kamran from behind so far. When the readers turn the page, they are just as surprised as Kamala to discover Kamran to be a conventionally attractive young man through a longshot picture of him filling half of the page. Kamala immediately starts to talk to Kamran about their common interest in videogames and – much to the dismay of her parents – falls in love with him. Kamala's father expresses his confusion when Kamala asks for his permission to visit a shop together with Kamran: 'One minute you **refuse** to be nice to our guests, the next you want to get chummy on Newark Avenue?' (**Ibid**, emphasis in original). In contrast to Kamala's parents, the readers are not surprised about Kamala's sudden change of opinion, since they already know how important Kamala's nerdy interests are to her. Kamran seems to reciprocate Kamala's feelings and they form a romantic relationship which is strengthened by Kamran revealing his own secret superpowers to Kamala. Kamala's astonished and overjoyed reaction to this is mediated on the visual level through her facial expression and on the textual level through a voice-over: 'All this time, I

thought I was **alone**… That I was the only nerdy Pakistani-American-Slash-Inhuman in the entire **universe**. And then, suddenly… I **wasn't**' (**Wilson et al. 2016a: issue 14**, emphasis in original). Although Kamala is also attracted to Kamran's physical appearance and his superpowers, the first trait of Kamran that aroused her interest is their shared love of videogames. Just like with Bruno, Kamala's passion for nerdy hobbies makes it possible for her to overcome her initial prejudices and form an emotional connection to another character. However, Kamala's relationship with Kamran turns out to be short-lived as he joins a group of superpowered villains and is eventually defeated by Kamala who remarks that 'he might look like a handsome prince but he's actually a total **buttwipe**' (**Wilson et al. 2016a: issue 15**, emphasis in original).

While Kamala's flirt with Kamran was not of a permanent nature, Kamala's first meeting with her brother Aamir's fiancée (and later wife) Tyesha Hillman – an African American convert to ultra-orthodox Islam – develops into a lasting friendship. Kamala's relationship with her older brother is fraught, because she rejects his adherence to strict religious practices, while he disapproves of Kamala's more liberal Muslim attitudes. When Aamir first asks Kamala to chaperone his meeting with Tyesha, she pouts and only agrees reluctantly, replying: 'Fine. Okay. I'll be a good *mahram* and chaperone your **non**-date with your **non**-girlfriend', later exclaiming: 'I cannot **believe** this' (**Wilson et al. 2016b: issue 2**, emphasis in original). However, when Kamala and Aamir finally encounter Tyesha, she is harassed by three Anglo-American security guards who target her because of her skin colour and her faith (she is wearing an abaya and a hijab). This first impression fosters a sense of solidarity in Kamala who has experienced racist and Islamophobic discrimination herself. Then Tyesha makes a reference to the classic science fiction book series *Dune*, which inspires Kamala to express her new-found affection for Tyesha by requesting her to marry Aamir (**Ibid**). Kamala's sudden change of opinion is caused by her and Tyesha's common appreciation of science fiction. Kamala's fondness of her brother's fiancée even goes as far as Kamala defending Tyesha against her sceptical parents: 'Tyesha is **awesome**! She read all of **Dune** twice and hated the movie!' (**Wilson et al. 2016b: issue 4**, emphasis in original). This statement illustrates how Kamala's personal value scheme that is highly influenced by American nerd subculture shapes her social interactions. Tyesha becomes a recurring character in the comics and joins Kamala's group of friends for common activities and later allows Kamala to babysit her and Aamir's son Malik. Tyesha's rather unexpected own nerdiness also works to disrupt stereotypical ideas about both science fiction fans and orthodox Muslim women. In fact, Tyesha connects those two important aspects of her life by explaining that reading Frank Herbert's *Dune* inspired her to look more closely into Islam and eventually

to convert (**Ibid**). The representation of both Tyesha and Kamala as Muslim women of colour who engage in nerd subculture intervenes in public discourses of nerddom and contradicts prevalent stereotypes of nerds as socially inept, young to middle-aged white men and as such starts to remedy the general 'lack of images of black girl nerds in American popular culture' (**Flowers, 2018: 185**). Additionally, the characterization of Kamala and Tyesha as Muslim female nerds works to dispel prejudices of 'Muslim women […] as either covered and oppressed by Islam or uncovered and sexually liberated by Western secular culture' (**Peterson & Echchaibi, 2017: 145**): Tyesha voluntarily wears a hijab and abaya and is an independent, confident woman with a well-paid job that allows her to provide for her family. Although Kamala only covers her head when she is inside a mosque and indeed enjoys certain products of 'Western secular culture', she still feels a sense of belonging to her parents' South Asian heritage and uses her Muslim faith as a moral compass.

This section has shown that nerddom is an important part of Kamala's life that influences not only her choices of interior decoration and fashion, but also shapes her social interactions. As the three exemplary readings suggest, Kamala's nerdiness enables her to overcome her own prejudices and to form deep emotional bonds to other characters who do not share her personal experiences.

'Time to break out the Geek Fu': Nerds against cyberbullying

Kamala's gamer identity is on full display throughout the main storyline in the collected edition *Damage Per Second* (**Wilson et al. 2017**). A sentient computer virus called Doc.X that was created as a 'social experiment' by a developer of Kamala's favourite videogame *World of Battlecraft* wreaks havoc among Kamala's group of friends (**Wilson et al. 2017: issue 16**). Mimicking the behaviour of internet users, the virus bullies, threatens and blackmails Kamala and her friends, eventually even outing Kamala's friend Zoe as a lesbian against her will. Thus, the comic addresses misogynist, racist and homophobic online bullying as a severe problem that contemporary teenagers are confronted with. Together with both her real-life friends and her videogame companions from the MMORPG *World of Battlecraft*, Kamala sets out to defeat Doc.X. Although Kamala has never met her videogame teammates in real life, they do not hesitate to help her. Kamala appreciates their sense of solidarity: 'This is why I play. Say what you will about their emotional maturity, these guys all got on planes and trains and traveled halfway across the country – or at least across the river in Max's case – because a friend they'd never seen needed help' (**Wilson et al. 2017: issue 17**). In contrast to Kamala who does not conform to the stereotype of the white, male, socially inept nerd, her three fellow gamers are represented in a way that reaffirms this stereotype: Max is an

overweight, bespectacled, white male teenager living with his parents in Manhattan; among the other teammates who are only known by their gamer aliases, are 'Nemesis', a white male middle-aged country-bumpkin from Tennessee and 'Eswyn', a tall lean young white man with a punky hairstyle. When convincing them to help her, Kamala makes clear that she considers them just as important as her real-life friends: 'You guys are my **friends**. We've been saving each other's virtual lives since the game was in **beta testing**' (**Ibid**, emphasis in original). Upon learning that Ms. Marvel is a part of their videogame guild, the three gamers are pleasantly surprised and do not display any misogynist, racist or Islamophobic tendencies. Instead of showing resistance to the increasing diversification of gamer culture, their reaction is emblematic of an increased public acceptance of Muslim women in nerd subculture that is also discussed (with a focus on cosplay) in Gittinger (**2018: 100-101**).[vi] Analogous to the results of the previous section, this sense of belonging across social dividing lines is brought about by their common passion for videogames. In this case, the relationships that Kamala has built in the online space of videogaming are so profound that they are directly transferable to the offline world. This representation can be read as the comic emphasizing the potential of online videogames as a way of connecting like-minded people which may result in the formation of real-world friendships. Thus, the book series once again represents nerdiness as a potential tool to overcome initial prejudices and form connections with people from different socio-cultural backgrounds. By working together with Kamala's real-life friends Bruno Carrelli and Michaela 'Mike' Gutierrez Miller, they eventually manage to reprogram Doc.X to spread kindness instead of hate. While this representation of the American nerd community is certainly idealized, it works to intervene in public discourses of what a gamer can look like thereby creating more awareness for the presence of women, people of colour and particularly women of colour within gamer culture. By representing three rather stereotypical white male gamers as unquestioningly accepting Kamala as one of their own, the comic reimagines nerddom as an open and egalitarian space where everybody with a passion for videogames is welcome regardless of their gender, ethnicity or faith. Coming back to Foucault's heterotopic theory, the nerd community as represented in *Ms. Marvel* might be read as a heterotopia of compensation which exposes social grievances (in this case, widespread Islamophobia, misogyny, and racism) and compensates for them (in this case, through the other nerds accepting Kamala unquestioningly).

'If life was an RPG': Videogame aesthetics in Ms. Marvel

Apart from its text-related references to nerddom, the *Ms. Marvel* comics also engage with videogame aesthetics on the visual level. This practice is particularly obvious in Wilson's final *Ms. Marvel* issue that features a

storyline in which Kamala travels through different videogame genres (**Wilson et al. 2019: issue 38**). At first, Kamala lands in an action role-playing game, easily recognizable through the presence of quests, info dumps by NPCs and a boss fight. However, the comic undermines the readers' expectations by having Kamala beat the level not by defeating the opponent 'Crystal Queen' (who is actually one of her real-life friends), but instead by showing empathy for her which causes the 'Crystal Queen' to transform back into her friend Zoe Zimmerman. Next, Kamala and Zoe arrive in an action-adventure with a high fantasy setting where they encounter a depressed minotaur who transforms back into their friend Bruno Carrelli after Kamala solves a riddle. Finally, Kamala, Bruno and Zoe enter a platforming game. There, Kamala beats the level by getting close to and eventually reuniting with her estranged friend Nakia Bahadir. In a final level, Kamala and her friends are confronted with visions of their younger selves and invited to ponder the question in how far they have changed during their lives which leads to them reaffirming the high value of their friendship. On the last page of the comic, narrator Kamala summarizes the lesson that she has learned through a voice-over: 'If I've learned one thing these past few years, it's that there's always another level to beat. But if you hold on to what's important… you won't have to beat it alone' (**Ibid**). I argue that this videogame-inspired storyline serves several purposes: first, it illustrates Kamala's gamer identity and thus resonates with readers who also play videogames as it creates a feeling of belonging. When understanding the references to certain videogame genres, informed readers feel as a part of a community and can get an additional amount of enjoyment out of the comic by appreciating those inside jokes. Second, as the videogame storyline brings previously estranged characters back together, the comic counters public discourses of videogames causing social isolation. Instead, Wilson's *Ms. Marvel* emphasizes the social aspects of gaming such as its potential of encouraging teamwork or bringing like-minded people together. In doing so, the books reaffirm the idea that playing videogames together can create tight-knit communities that bridge the gap between online and offline engagement. Whereas the previous section has shown how Kamala's online teammates turn into real-world friends, this section illustrates that this process can also work the other way around, with videogames helping Kamala to reconnect to her offline friends.

Conclusion

In Wilson's *Ms. Marvel*, an idealized representation of nerd subculture is contrasted with a depiction of the American general public as racist, Islamophic and exclusionary. The counter-site of the nerd community thus functions as a heterotopia of compensation, that is, as a space that accommodates people who remain marginalized in mainstream society.

Through the characters of Kamala, Bruno, Tyesha and Kamran, the book series shows how common (nerdy) interests can help people to overcome their own bias and personal prejudices and form alliances that cross social dividing lines. These alliances also work to reduce the characters' feelings of loneliness that are a result of their respective outsider status in American society as whole. Hence, *Ms. Marvel* questions prevalent stereotypes of nerds as antisocial loners and replaces them with a vision of the nerd community as composed of compassionate and supportive individuals thereby emphasizing the protective quality of heterotopias.

Furthermore, *Ms. Marvel's* nerd community is represented as emphatically diverse through its inclusion of, among others, impoverished people (like Bruno), people of colour (like Kamran) and Muslim women of colour (like Tyesha and Kamala). This representation invites (particularly female) readers of colour to see themselves as part of a nerd community while simultaneously encouraging male white nerd readers to be more welcoming towards female fans and/or fans of colour. Throughout the whole book series, fandom is consistently shown as a positive form of community building. Casting a Muslim woman of colour like Kamala Khan in the role a valued member of nerd subculture intervenes in (the often still negative) stereotypical representations of both Muslim women and nerddom in American popular culture. Thus, Wilson's *Ms. Marvel* series can be considered as an example where 'popular culture and religion intersect in productive ways, breaking free of the discourse of victimization and exoticism and helping us understand the complex, multiple frames of reference that define American Muslims' everyday lives' (**Peterson & Echchaibi 2017: 146**). While I agree with Sophia Arjana who regards *Ms. Marvel* as signifying 'the beginning of a more positive trend in the portrayals of Muslims in America' (**Arjana, 2017: 97**), I would go even further and add that this comic book series also paves the way for more diverse representations of nerds and nerddom in general. The start of a TV series based on Wilson's comics in 2022 will probably reinforce this effect and show an even wider audience the desirability of a visibly diverse, supportive nerd community.

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Endnotes

[i] MMORPG stands for 'massive(ly) multiplayer online role-playing game: an internet-based computer game set in a virtual world, which can be played by many people at the same time, each of whom can interact with the others' (Collins English Dictionary).

[ii] Nakia and Bruno also experience exclusion from mainstream American society, Nakia because of her Muslim faith and Bruno because he is impoverished.

[iii] For more information on Muslims in nerd subculture, see (**Gittinger, 2018**).

[iv] For more details on my reading of this page, see (**Cicholewski, 2021: 29-32**).

[v] For more information on the relevance of the new costume, see (**Cicholewski, 2021: 33-35**).

[vi] For more information on anti-diversity movements in gaming, see (**Massanari, 2020**).

So Many Ways to be an Outsider: 'Nerdism' and ethnicity as signifiers of otherness

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Abstract

The concept of the nerd and loneliness is an interesting one when we consider the idea of what 'outsider' status means and how it is communicated within popular culture. It is important to note that being identified as a nerd does not necessarily align with being lonely or holding outsider status as a negative quality. Indeed, within the mainstream Americanised evolution of the nerd we see the development of someone who although considered 'strange' or 'odd' and at times 'other' by their peers does have value and finds their place within the group, nerd becomes in these circumstances a shorthand for socially awkward rather than a true outsider.

Keywords: nerds; loneliness; otherness; disability; ethnicity; television

This article will consider the status of 'outsider' within popular television culture. The work will use as its textual analysis case study the France 2 produced French police procedural *Caïn* (2012-)[i], specifically considering the use of the character Nassim Borel (Mourad Boudaoud) within the show. Such a selection allows consideration of the nerd outside of the established Anglo-American iterations which permeate popular TV culture. Nassim Borel is a character who encompasses many of the stereotypical traits of the nerd within popular culture but also importantly combines these aspects with the implications of the character's French-Algerian ethnicity. Borel encompasses a range of character traits that can be identified within the nerd stereotype and as such immediately confirm a reading of loneliness or enforced outsider status because of this. Within the show Borel's social naivety and lack of 'cool' are defined through clothing, interests and behaviours, and perceived sexual inadequacy.

Such allocation and perceived confirmation of a Beta male status underscores how the nerd stereotype provides a short cut for an audience and within *Caïn* creates a strong dynamic which supports other forms of representation. Through the casting of Boudaoud as Borel we can consider how national assumptions may be adhered to or challenged within the series and in turn how the character's might be read by both national and international audiences. This offers the opportunity to consider the discourses which surround the narrative usage and reception of such a character, enabling exploration of concepts related to the posited outsider status of Borel. With this in mind his lonely status can be connected to the myriad of reasons for his positioning as 'odd one out' within his team, in terms of both a nerdist reading of his character but also the ethnic placement and concerns regarding race and perceived nationality leading to his distinct outlander status and treatment. Such analysis in turn raises considerations of racial stereotype and the perceived social and cultural effect of being ethnically different in a predominantly white country. Borel can also be seen as a representative of colonised peoples in French society. As a character of Algerian heritage there is an implication of enforced outsider status, difference and the loneliness felt when you are treated as different. Boudaoud's casting as Borel enables a wider interrogation of the stereotype of the nerd figure within popular culture. Such consideration can counter the formulaic use of whiteness in the nerd stereotype and extend the concept of where outsider status is welcomed or inflicted upon characters. Integral to this examination of the utilisation of the nerd within the *Caïn* narrative are the associations of masculinity which form a central concern within the exploration of the nerd stereotype and within the programme the reinforcement of hegemonic expectations of the male within popular culture and within that iteration as a part of the French psyche. Such a specific discourse is foregrounded as the lead

character, the eponymous Frédéric Caïn, is a paraplegic who is confined to a wheelchair, yet also regularly enters the field of investigation. The address of Caïn's disability, his personal treatment of his situation and the ways in which other characters respond to his paralysis, it is proposed, uses the status of Borel to narratively underpin the attitudes and physicality of the Caïn character. In so doing the interaction of the nerd stereotype and expectations of traditional masculine behaviour become central to the exploration of the characters within the show. A set of relationships where sociological placement and institutionalised behaviours are formed producing the framework for the discourses explored within the varied plot lines and character uses. Within this the application of assumptions regarding normative/hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity we can consider how those outside of these social mores are treated. Such institutionalised sociological and cultural patterns can then in turn translate into how those disregarded (outsiders) or lonely people find, or don't find, voice or place within society. Sexuality and prowess within the series are markers of traditional masculinity and so 'fitting in'. To be single and shy therefore equates to a lesser Beta status. Such loneliness is enforced not only by Borel's lack of consistent female company but his apparent inability to engage successfully in sexual conquests. In the case of the show *Caïn* there are additional considerations attached to the establishment of masculinity and Alpha male status. As already indicated *Caïn* has at its heart a differently abled male lead, opening the comparison of how physicality and machismo can be a performative aspect of masculinity. The use and representation of such a character is key to understanding the treatment of a figure such as Borel, as national stereotypes are at once challenged and underscored within the programme and considerations of French attitudes to disability, nerdism, and race are foregrounded within an analysis of the text. It is within this area that this article seeks to contribute to existing knowledge. Firstly, taking the identity of the 'nerd' and exploring it within relation to the application of ethnic representation and associated national concerns. Secondly, exploring the use of this sociological and cultural stereotype to affect some change in reception to the use of a paraplegic protagonist.

Created by Bertrand Arthuys[ii] and Alexis Le Sec[iii] the Marseilles set series *Caïn*, currently in season eight, follows a long serving eponymous crime detective Caïn (Bruno Debrandt – 2012 to 2018 and Julien Baumgarter 2018 -) who has been injured and subsequently confined to a wheelchair. A small but loyal team comprised of Captain Fred Caïn, Lucie (Julie Delarme) a younger female detective under Caïn's mentorship and Borel the youngest and most inexperienced member of the team who is usually relegated to IT support or research status. Alongside weekly investigations an overarching plotline continues through UK seasons one and two

enabling a continuity of narrative and the opportunity to utilise the character of Borel in a more narratively central way. This is explored as he attempts to assist his female colleague, Lucie, by stepping into the Alpha male role of hero and saviour. In this instance the Alpha male concept is demonstrated through an attempt to use physical dominance to assist Lucie in a fight with a man and so rescue her. Borel's inability to complete this role successfully complicates the situation and opens the team to investigation. Such inability and failure confirm his status of under-experienced yet loyal nerd. A situation which is used by Lucie, Borel's female senior colleague, to exclude and punish him, increasing his loneliness as his attempts to behave as his colleagues expect are once again thwarted, of which more later.

Firstly, the application of the epithet 'nerd' to the character of Borel will be considered. It is proposed that there is an added value within the application of the nerd concept to Borel, both in narrative terms but also within a wider consideration of the racial and ethnic stereotypes within French culture. In academic explorations of the nerd within popular culture, much is written about its evolution and use of representation within American culture. This is similarly represented in British iterations of the template. Christine Quail and K. E. Lane both consider the ways in which the geek or nerd have insinuated their way into social and cultural consciousness through both negative and in turn positive presentations.

Lane specifically traces the mainstream cultural construction of the nerd through iterations in sketch comedy from *Saturday Night Live* in the 1970's and via sit-coms of the 80's following this tradition (**2018**). Lane's consideration places the idea of the nerd into the comedy realm, a figure of fun and ridicule which has become the cultural norm. Nerd culture is that of the outsider, one to be watched but not to become. K. M. Earnest (**2018**) offers an exploration of the geek as group member and the differing ways in which such groupings have assisted in changing or encouraging an evolving consideration of the nerd or geek within American television presentations. Such constructions certainly offer the concept of strength in numbers. Characters can be themselves in similar company, less hindered by social expectations as we will explore later in relation to mainstream hits such as *The Big Bang Theory.* The revising of the nerd as a dominant cultural force when in an ensemble underlines the loneliness of the nerd in situations where conventionality is prized .

The über nerd, one classed as 'nerdy' even within their own group of nerds, is not a concept commonly explored within depictions outside of America and Britain and so within this article I seek to consider the use of the more established and stereotypical aspects of the nerd. In this case the excluded status found when the nerd is placed within a conventional

cultural and social space, where standing out is not encouraged. The concept of the outsider is one which strongly intertwines with the idea of the nerd in popular culture, although there has been a contemporary move to integrate the nerd into character groups that might be deemed 'socially popular' within entertainment narratives. Such a move aligns with the use in popular culture of the 'nerd' or 'geek' as a character that, although not necessarily the social pariah , is still someone who is seen as alone or who does not follow mainstream mores or patterns of accepted social behaviour. With this in mind the placement of the 'nerd' character means they are at forbearance of more popular and socially 'conventional' characters who have accepted the 'nerd' into their friendship group or because the presence of the nerd is tolerated.

Concepts of multiple 'otherness' become elements to be stacked against a character, in a world where being a nerd is not necessarily negative. Other aspects must be considered such as ethnicity, neuro-divergence and extended gradations of perceived masculinity are added to the baseline nerd status. Masculinity in this context is defined as the traditional heterosexual socialisation which promotes physicality (athletic and sexual), detachment, independence, and toughness. It is important to note that a perception of lesser masculine status, regarding physical prowess, size and perceived sexual vigour, has always been an aspect of the condition of nerd, 'one of the hallmarks of the geek is a definite social and sexual awkward- ness …' (**Wardell, 2018:252**). The nerd traditionally is physically smaller than the 'jock', under-developed both athletically and sexually, they are unable to defend themselves and tend to be the friend zoned character rather than the romantic lead because of this awkwardness within traditional male conventions and behaviour. However, as the epithet of nerd becomes more mainstream, for example Leonard in *The Big Bang Theory*, Chuck Bartowski in *Chuck* and Ross Gellar in *Friends*, and associations of IT knowledge and masculine power become more entwined clearer physical distinctions and abilities are focussed upon to indicate true outsider positioning. If we consider the roots of the masculinity/nerd dialectic we can identify an ongoing consideration of physical, rather than mental prowess being valued. Or, as Flowers would suggest:

> *The cultural ideal of masculinity would come to be associated with technologies like lawnmowers, power tools, trucks, and tractors, as opposed to science and technology, which lacked the power to violently reshape the world around it* (**Flowers, 2018: 172**).

We can see the application of Flower's idea in the attempt by Borel to physically vanquish Lucie's attacker, as referenced earlier. The impulse to action to validate masculinity is strong within the narrative of *Caïn* and

although not an athletic or powerful man Borel attempts to conform. Borel is traditionally placed within the IT section of policing, his wish to be in the field is clear as it is aligned with both acceptance and the traditional concept of justice and punishment being a physical role rather than a technical one. Such prizing of physicality over cerebral ability is also advocated by Bishop et el, as they discuss student behaviour in the school environment:

> *In some schools, a tight knit group of 'populars' wielded normative hegemony over students in their grade. This centralization of normative hegemony in a student group that is typically dominated by athletes, cheerleaders, and students with a fun ideology undermines teacher efforts to develop a pro-learning culture* (**Bishop et al., 2004: 251**).

Such research of real-life school experience reinforces the established fictional representation of the image of the 'nerd' in the American context of popular culture with an emphasis on athleticism and not learning. Indeed, in *Caïn* much focus is placed on gut instinct and intuition alongside physical grit and self-confidence, exemplified in the character of Caïn. Quail's 'awkward, math-savvy social and sexual failure' (**2011: 460**) establishes the roots of the nerd in popular culture through a focus on its evolution via the lens of American television and the creation through these iterations of the fictional nerd playbook found in Western representations. Additionally, there is an established identification of the nerd to be white and male although as Quail points out there have been exceptions which prove the rule, using the character of Urkel (Jaleel White) from *Family Matters* (1989-1987) to indicate some representation of differing ethnicities through the trope's TV evolution. With this in mind it is useful to note that even with nine years of additional media output, Quail's initial identifications that the nerd is white and male, is still the 'go to' stereotype within popular culture. However, television shows such as *The IT Crowd's* (2006-2013) Maurice Moss (Richard Ayoade), *The Big Bang Theory's* Rajesh Koothrappali (Kunal Nayyar), and *Leverage's* (2008-2012) Alec Hardison (Aldis Hodge), offer that there is a move to represent the aspects of the nerd stereotype within other ethnicities.

It is notable that American and British representations of the non-white male nerd dominate popular cultural vocabularies. Such narratives can also be seen in two French series *Caïn* with Mourad Boudaoud as Borel, and in *Lupin* (2021-) through Detective Guedira (Soufiane Guerrab). With this in mind, the nerd becomes represented not by skin colour, although whiteness still dominates and ethnicity offers an opportunity to further isolate a character, but more readily through semiotic aspects such as dress, appearance, and behaviour alongside sociological and cultural markers in interaction and interests. Use of these signifiers underline

Quail's assertion that 'The nerd is culturally placed in contrast with a more athletic, socially skilled, sexually aware individual—the cool kid or jock, who demonstrates a hegemonic heterosexual masculinity' (**2011: 461**). Such semiotic indicators are utilized within the character of Borel to simplify identification of his character as a nerd. His physique, personal presentation and body language all mark the character as divergent from the hegemonic concepts of heteronormative masculine display. As we will later explore these aspects become central to nerd characterisation within *Caïn*, becoming markers of otherness that may be focussed upon to secure understanding of the 'nerd's' place within the narrative and in relation to other characters.

If we consider dress initially as a marker of nerdiness, we can observe the use of this signifier in the case of Borel. He dresses in a manner we associate with office work, smart/casual, however when we compare his sartorial selections to those of his colleagues, nerd attire is represented through his choice of clothing. Generalised 'coolness' and masculinity are reflected in the coded 'breaking of the rules' , which is a cornerstone to the show. Borel generally wears a checked shirt, tie, dark trousers, and a slightly formal trainer, nothing that he wears is markedly fashion inflected or carries any indicative aspects of nerd culture and affiliations to hobbies or pursuits. Importantly, he is the only character who wears a tie on a regular basis - an aspect which marks him out as a follower of coded dress rules. A tie is conformity; in this case orthodoxy and so otherness. The tie also represents a social and cultural placement within Caïn's team suggestive of an inability to take risks therefore casting doubt on Borel's masculinity and general physical ability. His attire also implies a docility and desire to fit in. The conventionality of dress underscores the inexperience of the character and low status within the team. If we dress for the job we want Borel is clearly in IT support and not the rough and tumble of action in the field. We can also consider Borel's wish to not be noticed through his clothing, the plain colour palette and 'safe' selections suggest a desire to become invisible, to not stand out in a crowd. The idea of blending in, in the case of Borel singles him out in a team that dress more flamboyantly, confirming rather than mitigating his outsider status and associated loneliness. Such a desire to integrate can be read in two ways: by dressing anonymously, attention is not drawn underlining the aspects of his character which relate to the status of nerd, fitting in with cultural expectations of a work environment.

Secondly, such invisibility could link to experiences of ethnic minorities being unfairly profiled and singled out for unwanted attention, so by dressing conservatively, Borel seeks anonymity. This is contrasted with the attire of both Caïn and Lucie. Each dress in a casual manner, using a social signifier - the leather jacket, to identify their rebellious disdain for

authority. As Dylan Jones asserts 'Not only is it the most basic form of teenage rebellion – a black leather jacket, jeans and T-shirt – but it was the first. Not only is it prosaic, it is primal' (**2015**). Jones' identification of the teen rebellion aspect is also pertinent to Caïn and Lucie, their behaviour is, at times dangerous and ill-considered, in direct contrast to Borel. The leather jackets also indicate a masculine dominance which both Caïn and Lucie share indicating a physical capability that Borel does not display. Where Caïn and Lucie enter the physical fray frequently, Borel's attempts to overpower suspects or be physically active within the narrative tend to end in embarrassment for him, underlining his lack of prowess. Such narrative strands confirm weakened status as a 'nerd', a figure who is seemingly alone in contrast to the narrative togetherness of Caïn and Lucie. As Connell and Messerschmidt identify 'Masculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personal traits of individuals. Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to gender relations in a particular social setting' (**2005: 836**). Borel therefore is positioned into a more traditionally and stereotypically feminine and less active role. He is frequently or easily disarmed/captured while in the field, underlining his vulnerability and lack of physical capability when compared to the male lead. Such confirmation of Borel's lack of physical ability and therefore inherent nerd status, factors strongly into narrative positioning as the support for Caïn but also as a figure isolated by these distinctions. Such discourse focusses upon Caïn's wheelchair bound status and raise narrative questions regarding his physical suitability for his role as police detective in the field '… using a wheelchair for mobility is highly visual, is perceived to be severe, and frequently elicits invalidation' (**Gerschick, 2000: 1264**). Indeed, in the original iteration of a paraplegic detective *Ironside* (1967-1975) the character is no longer a serving police officer but a consultant having been forced to retire. Ironside relies on his mental ability and the physicality of others to solve his cases, a contrast to the eponymous Caïn who is violent and physically reckless. Alongside considerations of suitability for service, is the very visible nature of Caïn's disability, as Gerschick maintains:

> *… for men with physical disabilities, masculine gender privilege collides with the stigmatized status of having a disability, thereby causing status inconsistency, as having a disability erodes much, but not all masculine privilege.* (**Gerschick, 2000: 1265**)

Such potential inconsistency, is countered effectively, in *Caïn*, through the presence of Borel, a 'lesser man' in terms of physical prowess and social/cultural standing and a man very much on the periphery of the team.

In addition to this semiotic positioning of Borel as a male of lesser ability and standing than Caïn, we can also consider whether ethnic derivation is also used as shorthand for outsider status, or as a marker for supplementary social discomfort. Mis-readings of social situations and norms contributes towards the 'nerd' stereotype of characters in American shows like *The Big Bang Theory* where Kuthrapali's Indian roots position him as farther removed from the established national consciousness. With this in mind, we look to the character of Borel, a person of Algerian descent but French nationality, and the additional stigma of ethnicity as it isolates and distances the character narratively beyond their 'nerd' status. Concepts of the nerd and ethnicity is also demonstrated in the French Netflix show *Lupin* (2021). Detective Guedira (Soufiane Guerrab) is a French-Algerian character like Borel who is positioned on the periphery of his team. His outsider status confirmed by his exclusion from the jewellery heist case, which forms the backbone of *Lupin* Season 1 and his relegation to office researcher and IT support. Guedira exhibits less Beta masculine characteristics, he is physically larger than Borel and his behaviour is more assured and his desire to be heard more clearly communicated. In relation to Beta Male status we can consider a man who stands back, is softer and less obviously physical than his male peers. However, Guedira does inhabit the nerdist trope of being obsessed with a subject, in this case the Lupin literature which guides the main protagonist's actions. Lupin is a popular series of French literature by Maurice Leblanc focussing on a master gentleman thief Arsine Lupin set in the 1900's. These books form the basis of the creation of a persona by *Lupin's* hero Assane Diop (Omar Sy). By knowing the stories Guedira is able to track Diop and later assist him in his search for his son and justice. Placed within the nerd role, Guedira's observations, as Borel encounters, are dismissed without discussion. Borel and Guedira, as characters of French-Algerian heritage, serve as representatives of those sections of French society still seen as other or interlopers; Marseilles and Paris are centres of French-Algerian settlement, and in turn indicative of the attitudes and reactions to those from this ethnic background. Indeed, in *Lupin* a recurring theme is the invisibility of non-white people in France. For both characters, their identity is presented as an obstacle that they must overcome:

> *…semantic distinction between choosing a behavior and manifesting negatively perceived traits is important to stigma theory because behavior is changeable, while attributing negatives to another's appearance is merely an attribution that is socially influenced.* (**Cross, 2005: 27**)

They are, in part, victims of their own success, each having moved into a sphere where they could be termed as belonging yet not belonging. Borel and Guedira both serve in the police force, a perceived bastion of whiteness, that clearly accepts the abilities of the men as their passport into this traditionally off-limits arena. Each character fits in, yet is easily focussed upon as different when the narrative requires such distinction to be drawn, their nerd status combining with their ethnicity to define a secondary difference and point of otherness or isolation, and so loneliness. Such considerations of ethnic diversity and difference are confirmed in *Lupin* with the casting of Omar Sy (a first-generation French actor of Mauritian and Senegalese heritage) in the lead role with the show offering a clearly drawn confirmation of overt racism and discrimination in the French capital and beyond. A step which is made possible in part by the contemporary nature of the series, released on Netflix in 2021 and through the popularity of Sy, an actor and writer who on many occasions has challenged the racism present in his country.

The presence of French-Algerians in both of the shows' main locations creates an illusion of a diverse France, but also a France which is not as culturally integrated as it might first seem. Most prominently through the lens of Borel in *Caïn* the potential is offered to explore the difficult relationship between France and Algeria which has been ongoing for many decades. In *A History of Algeria* (**2017**) James McDougall offers the history of a country defined in the past five centuries by invasion and resistance. A substantial portion of Algeria's experience of colonial rule was under the French from 1830 to 1962, a relationship which has definite consequences for both countries into the present day. Within *Caïn* and *Lupin,* specifically through the characters of Borel and Guedira respectively, and additionally through encounters with other characters representing those of Algerian heritage, the placement and reality of being French-Algerian can begin to be explored and brought to the fore. It is important to note that such tensions are tangentially offered rather than explicitly explored. However, in most cases on-screen Borel is the only non-white presence, visually lonely as well as narratively so. With this in mind, it is important to note that the history of France and Algeria is one which colours French politics today as Sabrina Kalem confirms:

> *Being Algerian in France means representing a different country within a country … When I represent Algeria, I represent something that is in my DNA, in my blood. When I represent France, I represent the country where I was born, where I live currently.* (**Alsaafin, 2019**)

Such experience is interesting when we think of Borel. He is pulled in three directions; by his heritage, nationality, and his job. As with many people of immigrant descent, his role as a part of the system of law and order

potentially places him at narrative odds with his ethnic community, at least in terms of the generalised portrayal of the group within the series. The perception of 'traitor' both within the wider community he serves and those he works for, adds to his loneliness and outsider status. There is a recurring identification of Borel as a character that must 'take sides' and demonstrate loyalty in a situation, indicative of the ways in which those with 'outsider' status must constantly establish their reliability. In the case of Borel, this manifests as fealty to the police force and Caïn, regardless of his treatment or feelings. This positioning underscores the loneliness of Borel, a character who is not fully accepted by any element of his life. His lack of self-confidence means that he aspires to be an integral part of the team. However, in most episodes, Borel is relegated to office assistant and researcher, a lonely role, but one which underscores his distance from the approval and recognition he desires.

The tension between France and Algeria is an ongoing one which has a long history steeped in colonial mistreatment and national disregard, elements mirrored in Borel's treatment by the team. The relatively recent colonial history and ongoing oppression of Algeria can be seen in the:

> […] *murders of as many as 200 Algerians (estimates of the exact number vary) during a pro-independence demonstration in Paris in October 1961[…]* (**Ramdani, 2012; France24, 2012**).

Such contemporary wounds, indicate the concerns of a people living within a nation that until recent times was a source of violent repression. Many would say that the wounds still have not healed for many French-Algerians, as: 'They continue to experience discrimination in every aspect of their lives, as well as police brutality' (**Ramdani, 2020**). The positioning of Borel as both French-Algerian and within the police is therefore of narrative interest with a view to wider social and political commentary, underscoring the concept of being lonely in one's own country. To be a part of what could be seem as a repressive and authoritarian group by one's own ethnic community, is a clear indication of the potential for outsider status that a character such as Borel faces. Within this consideration are a range of aspects of the character and casting which would suggest a French-Algerian characterisation that is at once representative, but also non-threatening in terms of a wider French audience. A portion of this is found in Borel as unobjectionable nerd, one who physically fits that identity and perhaps not the stereotypical 'Algerian', one whom in the French national psyche is still more clearly aligned with manual labour, a fact which positioned them squarely at the bottom of society:

> *… Algerian men – and others from France's colonies – were recruited to rebuild the country's damaged industry, working menial jobs and living in shanty towns on the outskirts of cities* (**Alsaafin, 2019**).

Such a focus on 'menial' physicality also suggests a strong and traditionally masculine male. Borel certainly counters such stereotypical assertions about Algerian men, primarily via his nerd positioning. Borel is slight of build, he is not physically aggressive nor powerful, qualities utilized within the show to ensure confirmation of nerdist Beta male status and underscore Caïn's Alpha masculinity. However, by adding institutional and societal elements to his presence we can increase his relevance as the lonely outsider. Flowers (**2018**) has posited that the IT specialism is an indicator of a new masculinity and an attainment of power through technical mastery that can result 'in a kind of liminal identity that straddled hegemonic ideologies of masculinity, as well as more subordinate ones' (**Ibid: 172**). In the case of Borel, the latter assignment as IT specialist, in addition to young subordinate confirm elements of the nerd persona. However, Borel's Algerian heritage and position within the police force encourage us to carefully consider the treatment of his character, and through such investigation begin to explore ideas of integration and acceptance within French culture. Through Caïn, the audience is subjected to 'a particular expression of nonhegemonic masculinity and favouring the more hegemonic, consumer-viable contrast' (**Quail, 2012: 461**).

Considerations of the nerd in mainstream contemporary entertainment offer IT support and research skills, those jobs considered banal and too much trouble for the cooler rule breaking leads provides a role for the nerd to fit into in the police procedural world. Borel is the youngest and lowest ranked officer so on a superficial level, it makes sense for him to undertake the IT role. Additionally, it keeps him office-based allowing for Caïn to be the one entering the fray. Borel potentially lacks cultural and social capital because of his hierarchical positioning and Algerian heritage, but makes up for this in his ability and willingness to complete tasks of desk-based research. Borel's value, then, within the office situation is that of the nerd, one who is coercible, completing mundane tasks because they understand that they are not socially a part of the higher value portion of the group. To an extent, Borel fulfils Benjamin Nugent's identification of the second category of nerd, he '…is a nerd who is a nerd by sheer force of social exclusion' (**2008: 7**). Therefore, we can attach more significance to those times when Borel is liberated from the office and is part of the action. Especially as, at these points he is not used to being out of the office, and his intentions do not necessarily always go to plan. For instance, in the conclusion to Ep8 Se1, Borel tracks Lucie to a covert meeting with her ex-lover/informant, Carsenti (François-Dominique Blin) and a fight ends with Carsenti being pushed off a cliff by the pair. Borel's attempt to be a hero

ends badly, and in turn, he feels the wrath of Lucie. Borel's status within the group, allows for accusation and bullying from Lucie in a manner which would not be expected towards a stronger masculine character, particularly one of Caucasian descent. Lucie's callous punishment of Borel continues through the early episodes of Season 2, a situation to which Borel has no repost and which increases his loneliness as he has no other person to tell or appeal to. Borel is bullied, as actions completed with the best of intentions are valued by his colleagues on a mandatory scale which serve their individual sensibilities at any given time.

The concept of being used is not just associated with those identified as Caucasian but those of different ethnic heritage, an important distinction which suggests that it is the combination of nerd and ethnicity which places Borel into the position of being easily manipulated. This is confirmed by Capitaine Émile Allard (Pascal Légitimus) in Ep1 Se1 as he flatters Borel, focussing upon his loneliness and disconnection from the team, into assisting him to research a case, 'A team always needs someone like you to do the shitty jobs…You're underappreciated really…You know when you have strong characters above you it's hard to climb the ranks'. It is important to note that Allard is played by an actor of Ethiopian and Armenian heritage, offering a successful non-white character to whom Borel can briefly connect, one who understands his struggle and sympathises. Importantly this connection is only for Allard's benefit at the cost of Borel, his moment of inclusion but a trick. That Borel is unable to establish a stable position within the group dynamic, except for that of scapegoat, places him into the social categorisation of nerd, one who is useful but never a true part of the team, although, at times he is allowed some hope of admittance. Such treatment increases the sense of loneliness that can be attached to Borel, with no significant other and no obvious social life outside of his job, he is reliant on any attention his job might offer, but such affirmation is consistently withheld, and his value regularly questioned by his teammates.

Borel is also important to the integrity of Caïn within the show and the value of the 'nerd' persona and associated isolated status feeds strongly into this element of the narrative. The association of nerd with a less masculine persona, is important as we have a main character who is the embodiment of the white hegemonic masculine stereotype with one exception: he is in a wheelchair. Caïn himself makes disparaging comments about being unable to walk, calling himself a cripple and repeatedly references the concept of being a paraplegic as a lessening of him in the eyes of others, and in part himself. With this in mind, it is important to consider how we relate Borel's status to Caïn's disability. Borel's nerd status and lowered social capital presents him as an unthreatening male, positioned to both help and hinder Caïn, a character whose 'heroic

masculinities depend absolutely on the subordination of alternative masculinities' (**Halberstam, 1998: 1**). Borel offers the servitude of a subordinate who can be sent to physically go where Caïn cannot, but also as an inferior specimen to Caïn's robust, and frequently underscored, heterosexuality and masculine worth. Borel's need for inclusion because of his enforced loneliness and general exclusion ensures willingness and availability to serve Caïn. As Caïn is wheelchair-bound it is important that the viewer believes his physical ability, the focus upon physicality ensures that Caïn is read as a potent male. As Shuttleworth et al identify in reference to the work of Harlan Hahn many 'disabled men […] tend to identify on both personal and political levels with hegemonic notions of masculinity such as independence and bravado rather than identifying as disabled' (**2012: 176**).

This macho persona overtly drawn confirms the characters presentation as an Alpha male. Confirmation is offered through physical action, his literal strength in terms of moving around a generally hostile environment and in his use of physical or verbal intimidation when dealing with suspects or enemies. These elements confirm the traditionally positioned hierarchical and masculine status of Caïn's white middle class character; however, it is also obvious that despite such a strong representation the character is still physically impaired and so could be seen as 'less than' the stereotypical French male. It is also noteworthy that Caïn's middle-class white privilege also smooths the path for him to challenge stereotypical perceptions of a differently abled man. He can afford a light-weight wheelchair and an adapted sports car. That such potential inferiority is confronted by Caïn and used as a way in which he can undermine the attitudes of others directly addresses his assumed weakness in an ableist world. This makes Borel's nerd integral to the show. His presence reads as physically weak; although able bodied, as the actor cast is of slight build and uses a physicality which suggests uncertainty. Narratively, Borel is one who is easily overcome by others and who follows the rules providing a male 'competitor' that Caïn may comfortably better. The two are offered as opposed conceptions of the masculine – Caïn's white middle class gregariousness and centrality compared to Borel's French-Algerian loneliness and exclusion. Asch and Fine (**1988**) identify that there is a general perception that ''Having a disability [is] seen as synonymous with being dependent, childlike and helpless—an image fundamentally challenging all that is embodied in the ideal male: virility, autonomy and independence''(**Ibid: 3**). To ensure the reading of Caïn is of one who can function within the action detective genre the focus is therefore placed upon his challenging of this conception of what it is to be male and differently abled.

Explorations of masculinity and associated popularity become a focus. Lucie also fulfils a more masculine role than Borel, offering within the show a variety of masculinities, which make sense only in hierarchical and contested relations with one another (**Pascoe, 2007: 7**). This concept of masculinity is situated in traditional male and female stereotypes, masculine activity compared to feminine passivity. Lucie is active more frequently than Borel who remains as technical support point 'man'. Importantly, Lucie inhabits both the masculine and feminine, positioned as acceptable tomboy her masculine behaviour and inherently connected bravado '[…]read as a sign of independence and self-motivation, and tomboyism may even be encouraged to the extent that it remains comfortably linked to a stable sense of a girl identity' (**Halberstam., 1998: 6**). Lucie dresses in a manner which combines masculine utility and toughness, jeans and a leather jacket, but in tandem with low cut tops which display her cleavage. The concept of the tomboy sits well within the placement of the female in the male dominated world of the police force, her ability situated within traditionally male skillsets and social approaches, firing guns and being physically active whilst still displaying female elements, long hair and clothing which enhances her female form. She flirts with Caïn and is confident in these potentially sexually charged situations with her male superior.

Borel's placement as nerd and so lesser male serves therefore to also to support Lucie's more masculine positioning. Borel is the lonely assistant, one who is easily bested in his job and in combat. There is a softness and naivety within Borel that Caïn and Lucie exploit. Such treatment is situated in the fact that Borel does not present as a physically aggressive or confident character, his 'nerd' status encompassing a more thoughtful and careful character than his senior colleagues who are uncompromising and combative. When Borel is attacked and taken hostage at gunpoint by murder suspect Milo (Thibault Pasquier), (**Caïn, Series 1, Episode 5**) it is Borel's nerd status which facilitates this. Borel's assumption of power in the interrogation offers his mis-reading of the situation. It is Caïn who secures Borel's release, offering an important physical and psychological comparison between the two men. Borel obviously overwhelmed, shakes and perspires as Milo restrains and threatens him, in contrast Caïn is calm and insouciant. Such a convention also enables us to believe in the positioning of Caïn as the Alpha male within the scenario so confirming his superiority. Such separation of the presentation of Caïn and Borel references Gerschick and Miller's 'Three R Framework', reliance, reformulation, and rejection (see **Shuttleworth et al, 2012: 177**). Where reliance indicates the adherence to traditional hegemonic markers of masculinity and so the approach of Caïn; while Borel offers a more complex relationship to the masculine potentially combining the

reformulation and rejection elements of the framework. While Borel can be seen through his behaviours to reformulate masculine tropes something undertaken in line with an individual's limitations, Borel also partially embraces an alternative masculinity, one based more on softness and kindness than dominance and aggression (**Ibid: 177**). Alternative masculinity does not mean abandoning maleness but it does encourage embrace of difference, something which the character of Borel in the series can be seen to be struggling with in the orbit of Caïn. Caïn's approach to his differently abled status 'internalize[s] feelings of inadequacy and seek to overcompensate for them, perceiving the problem to be in themselves rather than the social structure' (**Ibid, 177**). It is of importance to note that although this observation is in relation to the experience and approach of differently abled men a similar reading may be made of Borel. He too perceives himself as the problem rather than the social structure in which he lives as a man. As a man of Algerian decent his seems inured to the racial stereotypes levelled at him, the macro aggressions which become associated with everyday interactions, and vulnerable to nerd stereotypes offered in relation to negative perceptions of his hegemonic masculinity.

We are aware that Borel cannot physically overcome Milo; he is too weak and scared, traits which we can accept within the nerd stereotype. Borel's experience is a deep one which resonates within his character in later episodes emphasising his lonely state, as he has no team mates in which to confide his fears. Such concerns seem not to trouble other characters who are placed into similarly perilous situations. Such impact speaks to weakness within Borel, rather than a human quality. This characterization once more confirming a lonely status for the more cerebral Borel, his thoughtfulness seen as introversion, inaction and weakness against the physically extrovert and risk taking Caïn, as Adi Robertson attests 'In fiction, being "nerdy" is shorthand for being an underdog…' (**2012**). The underdog within this scenario being one who is constantly thwarted rather than positioned to realise their eventual worth.

Borel is harassed by his team, until his knowledge and ability become useful and he is afforded some acknowledgement. In *Caïn* there is a fine line between the reading of this treatment as simply the behaviour of much more forceful characters towards a younger and less confident colleague, or whether at times, there are allusions to negative attitudes towards those of Algerian descent - that they are a second-class citizen and undeserving of equal treatment or respect. It is important to note that there is no overt racism directed towards Borel; however, it is possible to read disdain in the interactions with Borel and other characters of Algerian ethnicity within the show. This is offered clearly through a young woman who references the difference in treatment of white and Arab suspects in

investigations. She rejects the concept of assimilation and her father's placatory attitude towards the police, Ep 6 Se1. In this interaction it is important to note that Caïn and Lucie are polite and conciliatory. However, the contrast offered is between Borel's efforts to be accepted and the young woman's wish to be herself, embracing her Algerian heritage, by rejecting the assimilation that Borel (and her father) have actively pursued. Borel's decision to subsume himself to the mainstream enforcing a loneliness more commonly associated with a wish to assert difference.

Borel's outsider status is clearly identified when he is instructed to tamper with a van Ep 9 Se 2 00:17:08. Caïn states he will appear to arrest Borel if he is seen with the inference that as a French-Algerian he 'looks the part' of a thief, an everyday micro aggression, confirming embedded reactions to race and cultural expectations of transgression. Likewise, Lucie's identification of Borel as Caïn's 'slave' (**Caïn, Series 2, Episode 7**) offers another example of potential racism and clear placement of his French Algerian heritage as being perceived as less than that of someone of white French descent. The pejorative is on first regard designed to position Borel as a 'lackey', a micro aggression which places Borel as a subordinate undertaking Caïn's functional tasks, such as research. Although an important supportive element, research is not the 'sexy' aspect of physical police work with which Caïn associates himself and to which Borel aspires. Borel does not question the actions he is required to take and because of this attitude, will never be the police officer Lucie is. Lucie is action orientated and given the latitude to enter the field and act independently, therefore again she is aligned to the concept of policing that Caïn follows and will never deal in the detail orientated specifics and administration that Borel is assigned. The assertion that willingness is a negative personality attribute solidifies Borel's loneliness, his attempts to garner worth dismissed. Borel's willingness is countered by Lucie's intractability. Such single mindedness is an attribute which aligns Lucie to Caïn, her positioning in the narrative as a flirty combatant to the male lead, a will they won't they scenario which is carried through seasons 1 and 2 of the show. She can be seen as a 'female Caïn', able to hold her own verbally, physically, and sexually against her detective partner, a situation which '…reinforces the idea that masculinity is tied to dominance, control, and heterosexuality' (**Chard, 2020:58**). She is more powerful and confident than Borel can ever be and therefore may be perceived as more masculine in her approach, as Chard identifies qualities of dominance are linked to such displays of authority both physical and sexual. However, given the elements of bullying which can be discerned in Lucie's derogatory approach to Borel, the earlier comment takes on deeper meanings when considered in relation to Borel's ethnic heritage and sociological placement as French-Algerian. The resulting subordination of Borel, is then

key to Lucie's and Caïn's dominance within the show. His exclusion and loneliness in the team where he should be integral given his ability to research and use IT, elements neither of the other lead characters engage with for fear of a lessening of their hip statuses. Nevertheless, it presents a problematic discourse as it underscores covert racism and institutionalised notions of power, masculinity and exclusion. Borel's lonely status underscores this concept, his enforced isolation from the group contributing to his treatment as lesser masculine figure.

Borel's loneliness offers another exploration of power and masculinity using nerd stereotypes of sexual inhibition or inexperience. A speed dating sting in Ep 4 Se 1 offers the frame to explore sexuality and confidence in the show. Both Lucie and Caïn enter into proceedings with flirty confidence, while Borel presents only shy uncertainty. When Borel matches with a woman, Elise, Caïn admires Borel's skills as he and Lucie watch him make-out with his new date, a fact which initially counters the concept of the nerd. The following morning, Borel is caught by Caïn in the office changing into fresh clothes and is asked 'Does your mum know you stayed out all night?' (**Caïn, Series 1, Episode 4**) to which Borel grins broadly. Although not stereotypical for a nerd, this is a stand out occurrence in the first two seasons. It is also important to acknowledge that the encounter and its incongruity is treated as a joke by Caïn and that Caïn himself resisted similar offers during the operation. After the one-night stand, Borel appears momentarily in the office space without a tie, his sexual liberation connecting to his personal one. However, the encounter means that Borel begins to be 'sexted' by Elise, his one-night stand, something with which he is unfamiliar and which Caïn must explain to him, highlighting Borel's naivety. When Borel receives nude pictures from Elise, he is visibly embarrassed (**Ibid**). Borel's sincerity and implied loneliness is underscored when he asserts 'when I sleep with a woman, I fall in love with her', a sentiment not shared by the more sexually confident Caïn and Lucie. Borel's sincerity about relationships is at odds with the more sexually at ease and successful Caïn and Lucie. We may also read into Borel's hesitancy with the opposite sex a wish to be in a long-term relationship, a status which is not embraced by his colleagues and so might be seen as a nerdy aspiration The fact that Borel's encounter goes wrong is also of importance, he cannot simply meet a 'normal' woman, one who wants to get to know him and date. Instead, Elise is immediately obsessed, a woman much too sexually aggressive and masculine in her approach for a character as sincere as him. The nude photos immediately sent reminiscent of the male focus upon the 'dick-pic' as a way of soliciting reciprocal nude images – reversed in this case by Elise offering nude snaps immediately. Borel's love life then is a point of humour for the other characters and highlights his loneliness, his only early foray into romance

becoming a difficult and embarrassing situation. In contrast the sexual confidence of his fellow officers and their 'will they won't they' status as a possible couple highlights his inability to find an appropriate partner or handle a relationship.

The exclusion of Borel from office romance increases the aspect of the loneliness of the character, his private life little to non-existent and his status in the team lowly and disregarded. He has no one to confide in within the team and no moments of revelation to be shared with other significant characters. We can refer back to his slight connection with Capitaine Émile Allard only to be used and discarded. A situation which is repeated, Borel is wanted when his skills are of use and dumped when he has served his purpose. The size of the team and Borel's outsider status mean that there is no space for him to form a significant relationship within the team. Caïn has Lucie, their shared confidences and conversations, an ongoing B plot in the seasons, with Borel as the literal and figurative third-wheel is left to his own devices. This exclusion is reflected in Borel being constantly left in the office whilst the others go into the field, the small team not offering a fourth member with whom he might connect.

Borel clearly represents the lonely nerd within *Caïn*, offering a naïve sensibility which contrasts the larger and more gregarious personalities and attitudes of his immediate colleagues. As such he is positioned as an outsider both within the police force and his own community of French-Algerians, a lonely figure in the halls of the white middle-classes. As identified this juxtaposition of approach and experience through the character of Borel acts to also reinforce the reading of Caïn, providing a lonely beta male against which Caïn's fun-loving alpha may play. Borel's positioning as a weaker looking and also sexually inferior male, offers a needy nerd to bully but he also becomes the non-threatening face of the French-Algerian man, a person lonely in their own country. In offering a representative of the largest immigrant population in France and in Marseilles in particular the show offers a confirmation of France as an integrated country. However, through micro and macro aggressions identified earlier within this work it is clear that being of Algerian descent is still a marker of outsider status within France and more so within or in interaction with the establishment of the police. As I argue, Borel might be seen as a victim of his own success, as are many of immigrant heritage; integration is a hard-won prize but those not in receipt of such acceptance may begrudge that success as with it comes ostracization and the associated loneliness of never quite fitting in. The two aspects strongly intermingle within the character with aspects of the bullying observed, focussed on both his nerd traits and also his ethnicity. Society and culture place him at the bottom of the pile using either of these elements,

combined they increase his outsider status and so loneliness as he represents the many facets of the under-represented and marginalised.

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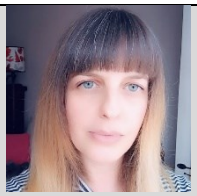

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Endnotes

[i] See **Media Bibliography** for details of films and television programmes referenced in this article.

[ii] For Bertrand Arthuys' career details, see: https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0037868/

[iii] For Alexis Le Sec's career details, see: https://www.imdb.com/name/nm2978041/

The Simultaneity of Loneliness and Popularity in Dear Evan Hansen

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Abstract

Musical theatre is an often neglected medium amongst popular culture studies. Critics of the theatre art form are quick to open the distance between musical theatre and other dramatic varieties, seeing it as melodramatic or banal. Dear Evan Hansen, — which first opened on Broadway in 2016, — has generated a new wave of fans and critics alike by addressing larger cultural topics of mental health through songs. The narrative centres on the titular character, a nerd and self-professed social outcast struggling with loneliness and low self-worth, who gets caught up in a lie that sparks a social media movement. The audience watches as Evan attempts to negotiate his newly found popularity, being driven by the fear of losing a validation he had always longed to receive.

Despite technology and social media easing long distance communication and creating communities, nearly half of Americans report feeling alone or left out and struggle with presenting a 'worthy' self-image to a highly critical yet invisible online audience. Using a psychoanalytic approach, this paper will first discuss the modern narrative of Dear Evan Hansen and its motifs of loneliness and social belonging, before moving on to consider how musical theatre articulates conversations of loneliness and popularity whilst simultaneously engaging the audience as integral characters in the performance.

Keywords: musical theatre; social media; mental health; nerd

Introduction

Dear Evan Hansen, a musical written by Benj Pasek and Justin Paul, premiered on Broadway in December 2016 following successful runs in Washington DC and Off-Broadway between July 2015 and May 2016 to high public acclaim. Electing to open with a monologue, rather than a grand opening number, it challenges the stereotyped image of musical theatre from its outset.

The musical is traditionally a play in which song and dance are incorporated into a dramatic story that evoke emotions beyond joy. Despite this, musical theatre is often viewed as a lesser art form. Musical theatre on Broadway developed from variety and minstrel shows to Vaudeville and Burlesque, thus being viewed by upper class 'legitimate' theatre goers as gaudy and tacky. Early musical theatre has historically been engaged with as a singular media form, with just a few hours to give a rounded performance that leaves the viewer both entertained and satisfied, and the expectation they would have little interaction with the show and its content after the final curtain. The invention of the internet has made musical theatre wholly more accessible, as those without the access or means to see performances can stream soundtracks and performances. Moreover, reviews are no longer limited to critics belonging to the elite but include the opinions of the regular audience member, and online interactions generate debate that open new perspectives on the content.

Musical theatre now has the technological capacity to reach the same broad audiences as film and television but must utilise different techniques. Novels and television series have time to develop characters and flesh out the narrative. Films, similar in length to a musical theatre performance, can use multiple filming locations and expensive editing techniques to create feelings of scale or push emotions onto the viewer. To compete with the sense of scale in television and film, musical theatre instead adopts elaborate orchestration (*Sunset Boulevard,* 1991; *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang,* 2002) and set and costume design (*Phantom of the Opera,* 1986; Wicked, 2003) as the norm to transform a small stage into a new world and convincing the audience of its rules. In contrast, the eight-member cast of *Dear Evan Hansen* dress in nondescript, everyday clothing, the stage design minimalist with its main feature being several tall screens that project social media timelines and posts. These elements combine to evoke a feeling of a small local performance, rather than the extravagant experience of large chorus productions on Broadway. This shift gives rise to a sense of smallness and closeness, allowing for a greater focus on each character and helping the audience to develop a personal connection with those on stage.

The plot of the musical centres wholly on Evan Hansen, a socially anxious high school student with no real friends. At the start of the musical, Evan is instructed by his counsellor to write letters to himself to foster positivity after suffering social anxiety, and one is intercepted by a fellow student, Connor Murphy. Shortly after, Connor is revealed to have died with Evan's letter still on him, leading the Murphy family to conclude Connor wrote the letter for Evan. Unable to admit the truth, Evan begins lying about his close friendship with Connor, and enlists family friend Jared Kleinman to forge emails supporting his claims. He also begins working with classmate Alana Beck on a social media campaign to keep Connor's memory alive, which goes viral online after Evan speaks at Connor's memorial event. His father's abandonment and mother's busy work schedule result in Evan building a close bond with the Murphy parents, and he later begins a relationship with Connor's sister, Zoe Murphy. As the show progresses, Evan's relationships begin to fracture, as he fails to accept his own identity as a nerd in contrast to his newly found recognition from his peers.

The production has become a global hit and won multiple awards, but its real success has occurred through its social media engagement and connection with younger audiences, generating conversations about mental health, loneliness, anxiety, self-acceptance, and inferiority in the era of social media, online personalities, and fake news. *Evan Hansen* joins a long line of musical theatre productions that have highlighted societal and civic issues of their respective time. These musicals have often covered hard-hitting subjects yet maintained emotional diversity, functioning as a safe space for those that have felt marginalised by society, whilst simultaneously providing rich entertainment to the audience. *Rent* (1996) highlighted the HIV/AIDS epidemic in New York City during the late 1980s, and *Falsettos* (1992) depicted LGBT relationships and non-traditional family structures during the same period.

There is still limited literature available discussion *Dear Evan Hansen* academically. Quick (**2019**) used dramatist and postmodern theory to analyse the song 'Waving Through a Window' in relation to teenage vulnerability and anxiety, whilst Doherty (**2020**) discussed *Dear Evan Hansen*'s fan engagement on social media to evaluate Generation Z's participatory spectatorship. This paper looks to build upon this existing literature by discussing the show's lyrics and narrative more comprehensively and considering audience positionality beyond a generational lens, utilising various psychoanalytical approaches and incorporating existing literature to understand the subject matter in a real-world context. This is achieved by first working through the lyrics and narrative of the show to consider how contemporary cultural issues of loneliness, anxiety and validation are presented against the backdrop of social media and the internet. Secondly, *Dear Evan Hansen's* production

design will be discussed in its contribution to the audience's emotional response and engagement whilst uniquely incorporating them as critical characters in the performance.

The Characterisation of the Nerd through the Lens of Mental Health

Out of the darkness, a laptop screen lights up. From his bed, Evan writes his daily letter. His assigned task, supplementing further professional treatment — including counselling and medication — is to discuss why today will be a good day. Instead, he lists ways in which he should be something other than himself. Self-penned therapeutic journaling and the writing of traumatic or stressful events have noted psychological benefits (**Pennebaker, 1997, 2018; Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005**). The intention of therapeutic journaling is to help the individual express their full emotions and reactions to difficult or traumatic life events. For Evan, who has been unable to share his mental struggles with his busy mother or friends, his daily letters of encouragement are written as a form of self-validation in lieu of approval or endorsement from his peers.

On a surface level, the musical at its beginning appears to characterise Evan as a nerd, an outsider within the school setting, one who struggles to fit in and yearns for acceptance by his peers. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines a nerd as 'a person devoted to intellectual, academic, or technical pursuits or interests' or 'an unstylish or socially awkward person' (**2021**). At first glance, we associate this label with Evan due to his behaviour and appearance. One of his main interests is in trees and his elective response is to minimise social contact with others. We learn more of his general feelings of isolation and social anxiety in his first solo performance, *Waving Through a Window:*

> *I've learned to slam on the brake*
>
> *Before I even turn the key,*
>
> *Before I make a mistake,*
>
> *Before I lead with the worst of me…*
>
> *…On the outside always looking in, will I ever be more than I've always been?*
>
> *Cause I'm tap, tap, tapping on the glass, I'm waving through a window* (**Pasek & Paul, 2016a**)

These lyrics form the impression that his loneliness stems from his general negative bias of himself as opposed to a difficulty in forming and maintaining social relations (**Amichai-Hamburger & Ben-Artzi, 2003**).

Instead of nerd, the term loser, as 'a person or thing that loses, especially consistently' and 'a person who is incompetent or unable to succeed' (**Merriam-Webster, 2021**) is more advertently insinuated, again highlighting Evan's negative self-perception. He expects the worst in social situations, which leads to his withdrawal from society, though he simultaneously desires the attention of those on the other side of the 'glass'. The line, 'can anybody see, is anybody waving back at me?' underpins Evan's feelings of isolation and loneliness. From the outset, we see the factors that contribute to his belief that nobody would be there if he tried to reach out - the lack of attention from his crush, Jared's insistence that they are merely 'family friends', and no supportive community in his 'nerdy' interests just further add evidence to his fears. His negative outlook is presented strongly in the line 'will I ever be more than I've always been?' implying low confidence in his future. This negative outlook, along with low self-esteem, are key indicators among adolescents with suicidal ideation globally (**Overholser et al., 1995; Nguyen et al., 2019**). His desolation reaches a peak with the line:

> *When you're falling in a forest, and there's nobody around*
>
> *Do you ever really crash or even make a sound?* (**Pasek & Paul, 2016a**)

First sung in a low voice, opposed against the instrumentation and belting voice of the previous bars, the line is repeated over and over, louder each time. His rumination of loneliness, — a noted symptom of those with depression and other mental health conditions (**Barlow, 2002; Nolan-Hoeksema, Wisco & Lyubomirsky, 2008**), — functions as both a narrative and lyrical foundation, with its motifs and references being alluded to throughout the musical. Though the lyrics literally refer to Evan's fall from a tree which results in his arm being in a cast for a large portion of the show, it metaphorically calls attention to his belief that living has purpose only if somebody is there to validate it.

Up to this point, we have seen that Evan's self-identification has centred around feelings of expected failure or incompetence, and that his general outlook is that it is better not to try at all than to try and fail. Yet, the intersection of the figurative and metaphorical appear in aftermath of his fall, his nerdy social awkwardness unmistakeable, as he fails to joke away his loneliness when recalling the accident to Jared:

> *Evan: Well, except it's a funny story, because there was a solid ten minutes after I fell, where I just lay there on the ground waiting for someone to come get me. Any second now, I kept saying to myself. Any second now, here they come.*
>
> *Jared: Did they?*

> *Evan: No. Nobody came. That's the, that's what's funny about it.* (**Pasek & Paul, 2016b**)

Evan's cynicism here shows us why he was perhaps first assigned to write his letters, as he is unable to share his true emotions and reactions with those that are around him. He instead tries to make light of the issue, to lessen the emotional strain on both himself and Jared.

Similarly, as he meets with the Murphy family for the first time and sees Cynthia Murphy's need for validation that Connor was good, Evan decides to rewrite both his and Connor's histories and revise the circumstances of his own accident. In *For Forever*, he sings of Connor coming to rescue him after the fall. Perhaps unknowingly, Evan begins the task of rewriting his history and past trauma, a technique used to help build one's narrative identity and mental health development (**Adler, 2012 & 2015**). However, this ultimately leads to a fractured understanding of his later popularity, as he sees 'popular' Evan as a fictional character, rather than believing that people like him for his authentic self.

Sincerely, Me is one of the few upbeat songs during the performance of the musical. It features comedic choreography and presents the activity of Evan and Jared faking emails as game-like, glossing over the seriousness of their evidence manipulation. This gives power to Evan, whose fixation of reinvention highlights his preoccupation with being someone else, yet simultaneously reinforces his conflicting self-identity. His imaginary friendship with Connor not only draws attention to his desperation to disassociate himself with his self-assigned 'loser' attribute but also attempts to validate his own 'nerdy' interest in arboriculture by sharing his enthusiasm with someone else. However, Connor subsequently becomes a constant addition to Evan's consciousness, repeatedly functioning as a constituent of conscience and an unimpeded view into Evan's genuine mental temperament.

The song *Disappear*, in contrast, underlines Evan's true loneliness through the voice of Connor. Lines such as 'guys like you and me, we're just the losers who keep waiting to be seen', and 'when you're falling in a forest and there's nobody around, all you want is for somebody to find you,' channels Evan's own 'loser' mentality onto his self-manifested image of Connor. As Connor sings lines such as 'no one deserves to be forgotten' and 'even if you've always been that barely in the background kind of guy, you still matter', Evan's mindset transitions from his earlier negative bias to one of finding purpose. Though Evan is hearing these lines from Connor, he is saying them to himself as some form of self-affirmation.

This realisation spurs the theme of being found, which appears once more in the final song of the first act, *You Will Be Found:*

Have you ever felt like you could disappear?

Like you could fall, and no one would hear? …

…Even when the dark comes crashing through

When you need a friend to carry you

When you're broken on the ground

You will be found (**Pasek & Paul, 2016c**)

As this song draws the first act to a close, Evan appears to have achieved it all. His reinvention has garnered him recognition from his peers and his crush, becoming united with his classmates through a common goal of memorialising Connor. However, Evan's battles with self-worth reappear throughout the second act, as he constantly attempts to justify his new relationship with Zoe Murphy and validate his friendships.

His newly found popularity and public persona are founded on his false relationship with Connor and the focus of keeping Connor's memory alive becomes the crux of Evan's personality, much to Zoe's disdain. As everyone eulogises the image of a misunderstood teen, Zoe is the only character who recalls Connor as a monster. Despite the prevailing circumstances, she does not challenge the lionisation of Connor, and instead attempts to negate Evan's feelings of unworthiness in *Only Us,* singing 'try to quiet the noises in your head'. This is ironic, considering the audience's awareness that much of Evan's headspace is now taken up by Connor. Evan responds with another call of longing to be seen and the need for validation of his 'true self':

But if you really see me

If you like me for me and nothing else

Well, that's all that I've wanted

For longer than you could possibly know (**Pasek & Paul, 2016d**)

Here, Evan is desperate to have someone close to him love him just for who he is. His belief that the Murphys are an ideal family pushes him further away from his own mother, the person that has loved him from the start. But in *Good for* You, Evan's mother turns against him when she finds out he spends all his time with the Murphy family. She tells him that he 'got a taste of a life so perfect, now you say that you're someone new,' directly attacking the new version of himself Evan had attempted to create. These two lyrics challenge one another; though Evan can recognise

he has reinvented himself, he seems unable to resolve his old and new 'identities' into one whole individual. Just as Evan's mother and Alana challenge his new 'true self', even the imaginary Connor becomes increasingly accusatory, asserting that Evan's confession would ruin Larry and Cynthia. As they argue, his revilements culminate in the question 'how did you break your arm Evan? …Did you fall? Or did you let go?' This is a breaking point as we learn that even the earliest references to Evan's fall from the tree had been fictionalised. Evan cements his position as an unreliable narrator who has evaded the truth out of self-preservation. His lies have become compounded, and the various versions of Evan have become so entwined that he is not able to acknowledge the severity of his mental health in the moments surrounding the accident. Connor walks away, and Evan now stands on stage alone, without even an imaginary friend.

In a desperate bid to raise money for The Connor Project and justify to himself that his lies were only for the good of the Murphys, Evan falsifies Connor's suicide note, which circulates online, resulting in a torrent of abuse, harassment, and threats towards the Murphy family. The stress causes them to verbally attack and blame one another for Connor's death before Evan emotionally breaks down and confesses to the truth. Evan seeks to justify his behaviour to the Murphys, citing the absence of his parents and his longing for acceptance; but they, like Connor, walk away. In many ways, Evan's life reaches a level of self-fulfilling prophecy. Though he made references to being a stereotypical nerd, there was nothing in his actual daily life that suggested he was completely alone. From the outset we saw his interactions with his mother and people from school. Instead, it was his desperation to shed his perceived misnomer as a nerd that led to its reinforcement and to one of the few situations in which Evan was left truly alone.

Finally, he acknowledges his faults: the hopelessness and longing to be seen, the strain of maintaining a public persona, and lastly, the actions that resulted in him causing pain, sadness, and fractured relationships. In Evan's final song, *Words Fail,* he sings:

No, I'd rather

Pretend that I'm something better than these broken parts

Pretend I'm something other than this mess that I am

Cause then I don't have to look at it

And no one gets to look at it

No, no one can really see…

> *…Cause what if everyone saw?*
>
> *What if everyone knew?*
>
> *Would they like what they saw?*
>
> *Or would they hate it too?* (**Pasek & Paul, 2016e**)

His fear of being rejected for his true self instead results in being rejected for faking being someone else. Thus, it is only in accepting his authentic self that his relationships were salvaged, and peace was found, as he speaks in the *Finale*:

> *Dear Evan Hansen:*
>
> *Today is going to be a good day and here's why: Because today,*
>
> *Today at least you're you, and that's enough* (**Pasek & Paul, 2016f**)

The conclusion generates the overall message of the musical through its return to its starting point. Evan is alone on stage once again, his final line mirroring his first, but he stands at Connor's memorial, amongst newly growing trees, a clear metaphor of new personal growth. Evan's interest in trees that he imagined sharing with Connor not only becomes reality but that place has become one of shared hope across the community. In both scenes, he is himself, but this final scene highlights the importance of self-acceptance in developing a positive and mindful outlook.

Suicide, Memorialisation, and Mental Health in the Online Age

Dear Evan Hansen is certainly not the first musical theatre production to utilise an unidentified mental health struggle as the basis for character development. Terry (**2014**) refers to a slew of previous musical theatre productions, such as *Sweeny Todd* (1979), *Miss Saigon* (1989), or *The Who's Tommy* (1992), that function around mental health, with 'threats of suicide and self-destruction' lingering 'over all of these characters'. In their individual respective struggles to 'find their way back to a type of normal', as Terry further highlights, each character is 'neither fully devastated nor fully healed, in need of closure and support to have a chance of recovering and returning to a sense of normalcy (**Ibid: 130-131**).

When Evan meets with Zoe at Connor's memorial, he admits to taking a year out before college and works at a *Pottery Barn*. This is the only instance in which the repercussions of Evan's actions are addressed alongside a positive development of his mental health. Though he is positively presented as taking some time for himself to decide who he is and what he wants to do, he is also not presented as a hero who has moved on without an issue. The stereotype of the male protagonist in

musical theatre often displays traits of toxic masculinity but is still presented as a plausible romantic lead. This stands in contrast to Evan's character creation as an intentionally flawed protagonist. His nerdy demeanour, social awkwardness, and desire to change, counterposes the strength of the female characters who present as self-assured, and deviates from the image that female characters need guidance or saving.

We can see that all the characters of the show, regardless of age, class, or status, are suffering in their own way, underscoring the ubiquity and proliferation of mental health in society. Each character hides behind a mask, trying to pass as normal: whether this it is within Jared's sarcasm, Alana's cheerfulness, or even in Connor's disaffectedness. Though we understand how their struggles explain their actions, these are not intended to excuse their behaviours. The characters instead provide glimpses into the different mental struggles and present a rawness that helps the audience to find relatability to those on stage. However, the lack of representation of Connor's struggles that led to his death draws attention to a common criticism of *Dear Evan Hansen,* concerning its romanticisation of mental illness and glorification of suicide. It is only after death that Connor becomes seen, heard, and validated as an individual, an implication that his power and influence exist solely because of his death.

This proliferation of mental health and suicide-driven narratives has spanned across various media forms, such as the novel-adapted television series *13 Reasons Why* (2017-2020) or *Euphoria* (2019-Present). Though the appearance of mental health in popular media directed towards young people certainly helps open discussion on the taboo topic, the characters' mental illnesses within these forms are often presented as one of their leading traits. In addition, these characters are often presented as the 'other', the 'loser', their personal attributes are seen to be 'nerdy' and therefore in some way undesirable, making them unable to, or unworthy of, existing amongst others. The resulting risk is not only an internalised romanticisation of mental health amongst young people but a withdrawal from social structures and groups that would help to alleviate these feelings. These young people run the risk of becoming lost in the system and failing to get the help that they need, which often results in tragic outcomes.

Dear Evan Hansen has utilised social media with great success and its recognisable hashtags, such as '#youwillbefound'. The positive result of its campaigns has opened a space for fans to share their own mental health stories. Nevertheless, the romanticisation of mental illness across popular culture risks the advancement of epistemic bubbles, where relevant voices may have been accidentally excluded, and echo chambers, where these voices are actively discredited or excluded. Members of these groups are

often unaware of, or are unable to, engage with knowledge and critical reasoning to remove themselves from these groups. Nguyen (**2018**) notes that in epistemic bubbles, voices are not heard, a direct contrast to the overall message of *Dear Evan Hansen*.

The recognition that Connor's tragic outcome of his loneliness could have so nearly been Evan's becomes the key driver of his future choices. Knowing of Evan's suicide attempt, it is this relatability between these two characters that keeps them connected. In Evan's mind, Connor flits between a character of conscience and harsh self-realisation, but for everyone else, he is barely remembered at all. He instead becomes only what people need him to be for themselves, formed from their own misremembered perspectives of him. Thus, the public image of Connor becomes both idealised and idolised. The Connor of Evan's conscience perpetuates the illusion of being a good guy. For others, his prior negative or violent social interactions are ignored or justified, and he is remembered instead as a troubled teen or as someone who was never really seen or understood. Such importance is placed on Connor's ghost that his true story and struggles remain ignored. Even the circumstances of his death are never discussed, despite being the event that drives the entire narrative. Connor's death is an example of online memorialisation and moralisation through social media. Specifically, for those who have been lost to suicide, Bailey et al. write that a common refrain of the bereaved is to utilise the deceased's social media presence to make the child's death meaningful (**2015: 77**). Particularly in cases of suicide, bereaved families often become stigmatised, deprived of social support from friends and the community. Thus, social media becomes an essential tool in overcoming this isolation (**Ibid: 73**). Through the school population and the larger online community, Connor's memory and manifestation on stage continue through being seen and remembered.

Amongst the Murphy family too, their genuine grief and pain of both his existence and loss are hidden away. In *Requiem*, as they each sing of their own memory of Connor, they sing alone. They each remember him differently. Whilst Zoe recalls him as a monster: 'don't say it isn't true, that you were not the monster that I knew', Larry in contrast sees his son as a missed opportunity: 'I gave you the world, you threw it away.' Finally, Cynthia is almost incapable of honestly acknowledging the loss of her son: 'I hear your voice, I feel you near…and now I know that you are still here.' Rather than being united in their mourning, their grief is rarely acknowledged or discussed in front of one another. Gilbert wrote of grief as 'a process of reconceptualisation' and 'the loss of security in knowing that reality can be trusted to be "real"' (**1996: 271**), mirroring the simultaneous actions of Evan's reconceptualization of his reality. The differences in the Murphys' grief processes are formed because of their

own cultural conditioning and lived experience (**Rosenblatt, 2008**), which causes their failure to share and acknowledge each other's personalised memories of Connor, resulting in arguments when his name is brought up. While 'The Connor Project' is largely presented as an outward display of memorialisation online, it does ultimately help the Murphys in processing their grief, as the final scene reveals that the orchard (that was built through larger community donations), becomes a place where the Murphys bond and heal as a family.

Social Belonging in the Age of Social Media

Before 'The Connor Project', Evan's distance from social media is noticeable, given its substantial narrative function within the musical. Considering Evan's age, it would be reasonable to infer that he may be intentionally avoiding it due to his ongoing mental health conditions. Whilst recent studies, such as O'Reilly et al. (**2018**), have suggested that adolescents view social media as dangerous to their mental health, the widespread public assertion that social media actively contributes to adverse mental health has not yet been proven as entirely accurate (**Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Orben 2020**). This opinion has most likely developed mainly from increased reporting and social acceptance of mental health over the same period where social media and technological engagement have also increased. Around 70 per cent of teens now access social media daily, including 16 per cent who use it 'almost constantly' and a further 22 per cent who access it multiple times per hour (**Common Sense Media, 2018: 8**). The use of the internet is related to experiences of loneliness and social isolation (**Kraut et al., 1998; Stoll, 1995; Turkle, 1996 & 2011**). However, scholarly discussion on the matter also suggests that social media plays a heightened role amongst teens with low social-emotional wellbeing experience (SEWB) but with a more positive effect, with 39 per cent reporting it makes them feel less lonely (**Common Sense Media, 2018: 11**). Social media can particularly allow individuals to interact with others who share an enthusiasm for even the most niche of interests. Evan's new engagement with social media has both positive and negative elements to consider. Notably, his relationships and popularity develop alongside the growth of 'The Connor Project', as he becomes more active in creating content for social media, gains confidence in public speaking and begins to lose the nervous ticks that were prevalent at the outset of the musical. Over time though, he becomes physically and emotionally exhausted from sustaining his public image amidst constant media engagement, and struggles to control his lies during increasing public scrutiny.

In the era of social media, a major ongoing issue has become comparative behaviours and feelings of self-value in an edited reality. The 'Instagram vs Reality' trend draws attention to the normalisation of only an individual's best moments or features being shared on social media via actual unedited images and accurate anecdotes. Uploaded pictures are often chosen as the best out of hundreds taken, or extensively edited to remove perceived flaws. This constant erasure of any perceived negative, whether omitting negative life experiences from one's story, or presenting an idealised version of one's physical form, risks detrimental effects to users' life satisfaction, self-identification, and mental health. Social media differs from traditional media forms in that its content is generated by peers and is interactive (**Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2019**), and the focus on how many shares and likes content from 'The Connor Project' generates is a direct example of this. Adolescent years are particularly intense in identity formation, as teenage individuals rely on peers for both influence and validation (**Yau & Reich, 2019: 196**). The constant engagement for young people on social media causes the dilemma that whilst they are able to receive instantaneous influence and validation from their peers and larger society, they are unable to receive validation for their authentic selves due to the normalised conduct of life and image editing. Social media success is often limited to those who are in some way above average in the eyes of society, but the prevalence of social media 'influencers' results in individuals resetting the bar to unattainably high levels to match with what they see on their timelines.

At this juncture, we understand the struggles of several characters, most notably Evan and Alana. Alana Beck's first arrival on stage showcases this as she speaks with Evan about their summer breaks:

> *Mine was productive. I did three internships and ninety hours of community service. I know: wow…Even though I was so busy, I still made some great friends. Or, well, acquaintances, more like.* (**Pasek & Paul, 2016b**)

Combined with her engagement with 'The Connor Project', it is reasonable to see her character as merely success driven. Though she appears as engaged and continuously active in achieving her goals, her positive persona on social media belies the true nature of her feelings of loneliness, which come to a head when she confronts Evan:

> *Because I know what it feels like to feel invisible, just like Connor. To feel invisible and alone and like nobody would even notice if you vanished into thin air. I bet you used to know what that felt like, too.* (**Pasek & Paul, 2016b**)

For Evan, 'The Connor Project' creates popularity and attention from which he cannot remove himself, instead balancing on a precipice between popularity and loneliness. In desperation and fear of losing his new relationships, he forges Connor's suicide note and shows it to Alana, who immediately posts it on social media against his wishes. Alana finds comfort from Connor's letters knowing someone shared her feelings and believes the letters may help someone else. Yet her need for overachievement and for 'The Connor Project' to succeed results in hindered judgement and the use of shock value to engage audiences. A predilection for shock and sensationalism in media posts encourages social media influencers to risk dangerous behaviours, knowing the possibility of their followers attempting to recreate their conduct. More concerningly, there is evidence that globally, media coverage of both celebrity and non-celebrity suicides triggers copycat cases (**Stack, 2002; Niederkrotenthal et al., 2009; Choi & Oh, 2016**), a risk that Alana fails to recognise when she publishes the letter. While she hopes that others will find unity in reading, the outcome of the publication is instead a torrent of online abuse directed towards the Murphy family:

> *He wrote his suicide note to Evan Hansen because he knew his family didn't give a shit.*
>
> *His parents, by the way, are insanely rich…*
>
> *Maybe they should have spent their money on helping their son…*
>
> *Zoe's a stuck-up bitch; I go to school with her, trust me…*
>
> *Larry Murphy is a corporate liar who only cares about…*
>
> *Cynthia Murphy is one of those disgusting women…*
>
> *Fuck the Murphys…*
>
> *Their house is at the end of the cul-de-sac with the red door, Zoe's bedroom is on the right. The gate to the back is completely unlocked.* (**Pasek & Paul, 2016b**)

This is the first reference we see of social media risks to real world safety. The combined knowledge of social media users makes it easy to identify others, and some may take advantage of this to spread misinformation about people, or even put people's safety at risk.

The outcome of the letters publishing is the opposite of Alana's intention. Instead of the readers finding comfort, the cyberbullies make assumptions to attack the Murphys. The attacks are often based on the belief that only those in objectively bad situations, mainly financial, have the validity to complain about their circumstances. Those who are in the media limelight are expected to accept online harassment and bullying as part of their

duties within their role as a public figure. Celebrities' mental health is often overlooked because they 'have everything', often leading to tragic ends. As much as the internet becomes united when they first share The Connor Project's message, they are quick to turn on the Murphys, before ultimately forgetting the whole incident and moving on. These faceless individuals become the only true villain of the play, unaware of the circumstances of their victims or the power their words wield.

Social Media and Audience Engagement

The key song of the musical, *You Will Be Found*, begins whilst Evan is giving a speech to his school in remembrance of Connor. He stands front and centre of the stage, stammering and jumbling his words before dropping his cue cards. He drops to the floor to collect them and looks out to the audience in horror. At that moment, the theatre audience is immediately repositioned; they are no longer passive consumers, but instead have become active actors. They are not just the silent observers of Evan's life but also the voices of judgement that Evan has feared. They are suddenly and unexpectedly high school students watching their classmate in an assembly. The audience's emotions in watching him as he falls to the ground is compounded, as it combines both the experience of watching a fellow student struggle in public, with the audience's insider knowledge of his struggle with anxiety and unsteady mental health. As the audience find their new positioning, Evan finds peace and now embraces the audience as his schoolmates. He stands tall and composed, his message now focused directly on the audience members. As he sings 'if you only look around, you will be found,' he is speaking directly to the hundreds of people brought together that night in the theatre to hear the show's message of togetherness and community. In this vital scene that highlights *Dear Evan Hansen's* message of hope is made clear that the audiences' function as main characters within the musical positions them both with the shared feelings of loneliness, yet also hope among each one of them. Viewers share Evan's message, both figuratively at that moment, but also literally, through their online engagement outside of the theatre, on *Twitter*, *Instagram*, etc. Steven Levenson, the playwright for Dear Evan Hansen, speaks out that:

> *If we tried to tell our story today without cell phones and social media, there would be a real inauthenticity to the show. And at the same time, we wanted to be sure we're using social media as a storytelling device and we were never interested in exploring social media as a theme or as an idea.* (**DiLella, 2018**)

From the outset of the musical, a bombardment of mobile phone ringtones plays out across the amphitheatre to request audience members to silence their phones during the performance. Many young users

recognise the problems that social media causes and feel connected to the characters of the performance for sharing their experiences. It is perhaps ironic that these same users must then be reminded to turn off their mobiles before a performance and immediately light up their screens once again after the final curtain has fallen.

Though the audience is united as a positive figure, as social media users, they too are the antagonists. The users that speak of hope and share Evan's message are the same who turn on the Murphys after the release of Connor's suicide note. As the narrative darkens in the second act, the opportunity arises for self-reflection. The performance evokes affect as it causes the audience to reflect on what they choose to show on their social media accounts, how they respond to others, and how they treat people online. By allowing themselves to judge Evan's behaviours and the other characters, both imaginatively online and in-person, the audience must also allow themselves to be judged. The online engagement of *Dear Evan Hansen* with fans allows for the fleeting emotions of the audience to continue long after the performance. Doherty writes that fans of the show take to social media to 'seek out the utopian performatives in their personal connections to Evan' whilst others are 'still seeking to achieve the moments that they experienced within the performance moment, in that they are still hoping to "be found"' (**2020: 6**).

Conclusion

Critics of the show argue that *Dear Evan Hansen* focuses more on the insecurity of the outsider, the nerd's stereotypical angst, and the teenager yearning for acceptance, over discussing the important ramifications of Evan's choices. However, the musical has created a substantial and long-lasting impact by creating a large online community of fans discussing all aspects of the show, including mental health, loneliness and belonging. The figure of the nerd, such as Evan's characterisation, has so often been imbued with negative connotations that separate those with less mainstream interests. What *Dear Evan Hansen* has accomplished, along with the industry of musical theatre in general, is to develop spaces of inclusivity for those who have previously felt alone, whether that loneliness has stemmed from mental health, or the prejudice placed upon them for reasons such as their personal interests.

Dear Evan Hansen has helped to engage young audiences and share their mental health struggles when it has been a taboo topic for so long. As much as social media features in the show, it also plays a role in the audience's emotional processing in the aftermath of the performance as they turn to various social media channels to talk about what they have just watched and how it has resonated with them. It has created openings of stories and discussion as people share their own experiences of mental

health hardship or share their creativity and artwork that has been inspired by the show. The musical teaches us about hidden emotion and the extent to which young people today feel they must live up to the impossible standards set upon them in the age of social media and the internet. Nevertheless, whilst social media so often is treated as a hostile entity, a place of bullying and harassment, it is also a place for people to share, come together, build a community, and lift each other. Evan is a flawed hero but has become an accessible and relatable protagonist for many. His motives become understood in a society where it is so easy to be invisible. And that is the real message of *Dear Evan Hansen*: you are seen, and you are not alone.

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From Misfit to Guide: Toward a corrective depiction of Otaku and Hikikomori in Japanese videogame Persona 5

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Abstract

In the last four decades, 'otaku' and 'hikikomori,' namely popular culture enthusiasts and reclusive shut-ins, have been at the center of a heated debate in Japan concerning their social alienation. On the one hand, public opinion and mass media consider them individualistic nonconformists who selfishly disregard their interpersonal obligations, thus posing a threat to the cohesion of the nation. On the other hand, cultural critics, social scientists, and professional psychiatrists argue that their isolation may actually be the consequence of the current disgregation of the relational ties and of a consequent psychological state of constant anxiety and dejection. The article explores the complex ways the computer game Persona 5 goes against the view held by many Japanese in favour of the latter's explanation. To this end, the article applies the method of cultural studies on the portrayal of a specific character in the game, Sakura Futaba, as a case study. Ultimately, the article aims to demonstrate that Persona 5 constructs a revisionist representation of 'otaku' and 'hikikomori' on the base of a thorough knowledge of contemporary Japanese societal problems, a revaluation of the pop culture fan and the hermit's condition and abilities, and a newly defined vision of sociability.

Keywords: Japanese studies; cultural studies; videogame studies; Otaku; Hikikomori

Introduction

In Japan, a large part of the population has often voiced its concerns about *otaku* オタク and *hikikomori* 引きこもり, respectively avid consumers of popular culture and hermits. According to many troubled witnesses, the former dedicate themselves completely to their hobbies and the latter live in their private bubble, both risking to be self-absorbed and relationally inept. As a result, those worried citizens go on to say, *otaku* and *hikikomori* might fail or refuse to assume their social responsibilities, potentially destroying the cohesion of the nation. Such a dismissive view finds ample space in public opinion and mainstream media, that commonly depict the two phenomena as a modern disease born from individualism, excessive affluence, and permissiveness (**Kinsella, 1998: 290-294**).

Recently, however, an overflow of animated TV series, comic books, and videogames has seen the emergence of a corrective narrative aimed at going against this conception. *Persona 5* (*Perusona go* ペルソナ5; hereafter, *P5*), a role-playing game developed by Atlus, written by Yamamoto Shinji, Tanaka Yuichirō, Hashino Katsura, and first released in Japan in 2016, contributes to the new wave of revisionist productions by elaborating the experiences of these vilified categories through a character named Sakura Futaba 佐倉双葉, who belongs to both.

After the tragic death of her mother, named Isshiki Wakaba 一色若葉, for which Futaba feels responsible (an alleged suicide caused by a maternity neurosis) crushed by a guilty conscience Futaba quits school, severs as much as possible any ties with the outside world, and segregates herself in her bedroom. In other words, she lives as a *hikikomori*. Forcing herself to stay in her chamber, Futaba gathers an unparalleled knowledge of computers and hacking and hoards books, *manga*, *anime* CDs, magazines, and figurines. Given her antisocial way of life and her penchant for technology, comics, and related merchandise, Futaba may be considered to be not only a *hikikomori* but an *otaku* as well.

Her condition is further represented thanks to a supernatural element. In *P5*, there exists alongside the ordinary world an alternate reality known as "Metaverse" (*isekai* 異世界, literally a "different world"), another plane of existence that manifests the projection of people's distorted perception. When a person's viewpoint becomes particularly twisted, it creates in the Metaverse a so-called "Palace" (*Paresu* パレス), a place where their wrong notions take form. In Futaba's case, her chamber appears in the Metaverse as a pyramid inhabited by her doppelganger, which has the aspect of a pharaoh's mummy. This narrative device shows that she sees herself as a living dead. In her warped opinion, this is a well-deserved punishment for

having killed her mother. Thus, she deems her life as a *hikikomori* an atonement for her sin.

Nevertheless, Futaba manages in the end to regain control over her life. Thanks to the game protagonists, a group of teenagers collectively known under the nickname "The Phantom Thieves of Hearts" (*Kokoro no kaitōdan* 心の怪盗団), who possess the unique ability to enter the Metaverse and modify the warped worldview of the Palaces' owners, Futaba finds out that she is not responsible for her mother's death and was instead framed by a powerful politician, named Shidō Masayoshi 獅童正義, who had Wakaba murdered and then blamed the woman's death on Futaba, to throw suspicion off himself. By healing from her guilt, Futaba awakens to new powers both in reality and in the Metaverse where she can use her *otaku*-esque hacking abilities and reinterprets her past as a *hikikomori* as a protective cocoon that helped her accept Wakaba's loss. In this manner, Futaba turns her perception of herself as an *otaku* and a *hikikomori* as a positive part of her identity.

Through Futaba's personal story, *P5* echoes the main points of the counter-discourse that attempts to go against the negative view on *otaku* and *hikikomori*. In particular, this counter-discourse argues, as we will see more in detail below, that *otaku* and *hikikomori*'s supposed alienation might be the consequence not of behavioral flaws, but of deep socio-cultural changes that have been affecting the country. Secondly, it tries to show that pop culture enthusiasts and recluses possess instead a solidarity conception about interpersonal relationships, strategically useful technological skills, and heightened self-awareness, qualities appropriate to face the challenges of a society in rapid transformation.

The article is organized in two parts. In the first section, I will provide the reader with an overview of the *otaku* and *hikikomori* phenomena and I will attempt to demonstrate that Futaba concomitantly belongs to both categories. In the second half, I will take a closer look at the character's storyline in the game to show how *P5* painstakingly constructs a positive redefinition of what it means to be a pop culture fan and a reclusive shut-in.

Background

The Linguistic and Social Meaning of 'Otaku'

The term *otaku* indicates those individuals who consume products of popular culture such as *manga*, *anime*, figurines, videogames, computers, technology, science fiction, train models, and so forth. Etymologically, *otaku* お宅 means "your residence," and it can be used as a formal second-person pronoun. Starting approximately in the early 1980s, the word was appropriated by pop culture fans to employ in conversations among

themselves (**Morikawa, 2013: 56-57**). The reason why they singled out this oddly elegant-sounding pronoun is usually explained with a reference to its double connotation that marks their supposed antisocial behaviour, since it simultaneously indicates someone who is not accustomed to close friendships and therefore communicates with their peers in an impersonal and business-like manner, and someone who spends most of their time on their own at home (**Dela Pena, 2006: 10-12**).

On an individual level, according to Thiam Huat Kam's analysis, *otaku* might be considered a demeaning label used to indicate those persons who are judged to fail to keep certain rules of conduct. Together these norms constitute the "social common sense" (*shakaiteki jōshiki* 社会的常識) that people use to determine if someone is or is not an *otaku*, accused of breaking any of the rules or all four (**Kam, 2013: 152-157**):

The reality rule: *otaku* is generally conceived as someone who, given their complete immersion in play and relaxation, in fantasy, has lost touch with "reality" (*genjitsu* 現実), a notion under which Kam's informants designate a set of relational roles and obligations typical of contemporary Japan as a capitalist society, such as responsibilities, social life, school, and work (**Kam, 2013: 159-161**). Futaba breaks the rule when she drops out of school, failing to live up to her interpersonal expectations as a student and to engage in academic pursuits.

The communication rule: people must be sociable and able to effectively share their opinions, information, and interests with others. Here, *otaku* is applied to anyone who downplays, ignores, or refrains from forming relationships and maintaining communication (**Kam, 2013: 161-163**). Futaba breaks the rule when she isolates herself and gathers knowledge about computers and hacking in the seclusion of her chamber.

The gender rule:[i] it posits a strict distinction of pastimes as purportedly adequate for boys and girls, men and women. *Otaku* may not follow consumption as gendered and trespass into the sphere designated as exclusive to the other gender (**Ibid: 163-165**). Futaba breaks the rule because she collects figurines of warriors usually purchased by young boys. In *Persona 5: Dancing in Starlight* (*Perusona 5 danshingu stānaito* ペルソナ5ダンシング·スターナイト), a rhythm game spin-off of *P5* released in Japan in 2018, a male cisgender protagonist named Sakamoto Ryūji 坂本竜司 displays one of the same figurines in his bedroom, too. Moreover, technology is generally viewed as a male occupation, so Futaba interacts in forums and chat rooms only with older men to the point she incorporates in her language certain expressions, for example "What on Earth is that?" (*nanda korya* なんだこりゃ) and the blunt imperative form

yare やれ, that the other teenage male characters deem peculiar to middle-aged men.

The majority rule: the compulsion to indulge in what is consumed by many, if not most, people. Consumption is a collective act and reinforces a sense of belonging to a group and society (**Ibid: 165-167**). Futaba breaks the rule when she collects extensive knowledge about the deep web and hacking, far more advanced than the abilities required for school or work and potentially threatening, for she employs it to operate as a cracker and alter data of dangerous corporations. By breaking all four rules, Futaba can be said to incarnate the quintessential *otaku*.

Degrading Socio-cultural Connotations of 'Otaku'

As a consequence of their supposed alienation, the *otaku* has been associated with a range of negative stereotypes ever since the contemporary use of the word was first popularised in an essay titled *A Study of* Otaku (*Otaku no kenkyū* オタクの研究), written by journalist Nakamori Akio in 1983. In his article, Nakamori draws a caricature of the *otaku* as the unpopular highschool boy linked with a wide number of pejorative attributes: the prototypical *otaku* is bad at sports, is ugly because he is either too skinny or plump, wears thick glasses, unfashionably cheap clothes, and has a shy and introverted disposition, so he escapes loneliness by obsessing over his passions (**Morikawa, 2013: 56-57)**.

In the late 1980s and 1990s, the *otaku* sparked a moral panic among concerned Japanese or, as Sharon Kinsella (**1998: 313-314**) aptly calls it, an *otaku* panic, a nervous discourse that reflected the worries of contemporary social scientists about the fragmentation of modern society and the effect of the mass media on this change. Cultural critics of the time interpreted the *otaku*'s relational disconnection and interest in popular culture as an extreme form of "individualism" (*kojinshugi* 個人主義) that may tear apart Japan's social fabric. Younger generations, and *otaku* in particular, were thought to be so preoccupied with their personal well-being and focused on the consumption of cultural goods and leisure as to become dysfunctional and relationally incompetent. Intellectuals feared that youth would fail or stubbornly refuse to contribute to society by not carrying out their obligations and duties to family, company, and country, causing the decay of a once close-knit civil society (**Kinsella, 1998: 290-294**). In other words, *otaku* were blamed for being the alleged cause of the major characteristics and problems of a late industrial society, a conception still present in today's public opinion and mainstream media.

Redemption of the 'Otaku'

The new millennium brought about a fundamental revaluation of the *otaku*. In *Introduction to Otakuology* (*Otakugaku nyūmon* オタク学入門, 1996), Okada Toshio, self-proclaimed King of *Otaku* or *Otaking*, defined *otaku* as "new-type humans" (*shinjinrui* 新人類) that present an evolution in human perception. Thanks to the advent of new recording technologies, Okada argued, viewers developed a new form of connoisseurship that demanded a superior competency in reading pictures. Specifically, they began seeing the image in *anime* productions as multisensory and comprising an array of modalities of sound, voice, and music. In other words, *otaku* saw the image as an extension of the superplanar image and in exploded view. For his table of contents, Okada provided a clear example of this new concept: he employed a globe, a telescope, and a toggle with the parts labeled as different topics, items that can be seen at the same time with all the bits at once apart and together (**Azuma, 2009: 4-5; LaMarre, 2009: 144-149**).

More generally, in the 1990s, the ubiquitousness of technological devices made the masses technologically more capable, thus relatively normalising the *otaku* (**Iida, 2000: 428**), and the transnational *anime* boom and the success of related commerce partially defused the media panic about *otaku* as sociopaths (**LaMarre, 2009: 152-153**). Instead, they finally came to be perceived as informed experts possessing a postmodern sensibility and a refined knowledge of pop and cyber culture and technological fluency (**Azuma, 2009: 7-8, 17-19, 25-29; B-Ikeguchi, 2018: 247**).

The Linguistic and Social Meaning of 'Hikikomori' and its Relation with 'Otaku'

A second category Futaba belongs to is that of *hikikomori*, usually translated into English as "social withdrawal." Etymologically, the word derives from the compound verb *hikikomoru*, which comprises the two characters for "to pull back" (*hiku* 引く) and "to seclude oneself" (*komoru* 籠る). As a verb, it is employed when an individual leaves the group and lives in self-segregation. As a noun, it was coined in the latter half of the 1990s by Japanese psychiatrist Saitō Tamaki in his book titled *Hikikomori*: *Adolescence without End* (***Shakaiteki hikikomori*: *owaranai shishunki*** 社会的引きこもり: 終わらない思春期, **1998**), where he tentatively defined *hikikomori* as someone who has ceased to go to school or work for more than six months and has stayed at home for most of this time (**Hairston, 2010: 311-313; Kato, Kanba et al., 2019: 427**). The noun can refer both to the phenomenon of self-incarceration and the individual who lives in seclusion. *Hikikomori* can then be loosely described as a person

who has developed a psychological fear of personal interaction with the outside world and thus rejects their social roles by becoming a recluse.

Do the figures of *otaku* and *hikikomori* overlap and, if they do, to what degree? As regards their core concepts, they may not. In fact, hermits are not necessarily fans of popular culture, while fans of popular culture can compartmentalise their hobbies in their private sphere and otherwise interact with others in public life (**Hairston, 2010: 313**). Nevertheless, they share an important characteristic in that both are commonly regarded, especially in public opinion and mass media, as individualistic misfits who, rejected from contemporary society, do not assume the traditional roles expected from them and retreat in a protected environment (**Kormilitsyna, 2015: 15-23**).

Seen under this light, being an *otaku* or a *hikikomori* might mean occupying two points on a conceptual spectrum of social withdrawal: whereas an *otaku* feels disconnected from ordinary society and spends most of their time alone cultivating their passions, a *hikikomori* feels even more disconnected and lives in complete segregation. Therefore, the categories seem to coincide in that these persons cannot, to a varying extent, find their place in the roles and commitments that Japanese society has traditionally molded for them, and so they retire in their personal space and activities to release the pressure in their comfort zone. Futaba represents an example of the convergence of *otaku* and *hikikomori*, for she is a hermit who retains a slight amount of interaction with the outside world through technology and the consumption of cultural goods.

The Socio-economic Explanation

Modern cultural critics typically view the categories of *otaku* and *hikikomori* as two phenomena that are an expression of the rapid socio-economic changes that Japan has been undergoing for the past four decades. In fact, in the last 1980s, the labour model of lifelong jobs gave way to flexible labour and the deregulation of the market economy and in the early 1990s the Bubble economy burst (**Allison, 2012: 345-346**). Japanese society has been slow in getting up with the sociological and psychological effects of these transformations. To this day, the old model of the post-war era of high economic growth and middle-class lifestyle is still the norm, and social adulthood remains based on having a family and landing a permanent job (**Ibid: 360-362**).

But those who do not possess economic stability and its status symbols, a number constantly on the rise, experience several conditions that Anne Allison summarises under the umbrella term of social precarity: an insecurity in life material, existential, and relational that spreads to the

multiple ways in which unstable work destabilises daily living (**Ibid: 348-349, 356-357**).

Social precarity dissolved the old emotional world of the Japanese. During the post-war economic boom, the corporate system capitalised on the affective relations of heteronormative homelife in a model known as "my homeism" (*maihōmushugi* マイホーム主義). This previous model turned the home into a site of consumption and, consequently, into a breeding ground for hyper-productivity in the way of workaholic husbands, industrious students, and sacrificial mothers (**Allison, 2006: 70-71**). So sutured to productivity, families have been lacking in the education of the heart, that is to say, broadly speaking, family members may not be willing and able to communicate affectively (and effectively) with one another.

The economic crisis worsened this emotional inexperience turning the old model into the current one, called "individualistic" (*kojinshugi*), characterised by the fragmentation of the family core of the household. This brings millennial Japanese to lead an individuated life, spending much of their time alone, to be focused on their personal desires, and to be detached from the relationships and commitments that formerly grounded the culture (**Ibid: 70-71**).

The disgregation of relational ties and the economic insecurity can lead to a range of pathological symptoms. This condition might be experienced in terms of disbelonging as in expressions of disaffiliation and unrootedness, in sensations of ineptitude, isolation, defeat, anxiety, and loss. Youth are especially vulnerable to labour precarity and prone to these psychological repercussions (**Allison, 2012: 352-355**). As a result, as sociologist Miyamoto Michiko relates, Japanese youths are today not as much as anti-social but rather non-social, in that they do not take part in society. Citing a survey conducted in 2007 with subjects aged 18 to 24, she noted that 25.000 interviewees identified as full-blown *hikikomori*, and 70% of respondants said they had the "sentiment" (*shinjō* 心情) of being a *hikikomori* (**Ibid: 352-355**). Social withdrawal might have become a structure of feeling or ordinary affect for Japanese today.

Futaba's story

Futaba's 'Hikikomori'

At the beginning of her storyline, Futaba lives with Wakaba, a young single mother who works as a researcher. After Wakaba passes away, Futaba retrospectively reconstructs their relationship as frustrating for both of them. Futaba remembers constantly asking for attention and care from her mother who, exasperated, denied her necessities. In the end, Wakaba commits an apparent suicide by jumping under a speeding car, in front of a terrified Futaba. According to a suicide note that is later found, Wakaba

supposedly took her life because of a maternity psychosis caused by Futaba's excessive need for attention. As a result, Futaba's relatives blame her for her mother's death and distance themselves from her. Neglected by her biological father and relatives, her custody is given to a man named Sakura Sōjirō 佐倉惣治郎, a close friend of late Wakaba's. Futaba moves to his house but, blaming herself for her mother's suicide, ashamed of her greediness that purportedly brought about Wakaba's death, and worried that she may similarly hurt those around her, she segregates herself in her bedroom. Succintly put, the cause of Futaba's *hikikomori* might be found in the complex relationship with her mother.

In Japanese sociology, the relationship that ties a caregiver to a child is usually interpreted through the concept of *amae* 甘え, commonly translated into English as "dependence," namely the presumption on others to be indulgent and accepting (**Behrens, 2004: 2-3**). This dynamic is based on two complementary roles, the child who enjoys the indulgence received, and the caregiver who indulges them. Mutually satisfying *amae* can be achieved only when the two persons in question both agree on their roles. If that doesn't happen, for example, when the child is under stress and their necessities become extreme, or the caregiver doesn't meet their needs, *amae* behaviour might become increasingly disruptive (**Behrens, 2004: 2-3; Fogel, Kawai, 2006: 7-8**).

In this regard, psychiatrists Alan Fogel and Kawai Masatoshi distinguish between a positive *amae*, which is emotional and acceptable and includes a desire for closeness and intimacy, and a negative *amae*, called instrumental or disruptive and covers being selfish, clingy, making deals, acting abusively, and making unreasonable demands (**Fogel, Kawai, 2006: 7-8**). According to the false suicide note, Futaba's mother took her life because of a maternity neurosis caused by a disruptive *amae* relationship with Futaba, who demanded too much of her.

The way *P5* constructs Futaba's *hikikomori* is strongly reminiscent of expert Matthew Bowker's thesis about this state. In his opinion, reclusion can be originated in losses or deprivation of *amae*. According to him, the child whose need for an indulgent relationship has been unmet may fear the frustration of their immediate necessities and, more fundamentally, the negative psychic consequences of becoming aware of such desires and of the possibile inability to fulfill them. As a result, the individual with dissatisfied longing for *amae* might internalise a prohibition against such demand to avoid the pain of failing to achieve it and might believe it to be shameful, monstrous, and inappropriate. Consequently, the person may think *amae* to be a severe form of sickness and, by possessing it, to be a frightening carrier of a contagious disease (**Bowker, 2016: 31-36**).

Futaba's story closely matches Bowker's description. In her recollection of the years spent with her mother, she remembers being frustrated in her exigency for *amae* and her demands being so extreme they drammatically caused Wakaba's suicide. Thus, she creates a mystification of herself as unworthy of love and is convinced to be abnormal, disgraceful, and dangerous for the disastrous consequences of her exaggerated need for *amae*.

As Bowker goes on arguing, at this point the individual who has introjected a prohibition against *amae* might become a reclusive shut-in. Facing the conundrum posed by the ambivalence about their demand to be loved but disfiguring such longing as hideous, the disappointed person may live secluded as a desperate attempt to enter a protective cocoon from which they might one day emerge as worthy of indulgence and care. Nonetheless, the profound sense of humiliation that the individual has erected like a wall as a defense mechanism against their early frustration brings them both to strive to fulfill and to sabotage their struggle for *amae*. As a consequence, the hermit may not redeem their deprivation but could rather repeat it (**Bowker, 2016: 38-44**). Seen under this perspective, *hikikomori* may be considered at the same time as a claim to indulgence, an escape from a sorrowful condition, and a self-incarceration.

Additionally, living in isolation exacts a heavy toll on those who are close to the individual, too. In fact, while the person reenacts their lack, they share it with others by visiting their suffering upon them. As a result, family members caring for a recluse are relegated to providing them, materialistically, with meals, clothing, shelter, and other basic necessities, making them responsible for their survival and, by implication, for their *hikikomori* state as well. Emotionally, the individual deprives the caregiver of personal and psychological interaction with the *hikikomori*. Locked out of the hermit's bedroom, both literally and figuratively, family members and caregivers are left in utter confusion, often incapable of understanding what precipitated the seclusion, wondering if it is a punishment for some misdeeds, or whether it will lead to greater physical or mental sickness, suicide, or violence (**Bowker, 2016: 41-44**). Thus, *hikikomori* may be said to constitute both a self-victimisation and a victimisation.

The Impact Futaba's 'Hikikomori' Exerts on the Other Characters and the Player

P5 depicts the effects isolation produces on the game characters firstly through Sōjirō, Futaba's guardian, and secondly through the group of protagonists. As Bowker explains, in front of Futaba's *hikikomori* Sōjirō is given no other choice but to be her caregiver tasked with her material exigencies. Thus, he provides her with shelter, clothes, books about her passions, and, especially, meals. In the game, Sōjirō accomplishes his

primary role as a father figure, mostly in connection with food. He derives his income, which he uses to support both Futaba and him, from his bistrot, and in central moments of the story he cooks a special curry that was Wakaba and Futaba's favourite dish, thereby re-establishing the lost emotional bond between mother and daughter. Despite his best efforts, though, Sōjirō feels unsure about the effects his actions may have. Particularly, he worries that by indulging Futaba he might unwillingly be worsening her dependence on him. However, he continues to provide for her in hopes that she may one day exit from her self-incarceration and resume her life and school career.

In this regard, Sōjirō's behaviour is remindful of Ellen Rubinstein's research. In her essay, the expert draws attention to the fact that some parents, when the anticipated life course of their segregated children is disrupted, use narrative about onset, withdrawal, and recovery as a significant way to bridge the gaps between expectations and reality, creating a sense of continuity despite changed circumstances. In so doing, they employ narrative strategically to manage expectations and either portend or foreclose future possibilities (**Rubinstein, 2016: 642-644**). Similarly, Sōjirō uses this approach to justify his continued caregiving of Futaba and maintain hope for the future.

When the group of protagonists is first contacted from Futaba, they, too, have to deal with the uncertainty and instability of her *hikikomori*. Futaba reaches out to them via a messaging platform under a mysterious alias and abruptly opening and closing communication as she deems fit, with no further explanation. Futaba's way of communicating is characteristic of *hikikomori*: she does not meet with them in person, her identity disclosed to both parties; on the contrary, she takes advantage of the Internet and the possibility to retain, in a passive-aggressive fashion, her anonimity as well as the possibility to start and end communication at whim.

Interestingly enough, Futaba's behaviour puts the player in the same shoes as the protagonists. In fact, one of the main features of computer games as a medium is their interactivity, namely the need for the player to respond to the game's inputs. Nevertheless, Futaba withholds information at will and repeatedly denies the player's agency, making them unable to proceed with the story until she resumes contact with the other characters. In this manner, *P5* simulates a fractured interaction with a *hikikomori*. In other words, *P5* creates what in videogame studies is commonly referred to as procedural rhetoric, i.e., when a game utilises mechanics and gameplay to create a persuasive reproduction of real-world processes (**Bogost, 2007: 57; Lewis, 2020: 12**).

P5 uses other procedural rhetorics to also lead the gamer to understand both rationally and emotionally Futaba's life history and her psychological

condition. To advance in the Palace, the protagonists need to solve three puzzles in the form of a mosaic representing important moments of Futaba's relationship with her mother, namely Futaba speaking with Wakaba, Wakaba jumping under a car in front of a weeping Futaba, and Futaba listening to lawyers read Wakaba's fake suicide letter and declare the woman's death Futaba's fault, whose pieces are in disarray. The characters are tasked with reorganising those pieces so that they can witness how Futaba lost her mother. The puzzles perform multiple allegorical functions. On one level, they show the gamer and the protagonists Futaba's history, thus allowing them to form an empathetic affinity with Futaba. On another level, the state of disorder the mosaic is in metaphorically indicate Futaba's confusion on what really happened to Wakaba. On the one hand, in fact, Futaba accepts at face value the lawyers' words and consequently blames herself for her mother's suicide. On the other hand, though, Futaba understands that the lawyers' reconstruction of events is flawed and someone else is actually responsible for Wakaba's death. However, Futaba buries this realisation deep in her subconscious. The puzzles represent her need for clarification, honesty with herself, and external help. In this manner, the mosaic's procedural rhetoric portrays Futaba's confusion and the lies she tells herself, establishes the relationship between the characters, and shows that Futaba needs the protagonists' aid in facing the truth.

A third procedural rhetoric connects the characters' intervention with Futaba's *hikikomori*. To enter the pyramid's closed inner room, the Phantom Thieves need to actively alter Futaba's perception. The inner room's door reflects Futaba's bedroom door, that is always closed and thus fulfills a critical role in establishing Futaba's *hikikomori* condition both factually and symbolically. To open the inner room's door, then, the protagonists ask Futaba to open her bedroom's door, a gesture that initiates her process of social reintegration, which we will see in more detail below. The open door's procedural rhetoric depicts Futaba's need for external help and reconnection with others. In this way, *P5* uses the potential of the various systems of meaning extant within the computer game as a medium to simulate the main aspects of the *hikikomori* condition.

The Positive Revaluation of the Attributes of 'Otaku' and 'Hikikomori'

In a pivotal turn of events, the group of protagonists manages to correct Futaba's mystified vision of her past. By interacting with her memories and warped self-consciousness in the Palace, the player helps Futaba regain her true self and remember the real relationship she had with her mother. She learns she is not responsible for Wakaba's death and that her mother-daughter relationship was actually one of positive *amae*.

With such awareness, Futaba awakens to new powers in the conscience world that is the Metaverse, mastering how to employ her hacking abilities both in reality and in the alternate dimension. When she accesses the Metaverse, she can use a sophisticated and futuristic computer system to gather information about the Palace the characters are exploring and to alter the very fabric of the projection-world to lead The Phantom Thieves in their quest. In so doing, Futaba proficiently transfers her *otaku*-esque computer and hacking knowledge from the real world to the Metaverse in a way similar to Okada's thesis about the *otaku* as 'new-type humans' who possess an advanced perception. Thus, *P5* seems to endorse the argument about *otaku* as cyber-experts.

In a highly symbolic monologue, Futaba directly reflects upon the significance of her life as a *hikikomori*. Soon after she regains her memory, she confronts her doppelganger in the Metaverse. Her alter ego explains to her real self, as to the gamer who observes the scene as a spectator, that Futaba has lived self-incarcerated because of the ambivalence of her situation, as we have seen thanks to the mosaic's procedural rhetoric: deep in her heart, Futaba had known all along that her mother loved and cared for her and she would never take her life blaming her daughter. The doppelganger itself represents Futaba's subconscious where she had repressed such awareness. According to the alter ego's explanation, for Futaba living as a *hikikomori* served a double role: on the one hand, it represented a compliant capitulation to her mother's homicide; on the other hand, it served as a cocoon Futaba entered to defend herself while she was processing her grief and mastering the courage to accept the truth. In this way, *P5* portrays *hikikomori* as a protected environment where the individual can heal from trauma, work out their identity, and allow time for their inner growth.

The necessity for Futaba to accept her sorrow is made specifically evident in *Persona 5 Royal* (*Perusona go za roiyaru* ペルソナ5ザ·ロイヤル; hereafter, *P5R*), an enhanced version of *P5* first released in Japan in 2019 which inserts new material to the game in terms of secondary characters and story events. In the finale of *P5R*, a new opponent who possesses powers akin to a god asks the player to submit to him in exchange for happiness. Should the gamer accept, Futaba is able to reunite with the revived Wakaba and lead a blissful life with her mother. However, the game rhetoric constructs this choice as harmful to the protagonists because it requires giving their free will up. On the contrary, the game rhetoric presents holding the responsibility of one's decisions and taking their consequences, both good and bad, as the right choice to make. This means turning the enemy's offer down and, in Futaba's case, living with the loss of her mother, respecting her own life history, and accepting her new-found identity.

P5 illustrates the therapeutic function of *hikikomori* and the empowering aspect of the *otaku* by the symbolic meaning of the Hermit Tarot Card. In the *Persona* series, the characters are each linked to a tarot card that represents qualities of the protagonist associated. In this case, the Hermit card depicts an old man wandering alone under an endless sky. While melancholic, the figure gains new and unique abilities, indicated by the lamp he holds to lighten his path (**Gray, 1970: 37**). In Futaba's case, her newfound potential consists in her *otaku*-esque hacking skills she uses both in real life and in the Metaverse. There, she is known as Navi, the person who guides the group of protagonists. In the official English translation, she is called Oracle, further strengthening her association with occult powers. In other words, *P5* presents the self-seclusion of the *hikikomori* and the interests of the *otaku* not as a form of interrelational ineptitude but rather as a self-discovery path that leads to the acquisition of important abilities.

These remarks are consistent with the findings of different scholars studying the *hikikomori* state. For example, Ishikawa Ryōko (**Ishikawa, 2007: 151-152; Heinze, Thomas, 2014: 159**) suggests that reclusion should not be interpreted as a static condition of illness, but rather as a long-term and radical process of self-seeking. For her part, expert Ishikawa Satomi (**2007: 24; Heinze, Thomas, 2014: 166**) writes in her survey to the interviews she conducted with Japanese youth in the 1990s that the new generations exhibit a striking passion for self-knowledge, which is frequently referred to as "self-seeking" (*jibun sagashi* 自分探し), "self-realisation" (*jibun jitsugen* 自分実現), and "self-expression" (*jibun hyōgen* 自分表現). To this, Rubinstein (**2016: 648-649**) adds that some parents consider their children's path to recovery as a process akin to "spiritual awakening" (*satori* 悟り). By closely mirroring these researchers' opinions, *P5* portrays *hikikomori* as a mystical journey of self-discovery and *otaku* as a way to empower oneself.

As the story unfolds, the destruction of her distortion pushes Futaba to finally discard her *hikikomori* shell. Now that she knows the relationship with her mother was one of positive *amae*, Futaba gradually regains what Bowker defines as ontological security, that is, she casts aside her apprehensiveness to be rejected, shyly embraces that relatedness with others may be potentially gratifying, and establishes an emotional link with her impulses and needs (**Bowker, 2016: 31-34**). For this reason, she stops living in reclusion and exits her room and house to blend with people and acquire the interpersonal skills she hadn't developed so far.

To rejoin the community, Futaba receives help from the other characters, who little by little accompany her in the usual relational activities of Japanese teenagers, such as spending a day at the beach, attending a

school festival in preparation for her to resume school attendance, and working part-time at Sōjirō's café. The player's interactivity carries out an interesting role in Futaba's newfound sociality. In fact, the gamer can decide if the main character, the protagonist fully controllable by the player named Amamiya Ren 雨宮蓮,[ii] charismatic leader of the Phantom Thieves, should or not court her. In other words, the gamer is free to choose the romantic or platonic nature of Futaba's tie with Amamiya. Regardless of this option, the group of protagonists provides her with what Fogel and Kawai define as a bridging frame, namely a transitional situation effective in assisting a person through potentially difficult and chaotic times of change (**Fogel, Kawai, 2006: 3-4**). In so doing, Futaba undergoes a gradual process of social reintegration.

The aid Futaba gets from the other characters may be linked with the sociological concept of *tsunagari* 繋がり. Literally translatable as "connection," *tsunagari* can be defined as an ideal of solidarity adequate to the current times of social precarity (**Allison, 2012: 350**). Instead of trying to reconstitute the traditional family model, because it bore problems of its own, the Japanese younger generations are molding this new ideal that is post-identitarian and premised on mutuality (**Ibid**).

In *P5*, Futaba finds a circle of trusted friends and dear ones which seems antithetical to the nuclear family. In particular, Sōjirō is a guardian who's not biologically related to Futaba and was not romantically involved with Wakaba, so he appears to be very remote from the myhomeist model of the father as the child's biological parent. This point is further stressed in a subplot which involves Futaba's biological father. After neglecting Wakaba and Futaba, he returns in his daughter's life only to blackmail Sōjirō into giving him money so that he can pay off his many debts. In this way, *P5* complicates the myth about the undisputable positivity of biological parenthood in favour of a more nuanced vision of the caregiver as a person who effectively looks after someone, who may be a biological parent, such as Wakaba, but not necessarily, as in Sōjirō's case. The same can be said about the protagonists, who bond with Futaba thanks to the journey in the Metaverse where they experience her life story and thus empathise with her. Thereby, it is plausible to state that *P5* depicts *tsunagari* as a support network between a group of people who, contrary to myhomeism, cherish each other not so much because of a blood relation but rather thanks to an affective tie based on shared life experiences.

Conclusion

In closing, I would like to demonstrate that, if we observe on a bird's-eye view Futaba's storyline in connection to the portrayal of *otaku* and *hikikomori*, we can notice that her life path undergoes a coherent process that moves from the degrading comprehension of these categories found in Japanese public opinion and mainstream media, which inherited this view from the late '80s and 90's theorists of the *otaku* panic, to their more nuanced reconsideration available in the theses of contemporaneous cultural critics, psychologists, and social scientists. To this end, I would propose, firstly, to retrace our steps and recapitulate the main characteristics of these conflicting perceptions of the topics at issue, so that, secondly, we can see how the main phases of the character's story engage in dialogue with the broader discourses about selfhood and sociability debated by the antagonistic notions of the two phenomena.

As said above, the negative understanding of the *otaku* and *hikikomori* groups articulates its main point in individualism. According to those who support this proposition, consumers of popular culture and reclusive shut-ins prioritise their hobbies and the permanence in their comfort zone because of a complete absorption over their own needs. As a consequence, they are thought to lead an alienated life and to disregard their social obligations, be it a bold refusal to assume their responsibilities or a gradual inability to develop the expected relational skills. On a bigger scale, *otaku* and *hikikomori* are accused of the erosion of the social bonds that has been occurring in the Japanese nation. As a result, pop culture enthusiasts and hermits are blamed for being the cause of the disgregation of the interrelational ties brought about by their individualism, seen as a behavioral flaw.

In direct opposition, the positive understanding reverses this cause-effect correlation. In the opinion of those who endorse this view, *otaku* and *hikikomori* are seen not as the origin of the current state of social disconnection, but rather as its product. As we observed above, a number of researchers and essayists argue that the categories of pop culture enthusiasts and recluses may be considered as the fringes of the Japanese society which suffer the most from the rise of flexible labour, the deregulation of the market economy, and the burst of the Bubble economy. These factors, in turn, might have influenced the emotional world of the population, that now leads an individuated lifestyle. Therefore, the positive understanding proposes that pop culture consumers and hermits might not be responsible for the erosion of the social cohesion, brought about by individualism as a personal flaw, but rather their individualism may be an outcome of the socio-economic crisis faced by the country in its stage of late capitalism.

On the heels of this reconsideration, certain authors have reinterpreted the supposed defects of *otaku* and *hikikomori* as qualities. For instance, Okada defined the former 'new-type humans' who present an evolution in human perception, developed thanks to their ability in using technology. More generally, pop culture fans have often been labeled as cyber-experts. Similarly, Ishikawa Ryōko reports that self-incarceration might be best understood not as a cronic condition of illness, but more accurately as a long-term process of self-seeking, an ideal that inspires, as Ishikawa Satomi recounts, a large fraction of the Japanese youth. According to these experts, *otaku* and *hikikomori* embody the new consciousness and abilities developed thanks to the latest technologies and the inner longings of the younger generations.

P5 introduces this representational evolution in the character of Futaba. As we saw, Futaba's storyline begins with the recollection of the supposedly disruptive *amae* relationship she established with her mother, a bad tie caused by Futaba who, allegedly, demanded too much attention from Wakaba and didn't notice the high toll she exacted on her, because she was exclusively focused on the fulfillment of her own desires. After Wakaba's death, Futaba segregates herself in her chamber where she focuses only on her interests to chastise herself and to accommodate to her perceived faulty interrelational skills, in fear she may wound others again. Thus, being an *otaku* and a *hikikomori* emerges as a punishment and, simultaneously and paradoxically, a necessity for a person so egoistical they can hurt those around them.

It is important to note, however, that such mystification of the mother-daughter's bond is actually forged by the old generation. It is the politician Shidō who spreads this interpretation of the facts, which takes hold on the girl's relatives and then on Futaba herself. According to this reconstruction, Futaba is deemed a person so individualistic she caused her mother's suicide. In this way, the older generation paints Futaba according to their disparaging vision of the younger generation and their behaviour.

Nonetheless, Futaba soon discovers the deception and this changes her self-perception. Remembering her true, positive relation with Wakaba, she reinterprets her *hikikomori* not as a self-punishment, but rather as a long-term process of healing from her mother's murder. Analogously, she now considers her *otaku* interests as powerful tools and her need of sociality as best answered by the *tsunagari* concept. Through this series of deceits and truth-findings, the game rhetoric discredits the negative understanding by showing it as an evaluation of events that alters the facts *a posteriori*, whereas it endorses the positive understanding as being

closer to the personal experiences of *otaku* and *hikikomori* and to their sensibilities and capabilities.

To conclude, *P5* enters the discussion about the *otaku* and *hikikomori* phenomena by presenting the debate as a conflict between the old generation, the upholder of what could be called the negative understanding, and the younger generation, the herald of the positive one. Ultimately, *P5* declares the positive understanding the winner of the dispute for being more adherent to the life experiences and the potentialities of being an *otaku*, revaluated as a pathway to empowerment, and a *hikikomori*, reconsidered as a pathway to therapeutic self-seeking.

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[i] Kam specifically refers to a masculinity rule, I took the liberty to change its name into a general gender rule to better fit the topic at hand.

[ii] The main protagonist does not have a name in the game, as the player can choose it; however, he is called Amamiya Ren in the animated transposition of the game, titled *Persona 5: The Animation* (*Perusona go ji animēshon* ペルソナ5ジ・アニメーション, 2018-2019), so I use this name for clarity's sake.

Sherlock and Shārokku: 'Nerdy' detectives in the West and in the East

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Abstract

This article explores the problem of archetypical features in the fictional character Sherlock Holmes. There are many fictional works, which we may regard as proof of the increasing popular interest, where this character presents 'awkward or socially embarrassing' features that can be associated with tropes on 'nerds' even. At the same time in our post-modern society, we also see a great number of different 'upside-down' stories, which show us well-known fictional characters from another angle, explaining their stories or giving them unexpected features. We suggest that it became a trend to expand features immanent to an archetypical fictional character, shifting the focus towards them, and thus allowing the creators to change the character while still keeping some of his core characteristics intact. Such changes also make it possible to move a character to a different environment and make him look quite natural there. In recent TV shows, Sherlock Holmes has undergone drastic changes in his homeland – Great Britain, and he changes ever more when he appears in Japan. His devotion to his work as shown in classical works by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle has turned into a kind of sociopathic behaviour: he hates people and tries to avoid them; he is only interested in his work, which aligns him with 'nerdy' features. We suggest that in spite of these transformations, he is the same great detective, maintaining an archetypal identity that we can recognise easily.

Keywords: archetype; detective; nerds; Sherlock Holmes; Shārokku

Introduction

We are going to explore the changes that one of the most well-known fictional characters, private detective Sherlock Holmes created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, has undergone throughout his long history in original stories and adaptations. We ask why two modern adaptations of the story, namely the British *Sherlock* series (BBC, 2010) and the Japanese *Misu Shārokku* series (Hulu & HBO Asia, 2018), turn the hero detective into what can be popularly perceived as a 'freaky' or 'nerdy' character.

We will examine the qualities associated with nerds in these two counterpart detectives created in two island nations. We suggest that some traits attributed to stereotypical perceptions of the 'English national character' stay unchanged from Victorian to Modern Britain, and can be found in modern representation of Sherlock Holmes, who becomes a personification of 'a Victorian myth' (**Rasevich, 2014**), epitomising the ideals of his own age and nation (**Coffman, 2005**). We will also try to map common features in British and Japanese cultures, which allow this modern representation to find favourable and creative reception in Japan.

At the same time, we will concentrate also on the so-called 'nerdy' features of these two Sherlocks and see whether these traits really affect the image of the great fictional detective. Based on definitions for 'nerd' given in the Merriam-Webster online dictionary (1. a person devoted to intellectual, academic, or technical pursuits or interests, or 2. an unstylish or socially awkward person (**'Nerd', 2022a**) and the Cambridge Dictionary (1. a person, especially a man, who is not attractive and is awkward or socially embarrassing, and 2. a person who is extremely interested in one subject, especially computers, and knows a lot of facts about it (**'Nerd', 2022b**), we shall regard 'nerdiness' in a broad sense. We will concentrate on the image of a 'nerd' being 'socially awkward and embarrassing' and 'devoted to intellectual interests, extremely interested in one subject' and dwell upon the interest audiences show towards deviant behaviour of such 'nerds' in fictional works.

For several decades now, people considered to deviate from established norms of social interaction, especially those who have unusual intellectual abilities (sometimes these are people with so-called *savant syndrome*), have been drawing much attention in fictional works, with autistic people of genius often at their centre. After *Rain man* (1988) and *Forrest Gump* (both the book (1986) and the movie (1994)) there came *Shine* (1996), *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), *The Big Bang Theory* (2007), *Good Doctor* (2013, with a US remake in 2017 and a Japanese remake in 2018) and so on. Rare as savant syndrome may be seen in real life ('one or two in 200' among people with autism, according to data cited in (**Treffert, 2010: 4**)), it nevertheless attracts audience and therefore is quite sought-after by

modern authors (**Maich, 2014**; **Vazhenina, 2018**). It is arguable whether we can apply the word 'nerd' to such characters, but they are popular, allegedly being unrecognised geniuses demonstrating slight (or strong) peculiarities in their behaviour. Quite naturally, the contrast between the inability to communicate with people and high scientific (or other) abilities of such character become the core of the story.

In the postmodern age, with its eagerness to distort established forms, storytellers and filmmakers apply this new approach even to characters, which long seemed to remain unchanged forever. For example, Maleficent from the animated film *Sleeping Beauty* (an evil fairy godmother in Charles Perrault's fairy tale) turns to be an offended angel in Disney's *Maleficent* (2014), and Red Riding Hood appears to be a werewolf in ABC's *Once Upon a Time* (2011) series. Among these, Sherlock Holmes has been the object of numerous contemporary refashionings, for example within the Lovecraftian Cthulhu Mythos universe in Neil Gaiman's *A study in Emerald* (2003). More recently, *Sherlock*, a TV-series by BBC, UK (2010-2017) appeared, giving the audience another vision of Sherlock Holmes. This archetypical private detective is 'a cold mind' (**Doyle, 2014: 123**), a talented sleuth that becomes a 'high-functioning sociopath' (**Moffat, 2010: 86**), as he proclaims himself, one who 'sees but does not observe' (**Doyle, 2014: 124**; **Gatiss, 2010: 71**) people around him unless they are crucial for his investigations.

Following the extraordinary British detective, another Sherlock (*Miss Sherlock*, Hulu and HBO Asia, 2018) emerged in contemporary Japan, a country where nerds are often associated with the similar *otaku* (nerd or geek) culture. *Otaku* may or may not have evident mental disorders (**Teo & Gaw, 2010**), but in common discourse they are characterised by perceived degree of deviant social behaviour. The Japanese Sherlock's (Shārokku-san) ways of interacting with people very much resemble those of *otaku*, because Shārokku does not notice people around her, being deeply involved in the investigation, and seldom following common rules (often going against the norms of a strict Japanese society in the show).

Against this background, we will try to explore Holmes' archetype and how it is influenced by contemporary tendencies refashioning well-known characters with anti-social traits.

Sherlock and the Archetype of a Detective

Sherlock Holmes, the main character in the series of novels by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, can be described as the most famous fictional detective worldwide, with the books boasting translations into 98 languages, and Holmes becoming 'the most portrayed human character in film and on TV'

in 2012 (**Guinness World Records, 2012**), as he had appeared on screen in 254 cinema and TV-adaptations.

Many researchers suggest that the image of a detective is a personification of an archetypical myth of a hero (see, for example, **Miyachi, 1999**). Cawelty, in his *Adventure, Mystery and Romance* (**Cawelty, 1976**), Propp in his *Poetics of Folklore* (**Propp, 1998**), Eco in *The Role of the Reader* (**Eco, 1979**) analysed the archetypical bases of fictional texts; Eco in particular, thoroughly explored the connections between myth, fairy-tales, and novels, including detective ones. He pointed out a strict formula and repetition of plots or heroes, which can ease the response of a reader. At the same time, he suggested that a character of a novel and his life should be as unpredictable as the readers' lives are, in order to elicit sympathy and compassion with the reader (**Eco & Chilton, 1972: 15**). But what if a hero outgrows the frames of a novel and returns to being a myth, an archetype at a higher level? Ritual archetypes can be the base for any fictional world across all literary genres, including crime fiction (**Karmalova, cited in Krapivnik, 2014: 162**).

Detective texts always have as their base a formula, a cyclic or a loop-structured time, which is typical for a mythological consciousness re-creating an archetype, a stereotype (**Ibid: 163**). A detective thus is a personification of a mythical hero, a superman, because, according to Eco, in an industrial society a positive character is supposed to represent to the utmost the need for power which an average citizen feels but cannot satisfy (**Eco & Chilton, 1972: 14**).

Being at the same time a personification of a mythical hero, and of the quintessence of an English gentleman in popular perception, the 'original' Sherlock Holmes is supposed to demonstrate the best features of both. We may regard him as a character embodying the 'national features' of an Englishman, thus reinforcing a stereotype popularised worldwide. Various authors in the book by Ter-Minasova define 'national features' as 'the whole of specific psychological features which have more or less become characteristic of some social-ethnical community under specific economic, cultural and environmental circumstances of its development', 'psychological characteristics', 'stable national features of customs and traditions' (**Zhandildin, Parygin, Arutyunyan, cited in Ter-Minasova, 2000: 136**).

According to Sukharev and Sukharev, 'a beau ideal of an English person is independence, education, dignity, honesty and unselfishness, tactfulness, elegancy of manner, exquisite politeness, ability to sacrifice time and money for a good deed, ability to lead and to obey, insistence in pursuing a goal' (**Sukharev & Sukharev, 1997: 106**). All these features can easily be found in the stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Holmes helps people, 'his

sole reward being the intellectual joy of the problem' (**Doyle, 2018: 772**) and he plays 'the game fairly' (**Ibid: 805**); he has 'the power of detaching his mind at will' (**Ibid: 508**); he is sure that 'the emotional qualities are antagonistic to clear reasoning' (**Ibid: 92**), he is able to 'plunge into a chemical analysis' for rest (**Ibid: 131**). As seen by people around him, he is also 'a little queer in his ideas — an enthusiast in some branches of science' and 'a decent fellow' (**Ibid: 12**), has his 'little peculiarity' (**Ibid: 15**), his knowledge 'is very extraordinarily ample' (**Ibid: 17**), he has 'the reticence' (**ibid: 16**); he has 'many extraordinary qualities, nimble and speculative mind' (**Ibid: 127**), he is 'a wonderful man' (**Ibid: 128**). At the same time, he is sometimes 'a little too scientific' (**Ibid: 13**), certainly 'very conceited' (**Ibid: 21**), has 'a small vanity' (**Ibid: 86**) and shows 'the over-refinement of his logic' (**Ibid: 127**).

If we pick up and strengthen several features mentioned above (having little peculiarities, being too scientific etc.), we can attain an image of a 'nerdy' character with his exquisite mind, deep involvement in crime solving and his unwillingness at some times to communicate with common people, which we can interpret as social misbehaviour. Relying on the dictionary definitions given above, we could regard Sherlock Holmes as a Victorian 'nerd', fully devoted to and deeply involved in crime solving, though he never gives impression of an unstylish or a socially awkward man.

We can define the name of Sherlock Holmes as a 'precedent name' being a 'complex sign which is attributed not to a denotation, but to a number of distinctive features, qualifiers of such a name' (**Zakharenko et al., 1997: 83**). The name of Sherlock Holmes is associated with detective work and thus is relatively common for the names of search-engines (*Holmes* application and *Sherlock* online Apple version) or detective agencies (online agency *Sherlock Holmes*, Ufa town agency *Holmes*, Ukranian Detective Agency *Sherlock Holmes*). It is seen as something undoubtedly English, so pubs (perhaps the most famous one is situated in Northumberland Street, London), and even tea brands (Gutenberg *Sherlock Holmes' Favourite Tea* or The Literary Tea Company *Sherlock Tea Collection*) are named after this hero detective character.

At the same time, the image of the famous detective has definitely changed throughout the years, mostly due to stage and cinema interpretations. For example, a survey provided in (**Popova & Stolyarova, 2014**), shows an interesting trend in the movies and TV-series (*Sherlock Holmes*, 2009 with Robert Downey-Jr and *Sherlock,* 2010-2017 with Benedict Cumberbatch) to be seen as the most interesting modern reproductions of the story. Perhaps it is the gap between the canon and the adaptation, which attracts spectators, though both Holmeses are

dissimilar. The former acts in Victorian London, he is eccentric, quirky, not only brainy but brawny, while the latter has changed with the epoch, but he still relies on his brain more than on his fists.

One may suggest that it is archetypical features of Sherlock Holmes that give creators the liberty to fiddle with his certain incarnations while keeping the main features of the image intact. Let us have a closer look at the BBC series *Sherlock* created by Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss. The writers did not try to change the nucleus of the archetype, but 'wanted to bring him out of the faux-Victorian fog and see him for what he is', as S. Moffat put it in an interview on *The Guardian* (**Jeffries, 2012**). They changed almost every variable parameter placing their characters into the twenty first century, making them use mobile phones and taxi (which are still 'cabs'), browse Internet instead of Encyclopedia Britannica and publish their reports not in newspapers but in blogs and on websites (**Moffat, 2010**).

Sherlock (the first name is enough now, as no one uses Victorian 'Mr Holmes' anymore) does not smoke but uses nicotine patches (**Moffat, 2010: 86**) to stimulate his brainwork, though he still uses drugs for the same purpose both in the novels and the show (**Doyle, 2018: 85; Sherlock, 2019: 379**). Dr Watson (he is John now) is still a military surgeon who has visited 'either Afghanistan or Iraq' (**Moffat, 2010: 17**) – even war zones have not changed much since Victorian times. The Baskervilles estate becomes a government research station (**Sherlock, 2012a**), inspector Lestrade can call for helicopters backup (**Sherlock, 2019: 326**), but Sherlock still solves crimes, John is still ready to help his eccentric friend, Mycroft still represents the British government (**Doyle, 2018: 898; Moffat, 2010**), Irene Adler is still 'The Woman' (**Doyle, 2018: 170; Sherlock, 2012b**), and Moriarty is an evil genius and a criminal mastermind weaving his intricate web (**Doyle, 2018: 473; Gatiss, 2010: 47**).

At the same time, some of Sherlock Holmes' features change drastically in the BBC adaptation, and we will see into the reasons of such changes later. The great detective's aim now is not so much to help people, as to amuse himself – though he has always been striving for 'the intellectual joy of the problem' as Dr Watson puts it in *The Valley of Fear* (**Doyle, 2018: 772**). It seems that he never thinks of his friends but only uses them. He talks to John only because Mrs Hudson has taken away his skull 'friend' (**Moffat, 2010: 64**), he never pays attention to his devoted helper Molly's feelings (**Moffat, 2010: 19**) and he can easily divert DI Lestrade from his investigation just because he needed some help with the best man's speech (**Sherlock, 2019: 326**). Yet, this inability of his to adopt strict rules of the society (**Sherlock, 2019: 196**) can be another possible feature of an allegedly peculiar and extravagant Englishman. Sherlock is still

independent, highly educated, full of dignity, though not necessarily honest and unselfish like the original Holmes was. He is surely able to lead (but not to obey), he is insistent in pursuing a goal, but delicacy and exquisite politeness are not among his strong features (see **Sukharev & Sukharev, 1997: 106**). He even announces himself a 'high-functioning sociopath' as opposed to a 'psychopath' (**Moffat, 2010: 86**).

Sollid explores this matter by applying tools for psychiatric assessments to both versions of the great detective. Using the Hare PCL-R test (Psychopathy Checklist-Revised), developed by Robert D. Harem, one of the most widely used instruments in the psychiatric assessment of psychopaths, commonly used to rate a person's psychopathic or antisocial tendencies (according to the web-site of Individual Differences Research lab (**Hare Psychopathy Checklist-Revised, 2022**)), she establishes that neither of the two detectives are sociopaths or psychopaths, though the modern version scores higher on both scales. At the same time, she notes that the term 'high-functioning' is mostly addressed to people with Asperger, although here again applying the test does not prove the diagnosis, but only shows some of the traits associated with the syndrome (**Sollid, 2016**). Even without a mental disorder diagnosis, the new Sherlock ignores social conventions (**Sherlock, 2019: 196**) and does not care much about maintaining communication when he does not need it. His thoroughness (or, better, obsession) with detailed information and meticulous research are evident in scenes where he boasts about having published an article on 240 different varieties of tobacco ashes (**Sherlock, 2019: 155**), or beats corpses with a stick to find out the nature of the bruises (**Moffat, 2010: 14**). Both episodes are also mentioned in the original stories: *The Boscombe Valley Mystery* (**Doyle, 2018: 209**) and *A Study in Scarlet* (**Doyle, 2018: 13**) respectively – obviously suggesting 'nerdy' traits.

This then begs the following questions: To what extent may archetypical features be adapted and modified, while still performing a substantial representation of the archetype? And what happens if we move the archetype into another culture?

In the beginning of the twentieth century there were many stories describing Sherlock Holmes' adventures in Russia, most of them showing the detective stunned by the unpredictable Russian criminals with their famous 'Russian character.' Such were the series 'Sherlock Holmes' adventures in Russia' by P. Nikitin (1908-1909), or two story collections by P. Orlov, 'Adventures of Sherlock Holmes in Siberia' and 'Sherlock Holmes against Nat Pinkerton' (1909) (**Reitblat, 1994**).

There are examples of Russian filmmakers who have tried both to represent classical Sherlock Holmes on screen and to film their own stories about the great detective (*Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson* series, USSR, 1979-1986; *Me and Sherlock Holmes* short animated movie, USSR, 1985; *My Dearly Beloved Detective,* USSR, 1986; animated *Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson: Lord Waterbrook Murder*, Russia, 2005, and its sequel *Sherlock Holmes and Black Men*, Ukraine, 2012; *Sherlock Holmes* TV-series, Russia, 2013; *Sherlock in Russia*, Russia, 2020). Neil McCaw links such interest with an 'Anglophilic nostalgia', proving the right of a 'non-English production team' to be nostalgic for 'a history… which primarily belongs to someone else' (**McCaw, 2020: 239**).

Among the modern adaptations mentioned above, the Soviet TV series is perhaps the most famous one in the post-Soviet territory, receiving high praise and love from Russian spectators for its faithfulness in following the original story, as opinions by spectators in *kinopoisk.ru* or *imdb.com* websites state. Vasily Livanov, who portrayed Sherlock Holmes, was appointed Honorary Member of the Order of the British Empire in 2006 'For service to the theatre and performing arts' (**List of Honorary Awards, 2006**), and his picture can be seen in the Sherlock Holmes Museum at 221b Baker Street in London .

Other works are more or less modified versions, of which, perhaps, the 2013 TV-series is of interest as it portrays the Victorian Sherlock Holmes, but gives the spectators an image not of the ideal gentleman from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's stories (allegedly written and idealised by Dr Watson), but of a 'real' person with his faults and weaknesses.

However, for the present analysis the image of Sherlock emerging in an even more different background, in Japan, is of particular interest. While Rudyard Kipling famously stated that 'East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet', (**Kipling, 1889**), other views highlight that Great Britain and Japan have a lot in common. Ovchinnikov, a famous Soviet journalist, who described both countries (**Ovchinnikov, 1971;1979**) after he had spent several years working there, wrote that English and Japanese people were very different and at the same time very similar to one another. Both follow strict social rules, – though English people tend to show individualism and the Japanese – collectivism; both value traditions, though the Japanese tend to praise inconstancy and changeability while the English succession and continuation (**Ibid**). The people of these two island countries are famous for their loyalty and nobleness together with some possibly extravagant features of character. Of course, these are stereotypes that do not represent all English or Japanese people, but stereotypes are an important factor in intercultural communication (**Haarmann, 1984; Seiter, 2006**), so we cannot fully ignore

them when comparing literature or cinematographic works using an archetypical character.

The history of Sherlock Holmes in Japan goes back to 1894, when the first abridged translation of *The Man with the Twisted Lip* was published, followed by many other translations and adaptations (**Kobayashi & Higashiyama, 1983**). Japan is quite famous for its own detective writers as well, starting with Edogawa Ranpo, whose mystery fiction, and own pen-name were clearly influenced by Edgar Allan Poe (**Fisher, 2017; Bode, 2019**), or Okamoto Kido, an outstanding playwright who had been deeply inspired by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (**Silver, 1999: 147-148**). There are many works taking inspiration from the Victorian period as a whole, and Sherlock Holmes stories in particular (**Nakatsuma, 2019**), with numerous adaptations, pastiches, and derivative works across media, including the animation series *Sherlock Hound* (*Meitantei Holmes*) by Tokyo Movie Shinsha, 1984-1985 (**McCaw, 2020**). Thus, it is only natural for Japan, which in some aspects resembles England so strongly, to get its own modern reincarnation of Sherlock Holmes as well: such is the case of the TV series *Miss Sherlock* (*Misu Shārokku*) by Hulu and HBO Asia, broadcast 2018.

The main character of the show, Sara Shelly Futaba, whose nickname is Shārokku, is a woman, though this is not revolutionary, as the Russian pastiche *My Dearly Beloved Detective* by TO Ekran (USSR, 1986) had already portrayed a woman Sherlock once, and there were female Watson and Moriarty in American TV series *Elementary* by CBS Television Studios (USA, 2012-2019). According to the creators of the Japanese show, Shārokku is a Japanese who was born in England and later returned to Japan (**Hulu Original Miss Sherlock, 2018a**). This makes her a *kikoku-shijo,* which is a term for Japanese returnee children (**'Kikoku-shijo', 2022**) who had long lived abroad with their parents and then returned to the country: this is an important fact, which we shall examine later.

Dr Watson (Wato-san), a former surgeon suffering from post-traumatic syndrome disorder after having taken part in a peace-making mission in the Middle East (**Hulu Original Miss Sherlock, 2018b; 2018c**), is also a woman. In the series we see modern Japan, where a rich widow like Mrs Hudson's counterpart Hatano-san may still own a large traditional Japanese house (**Hulu Original Miss Sherlock, 2018d**), but young women are ready to choose their own way in life, though their families sometimes expect them to act in a more traditional way (**Hulu Original Miss Sherlock, 2018e**).

McCaw sees *Misu Shārokku* as a nostalgic reminiscence of former Japan, an 'idealized Japanese past' (**McCaw, 2020: 247**). But in our opinion, he overlooks (or intentionally ignores) a very transparent fact, that although

Misu Shārokku is far from being a remake of the BBC *Sherlock*, Shārokku-san obviously mimics her British counterpart by behaving as a 'nerdy sociopath' within a Japanese context. She ignores cultural customs and social etiquette, staying too close to a person, sitting on the table, entering the house without taking off her shoes or refusing to greet people with the traditional *aisatsu* (formal greeting) (**Hulu Original Miss Sherlock, 2018f**), and insisting she has no friends.

It is interesting to explore the reason of such changes in the archetypical hero detective. Why has he adopted such nerdlike features in his British homeland and why does the Japanese adaptation also stick to these peculiarities? We suggest that the two shows demonstrate and speak to an increasing interest in unconventional people, including those with behavioural issues deviating from accepted social norms.

Autism Spectrum Disorder and Media

Popular fascination with 'different' individuals is nothing new, let us just remember Barnum's American Museum or his 'What is It?' Exhibition held in London in 1846 and other so-called freak shows. *Punch* called the interest for this kind of entertainment a 'deformito-mania' (cited in **Karpenko, 2004**; **Durbach, 2011**). Barnum implied that the participants of his show were neither people, nor animals, and even physicians were not sure of the extent of their disabilities.

Researchers have highlighted gradual developments in the recognition of disabilities, which first meant a declaration of the human status for all disabled individuals. For example, the Institut National des Jeunes Aveugles founded in France in 1785 became the first specialty school for blind people in the world (Louis Braille, the inventor of the braille system, was one of its students). Later, its founder Valentin Haüy continued his work in Russia, at the invitation of Alexander I of Russia. In the first years of Soviet Russia Lev Vygotsky provided a strong theoretical basis for defectology, suggesting that humanity should first fight deafness, blindness or 'imbecility' socially and pedagogically, rather than medically (**Vygotsky, 1995: 16**; see also **Knox, Stevens, 1993**). Even now there are still cases of marginalisation and mistreatment of physically disabled people; as for mental disorders, there is too little common understanding of depression, let alone schizophrenia, different kinds of manias or syndromes. That is why there is still much prejudice concerning such disorders and people having them.

Media, including literature and cinema, have engaged with picturing people with 'divergent' mental features for some time already (see the list above). Of course, not any degree of 'neurodiversity' attracts the attention of the creators of media content: as far as the audience needs drama,

people of genius (either evil or good, real, or fictional) usually become the centre of any story. Such are the stories of Hannibal Lecter and Billy Milligan, John Nash-Jr. and David Helfgot and many others. People with schizophrenia or autism spectrum disorder, including those with Asperger syndrome, have become the centre of media attention, though mostly those with unusual abilities (first of all, people with traits of savant syndrome) are widely pictured in literature and cinema, as we can see even from the short list or cinematographic works given above. It is possible to say that fictional works often try to show the audience nice, soft, and kind people whose medical issues become obstacles to normal interacting with others. But these works also make every effort to explain that obstacles can be overcome with mutual interaction and help.

Perhaps, we may speak here rather of socially 'divergent' people. Nerds can also enter the category if we take them mostly as 'awkward or socially embarrassing' as per the Cambridge Dictionary entry. In any case, movies and novels focusing on disabled or divergent characters are not just making them 'moving objects with certain functions in a fiction work' (**Shestyorkina & Vazhenina, 2018: 108**), but are also explaining to wide audiences that there are ways of communicating with them. This is quite important as far as media are supposed to play an educational role in society promoting a certain way of life and common values (**Ibid: 108**). For Vazhenina, through this practice media can and should be a motivator for further promulgating humanist values of the society (**Vazhenina, 2018**). Such works may supposedly serve as a way of acquainting people with various social and psychological issues, and may thus be useful even for psychiatrists and medical students (**Beloguzov et al., 2017**). Of course, fictional approaches can be rather oversimplifying or non-academic, and some researchers criticise such works as misinterpreting mental disorders, for example contributing sometimes to 'a harmful divergence between the general image of autism and the clinical reality of the autistic condition' (**Draaisma, 2009**). By showing idealistic portraits of persons with autism spectrum disorders and giving them superpowers, such fictional works attract spectators, but do not provide them with a full understanding of problems which people with mental disorders and their families face (**Beloguzov et al., 2017**).

Fair as this criticism may be, there is still a tendency of making people with autistic spectrum disorders, together with outstanding intellectual powers, central figures of fictional works. This may explain the changes adopted by a postmodern reincarnation of Sherlock Holmes, the hero detective.

Now let us explore the reasons for creating a Japanese version of a 'nerdy' detective.

Japanese Ways of Escapism: *Ijime* and *Hikikomori*

Why would the Japanese audience be interested in such a perverted image of the famous detective?

There is deep meaning given by the creators of the show to the fact that Shārokku is a *kikoku-shijo*, a girl who born and/or raised abroad and returned to Japan later. Tawara, speaking of the problems school teachers face when organising activities, points out the guidance to 'be like the others', which can be seen in Japanese society and which extends even to elementary schools (attended by children from 6 to 12 years old). Since acting in unison is encouraged in different group activities in Japan, *kikoku-shijo*, presumably raised in different conditions and with different values, find it necessary to conceal their individuality and experience after they come to Japan, otherwise they may incur bullying (*ijime*) (**Tawara, 2004: 68**).

In Japan *ijime* is a problem closely connected with isolation from society. While it is not limited to school bullying (**Abe & Henly, 2010**), studies of *ijime* in school as a social problem have a long history that dates back to the early 1980s. Though schools in different countries report bullying problems, Kanetsuna argues that Japanese *ijime* has its specific features and, in comparison with bullying in England, does not always mean direct violence, but is frequently associated with aggressive behaviour, which causes a victim more psychological than physical suffering (**Kanetsuna, 2016: 155**). He defines *ijime* as 'one of the strategies for pupils to maintain group cohesiveness of the class' and sees the pupils' inability to fit in with the specific climate of the class as one of the reasons for *ijime* (**Ibid: 163**). *Kikoku-shijo* is one of those categories often 'unable to fit in', and therefore potentially subject to *ijime*. It is then quite natural for Shārokku to become an outcast because of her background.

Other phenomena which may explain the interest towards highly intellectual but strangely behaving detectives are *hikikomori* and *otaku*.

These are interrelated with discourses on instability in contemporary Japanese society. After the decades of massive postwar economic growth and accumulation of material wealth as a sign of prosperity – such as the idea of *maihōmushugi* (my-home-ism), buying one's own home and concentrating on one's own family (**Sakai, 2017**) – , in the aftermath of the recession from the mid-90s and the progressive casualisation of the job market, the possibility of realising these dreams of affluence and accomplishment became more and more unrealistic and remote (**Suwa & Suzuki, 2013: 196-97; Allison, 2012**). The sociologist Ōsawa defines this contemporary age as a 'time of the impossible' (**Suwa & Suzuki, 2013: 196)**. This was the time when individuals lost 'the agency of a third person',

'the transcendental other who alone can judge the appropriateness of social standards', and against which they may resist (**Ibid**). Arguably, gaining such agency could commonly be typified as being among those areas of emergent socialisation which young adults pass through during their formative years. Consequently, deprived of such standards (societal, governmental, etc.) and of the models of prosperity they represent, many young people turned their resistance from clear ideologies, the 'transcendental other', to their closer proximity, including themselves, which resulted, among others, in the *hikikomori* phenomenon as a form of social withdrawal in order to protect and harm themselves at the same time (**Ibid**).

The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) uses the definition of *hikikomori* given by Mitaku: a 'situation when a person stays at home for more than six months, not going to work or to school, and beside that not communicating with people outside the family' (**MHLW, 2010**). The word also describes people who find themselves in such a situation. Saitō, who first suggested the term, sees *hikikomori* or 'social withdrawal' as a psychological problem. He describes symptoms characteristic of psychological disorders and, citing Walters, gives an unwillingness to act manly out of fear of a failure as one of the reasons for such behaviour (**Walters, cited in Saitō, 1988**) – possibly due to the influence of *amae* (accepting overdependent behaviours) and 'shame' culture (**Kato et al, 2018**). Further, Poznina and Kolomoets suggest that after many years of such high pressure from society Japanese young men decided to free themselves of this terrible burden and not to take any responsibility for someone's or even their own lives (**Poznina & Kolomoets, 2014**). At the same time, one may also admit influence of family environment (**Umeda & Kawakami, 2012**) and possible high-functioning pervasive developmental disorders (**Suwa & Hara, 2007**).

Hikikomori stay at home even after leaving universities, not marrying and being fully dependent on their parents' support. Allegedly most of them indulge in different hobbies, often, but not necessarily in consuming anime, manga or/and videogames, or collecting related merchandise. This category is called *otaku* - 'young persons who are very interested in and know a lot about computers, computer games, anime, etc., but may find it difficult to talk to people in real life' (**'Otaku', 2022**), which bear comparable features with nerds or geeks in the West. The three categories are slightly different. For example, Merrill Perlman's research on the changes the word 'geek' meaning has undergone shows that it developed from 'a fool, a person uncultivated, a dupe' in 1876 to 'an overly diligent, unsociable student; any unsociable person obsessively devoted to a particular pursuit' in 1957, and to the modern 'a person regarded as being especially enthusiastic, knowledgeable, and skilful, esp. in technical

matters' (**Perlman, 2019**). Still, there are some common things about them as well, as all of them may have deep knowledge in some fields, and they are often frowned upon as not socially functioning, sometimes incurring seclusion.

Shārokku-san shares comparable features with the above phenomena insofar as her behaviour presents traits of obsession, specialist knowledge, and incapacity to integrate with mainstream society. However, perhaps it is her success in turning her inability to act in unison or to follow the rules of society into her strongest traits, such as the power to move independently, that attracted the Japanese audience.

Conclusion

We have thus studied the archetypical features of the image of Sherlock Holmes, one of the most famous fictional detectives. We showed that his name can become a 'precedent name', and he himself, being independent, educated, honest and unselfish, elegant, polite, and insistent in pursuing his goals, represents a number of stereotypes which may be regarded as an 'English national character.'

We also found out that under contemporary tendencies of making people with different behavioural disorders – from serious illnesses to slight divergences – the main characters of fictional or autobiographical stories, the core features of Sherlock Holmes change slightly to attract the interest of the audience. At the same time, picturing Holmes as a sort of social outcast allows him to be easily adapted in a foreign environment – emblematically in Japan, a country with notable examples of collectivism and phenomena of social withdrawal by those who feel and resent its pressure.

The character's development makes it possible to shift the focus of his core characteristics of intelligence, nobleness, extravagance and eagerness to help, to high-intellect, asocial behaviour, and eagerness to solve crimes for the sake of self-amusement. Therefore, we can conclude that it is still possible to keep the archetype intact while mediating different features relevant for every epoch and every society.

High intellect and asociality, or avoidant behaviour seem to have become features describing both a modern English Sherlock Holmes, and his Japanese counterpart as well. A *hikikomori* (or *otaku*) type seems to have become another impersonation of the nerdy and geeky famous detective, making East and West meet halfway. These common features appear to connect archetypical features of the character with his modern impersonations, regardless of different cultural backgrounds. Contemporary tendencies of media-texts, which develop features immanent to detective stories, now show a tendency to erase nationally

specific features within the circumstances of globalisation, while common features evolve on the surface letting audiences forget the differences.

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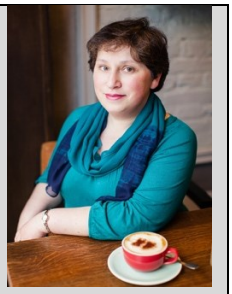

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Social and Spatial Representations of the Nerd in Donnie Darko

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Abstract

The nerds of 20th and 21st century global pop and visual culture have taken various forms over the decades. In a plethora of media - from video games to comic books to film - individuals associated with this subject position have typically been shown to be on the periphery of socio-spatially determined spaces of value. Through contemporary North American high school dramas, comedies, romances, and thrillers ranging from The Faculty (1998) to She's All That (1999) to The Twilight Saga (2008-2012), these socio-spatial spaces of value are typically associated with social capital and popularity. Richard Kelly's protagonist in his directorial debut Donnie Darko (2001) raises interesting questions concerning the relationship between the nerd, the outsider and the loner, and their relation to social and personal space. In socio-spatial terms, Donnie calls into question the value and power of socio-spatially determined zones of value if one sees such spaces and structures as valueless in principium. This paper conducts a close reading of Donnie Darko, beginning with the assumption that Donnie is a nerd and, parsing the character through the socio-spatial relations of a variety of adolescent subject positions, what Donnie Darko ultimately uncovers about identity, space, and value.

Keywords: nerd; clique; crowd; outsider; loner; socio-spatial relations

Introduction

In contemporary global society, any definition of the term 'nerd' is necessarily multiform. In view of ongoing issues and debates concerning identity politics, ideology, and the various subject positions through which individuals can experience a modicum of freedom or further subjugation, 'the nerd' can be parsed in various ways. In 20th and 21st century global pop culture, there are 'traditional' characteristics and behavioral modes associated with nerds and/or stereotypes upon which the category of nerd relies. These typically include but are not limited to: a lack of 'cool' which manifests as unrelenting social awkwardness; fastidious punctiliousness which manifests as an intensity of passion for their chosen interests such as comic books, science fiction, technology, and/or science and mathematics more broadly; bookishness or complete scholarly disinterest which manifests as academic acuity, profligacy, or both; and non-athleticism which often manifests as physical diminutiveness and/or chronic ailments such as asthma and astigmatism (**Kendall, 1999, 2000; Boynton, 2017; Bucholtz, 2001: 89-91)**. This last feature is often combined with the nerd's stereotypical physical unattractiveness, be it on account of a lack of sartorial sense or trend awareness in fashion and culture, or having conspicuous chronic ailments like eczema or dandruff.

While the behaviors circumscribed by terms such as 'nerd' or its antipodal opposite in social and aesthetic terms 'jock' still exist, these broad identarian categories demarking the popular and unpopular have undergone numerous permutations in 20th and 21st century global popular culture. There are various subsets of the nerd which combine with other stereotypical subject positions produced in and through the typified North American high school milieu. These include but are not limited to: the Goth, Hipster, the Manic Pixie Dreamgirl, or Hippie. Jocks, Preppies, and Populars 'represent identities that carry prestige and bring power. Other crowds – Freaks, Goths, Losers, Druggies, Nerds –represent the bottom of the status hierarchy' (**Bishop et al., 2004: 237**).

The multitalented Donald Glover, who many consider to be an Ur-example of a nerd himself, gives an interesting definition of the term 'nerd' in his 2012 stand-up special Weirdo: 'If you like strange, specific stuff – that's a nerd. Kanye West is a black nerd. He likes strange, specific stuff. If you go up to Kanye West and say, "hey, what are your favorite things?" He'll be like, "Robots and teddy bears." That's a nerd.' (**Glover, 2012**) Glover's assertion here accurately sums up the fact that beyond the purview of the North American high school milieu from which emerged the most recognizable pop and visual cultural examples of nerds, the nerd can mean so much more - even to the point of embodying its traditional opposite in being 'cool'. In this way, jocks, preppies, goths, hippies, and nerds are

ultimately undifferentiated by the intensity each subject position brings to its own self-identification with it.

While Glover's definition is broadly serviceable, its fundamental banality lacks any commentary, incisive or glancing, concerning what we could consider to be the pathological aspects of being a nerd. Moreover, Glover's definition does not address the inexorability of this subject position's association with loneliness, extreme oscillations of mood and action, and sometimes deadly resentment. In this way, the nerd, as represented primarily by white adolescent males in 20th and 21st century pop culture, has been many things: lovesick and homesick; spurned and unrequited; the unlikely hero and the maladroit social baggage; the invisible love interest and the secret beauty reified by the prom king/queen's unlikely attention; the slacker and the workhorse; the scoundrel, knave, or figure of moral rectitude; the merciless logician; the Romantic taker of umbrage; the lone gunman; the selfish creep and the altruistic caregiver (**Willey & Subramaniam, 2017**).[i] The variety of things nerds have and can be suggests that this subject position is ultimately a conglomerate of behavioral characteristics and modes, as opposed to an absolutist existential paradigm (**Gruys & Munsch, 2020**). Therefore, what we describe as nerdiness ultimately describes a set of 'practices, engagements, and stances, and individuals oriented to nerdiness to a greater or lesser degree in their actions' (**Bucholtz, 2001: 85**). What is of exigent interest to this analysis, however, is precisely how these concepts manifest in terms of social and spatial (socio-spatial) relations.

Before examining how nerds relate to their socio-spatial milieu, there are several ways to parse the nerd that relate to key socio-spatial concepts beyond the remit of this analysis that need to be at least acknowledged here - particularly those lines of thought that contextualize the nerd within gender and racial discourses. Such work includes but is not limited to: Christopher Fan's *Not All Nerds* (**2014**), which offers insightful analysis concerning the tendency to perceive nerds as a pseudo-race of their own, a tendency which simultaneously and violently permits the continued exercise of white supremacy in industrial nerd spaces such as Silicon Valley; Dan Leberg's *Self-Reflexive Whiteness: White Rappers, and the Nerds Who Mock Them* (**2012**) which interrogates the overlaps between nerdism and the issues and debates concerning cultural appropriation such as the nerdcore subgenre of hip hop music and culture; Lori Kendall's *"White and Nerdy": Computers, Race, and the Nerd Stereotype* (**2011**) which deftly reassesses the assumption that the nerd subject position is one marked by a lack of agency by unfolding precisely how nerds act as gatekeepers of certain knowledge and vocational opportunities, specifically in the fields of industrialized nerdism in the form of big tech; Ron Eglash's *Race, Sex, and Nerds: From Black Geeks to Asian American*

Hipsters (**2002**) which provides a comprehensive analysis of the confluence of racial issues and debates that are exacerbated and resisted by and through nerd stereotypes; Scout Kristofer Storey's *Identity and Narrative Ownership in Black Nerd and Wicket: A Parody Musical* (**2021**) which explores how race, social class, intellectual property, and tensions concerning ownership of the aforesaid intersect; there are also ongoing online spaces such as *Graveyard Shift Sisters and Black Girl Nerds* which seek to centralize the fandom and activities of black female horror aficionados in the case of the former, and provide a multimedia platform through and in which geek culture and Black feminism can cross-pollinate in the latter; and William Evans and Omar Holmon's *Black Nerd Problems* (**2021**) which draws together numerous strands of thought pertaining to race, gender, sociopolitics, economics, and culture in relation to nerds in a collection of thought-provoking essays.

This paper claims that what ultimately binds all of the above permutations of the nerd is a figurative and literal spatial relation nerds have with the centers of sociological spaces of value and access thereto. In other words, whether or not a misunderstood genius or an invisible malcontent sequestered on the periphery of socio-spatial zones, harboring resentment, envy, or praise, waiting for an opportunity to access these centers, the nerd's *outsiderness* is key. In contemporary digital late capitalism, which this paper sees as marked by, among other things, a paradoxical sense of hyperconnectivity facilitated by communications technology and social media, and an accompanying sense of isolation and malaise, there seem to be a variety of spaces - digital and concrete alike - within which a person may find solace or persecution. The tensions between spaces of interiority and exteriority inherent to the relationship between the digital self (the user avatar) and concrete self (what I think of as the user's source code) similarly emerge in Richard Kelly's 2001 debut *Donnie Darko*.

Kelly's exploration of the ellisions and erasures of Darko's sense of hyperreality and social reality, how the interior spaces of his ostensibly time-traveling mind interact, fail to connect, and pre-empt the phenomena he encounters in the social reality of his lived experience ultimately make Donnie's status as a nerd a socio-spatial phenomenon. Kelly exaggerates this concept of outsiderness to a radical extreme in Donnie: Donnie is not only outside of socially valuable spaces he is, on account of his schizoaffectivity and its effects of his personality, deportment, and interaction with others, outside of the socially accepted spaces of both mind and emotion, but also in his mind being displaced in time, Donnie is also outside of the socially accepted flow of time itself. It is for this reason that I have elected to use *Donnie Darko* as a case study. In his performance as Darko, Jake Gyllenhaal brings these antipodal socio-

spatial contents into stark relief on screen. He is at once aloof, uncertain, obsessive, dedicated, intelligent, passionate, removed, and disengaged. In this way, it would be unsurprising for an average viewer to agree that Donnie is a nerd, if asked. This assumption is predicated on the fact that Donnie seems to be a quintessential nerd in every way possible. However, in his complete disinterest in the socio-spatial value of the various high-school subject positions and the spaces they occupy, Kelly's protagonist and anti-hero raises a very interesting question: is a nerd still a nerd if a nerd does not care about being a nerd one way or the other? If so, then what is a nerd of this kind?

In analyzing these questions, I must note that the spatial dynamics of Donnie's nerdism - both internal and external - are exacerbated by the socio-cultural pressure of high-school that often acts as a crucible for the creation and destruction of nerds in contemporary Western culture. Kelly expertly and, despite the sci-fi conceit of the film's precis, naturalistically shows that such a milieu precipitates a type of paradoxical psycho-emotional pressure as well. On the one hand, this pressure pushes nerds to the periphery of social and physical spaces, whereby aggregations of nerd groups find themselves not only on the margin of social acceptability and popularity, but this peripheriness also manifests topographically in nerds being forced out of spaces of centrality within the infrastructure of school domains and the nuanced complexity of social districts. This can take various forms we are all familiar with: good seating in a cafeteria, auditorium, or being barred access to privileged symbolic sites of a certain elevated social status like sports fields and car-parks. They are forced to eat, convene, escape, evade, and endure the psycho-emotional stresses of their outsider status outside the orbit, remit, or aegis of those whose status – such as jocks – is latently hostile to them. Ultimately, Gyllenhaal's performance of sullenness, interiority, and socio-spatial remove from the centrality of popularity in the film highlights a through-line between the nerd subject position and an indissoluble sense of outsiderness, making both film and character ideal subjects for the current analysis.

From a theoretical standpoint, there is a pathetic fallacy at play here of a specifically psychogeographical kind. I use the term 'psychogeographic' in line with Guy Debord's definition of the phenomenon; namely, as 'the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals' (**Debord, 1955**). The sense of internal psycho-emotional ostracization experienced by nerds manifests physically in the external spaces of sequestration, limns, bourns, and margins outside of which they may feel a temporary sense of pseudo-safety or, perhaps even more recessed, belonging. Exemplified in films such as *Carrie* (1976), *Mean Girls* (2004) and a plethora of others in which the nerd subject position fuses

consistent physical and/or psychological abuse, and a desire for revenge, the quintessential socio-spatial politics of Western high-schools is a trope that is, in all its generic permutations seen in teen dramas, horrors, comedies, and romances, latently psychogeographically determined.

With a view to addressing what I shall call the socio-pathology of the nerd, this paper will perform a close reading of *Donnie Darko* in an attempt to move through and ultimately away from the fundamental banality of quintessential conceptions of the nerd. In doing so, it will seek to add to the theoretical scholarship that examines the nerd as type and phenomena, a form and consequence of a confluence of forces; specifically, the nerd's socio-spatial relations to loneliness, misunderstanding, extreme oscillations of mood and action, and resentment.

Theorizing the Spatio-Sociology of the Nerd: Cliques, crowds, & outsiders

Any theorization of the Western nerd ultimately redounds to an exploration of the socio-spatial relations of middle-school/high-school milieus. Coleman's 1961 study of adolescent society was the first sociological examination of contemporary adolescent status systems in a typical North American middle school milieu (**Bishop et al., 2004: 235**). Coleman's study simultaneously sought to determine what it is like to be denigrated by one's middle school classmates; how common predatory anti-teacher peer culture is in junior high-school; whether it typically carries over into high-school; how peer norms of different crowds in a school are established and maintained; the actants that determine them; how they are enforced; crowd and individual variance in terms of influence in establishing peer norms that apply generally to all students; why some crowds have higher status than others; what happens to crowds and individuals who challenge normative dominance of the dominant/popular crowds; the long-term effects of being popular/unpopular during secondary school; the effects of context and educational policy on norms that prevail in youth culture (**Ibid**).

From Coleman's data, it can be easily deduced that nerds emerge out of and against two dominant types of conglomerate structures of the student body. These are cliques and crowds, each which operate under different, sometimes malleable, conditions determined and manifested by, in, and through different figurative and literal zones of social capital. These zones are as much spatial as they are social. For example, the library is a *physical space* whose *social value* within a typical American high-school milieu sees it as being inextricable from knowledge, physical weakness, insularity, cravenness and therefore nerdiness by default. The socio-spatial capital of

the high-school library contrasts starkly with that of a space like the high-school sports field, for example, which is associated with physical prowess, the openness and adulation of spectatorship and spectacle, communal support, and popularity.

Some terminological definitions are necessary here. Cliques are small groups of friends who maintain close personal relationships where members spend a lot of time with one another. On account of this high interpersonal proximity, members thereof tend to share similar attitudes and behaviors. The small size of the clique is no guarantee of its permanence as sociometric studies like Bishop et. al.'s indicate that there is a consistently high turnover rate in clique membership and affiliation. While the mobility in and out of cliques might intimate an underlying sense of identarian agency, the assignation of a specific type or subtype of belonging is difficult if not impossible to disrupt. As Bishop et al. note, 'once classmates categorize you, changing categorization is difficult. In small schools changing one's crowd essentially involves convincing classmates you have become a different person' (**Bishop et al., 2004: 237**). Crowds are larger 'reputation-based collectives of similarly stereotyped individuals who may or may not spend much time together....Crowd affiliation denotes the primary attitudes and activities with which one is associated by peers....Whereas clique norms are developed within the group, crowd norms are imposed from outside the group and reflect the stereotypic image that peers have of crowd members' (**Ibid: 236**).

In terms of the socio-spatial aspects of his nerdism, Kelly's characterization of Donnie is fascinating and unique because it both adheres to and rebukes Coleman and Bishop's socio-spatial structuralism. This is on account of the fact that Donnie is so preoccupied, so often outside of the space and time of his peers, their squabbles, gripes, desires, and fears that the value of any and all structures within which they emerge, interact, change, and dissipate described by Coleman and Bishop are moot to Donnie. He is a boy snidely mocked by his peers who is simultaneously also perceived as socio-culturally aberrant but altogether brilliant by his detractors as well as both his English and Science teachers (Drew Barrymore and Noah Wyle). At the same time, he is described in the exact same way by his own outsider friends, his sister, mother, and even his therapist. In this sense, the multigestural assignation of Otherness that emerges from a broad network of sources and spaces – the scholastic, the clinical, and the domestic – pervades every moment and strata of Donnie's life. Regardless of whichever space Donnie finds himself in, the liminality of his oddity and the oddity of his liminality remain undimmed. Despite this, however, his status as being on the ascendency or descendancy of popularity and social power is largely irrelevant to him throughout the entire film.

While the power(lessness) of crowds varies from school to school, and at different stages of secondary education, there are, of course, intra-subjective interlopers: liminal figures who do not properly, rightly, or adequately adhere to or embody any of the common crowd identities, nor their respective clique subsets. This group, which researchers of peer culture refer to as 'the normals', typically experience and exert a nominal, average status and popularity (**Bishop et al., 2004: 237**). Despite his outsider status, Donnie is shown to have a very rich personal history, explored and presented to the viewer through the robust interiority of Donnie's *innenwelt*, which is portrayed abstractly in dream sequences and premonitions, as well as through his concrete interpersonal interactions: such as his intimate conversations with his therapist Dr. Lilian Thurman (Katherine Ross) who is treating Donnie for schizophrenic symptoms, mother (Mary McDonnell), love interest Gretchen Ross (Jena Malone), and small clique of friends (Ronald Stone, Gary Lundy, and Alex Greenwald). As such, within the socio-spatial zones of value within his high-school milieu, which subtends the suburban domesticity of his middle-class life outside of school, Donnie could be described, paradoxically, as a 'normal': as an individual both above and below average, a type of Outsider of outsiders. I will comment more on this later.

For now, let us acknowledge the fact that despite Donnie's strange and indeed strained relationship with *external* spatio-social centrality, Kelly lays the intricacies of Donnie's detailed, turbulent, and confusing psycho-emotional interior space bare. This transparency between inner and outer spaces which the omniscient gaze of the viewer has access to does not guarantee comprehension of what that gaze perceives. Often, the viewer is just as confused about Donnie's socio-spatial relation to fundamental forces of nature in space and time as Donnie is about both himself and his relation to the same forces. To the other characters of the film, Donnie is near or completely unfathomable. He belongs to no clique or crowd, suffers no authority save that of a mysterious anthropomorphic bunny that only he can see: a being impelling him to not only consider grand philosophical and scientific phenomena including eschatology and time travel, but fear and prepare for the end of the world itself. As a result, one could argue that Donnie simply does not figuratively and literally have time to worry about his reputation, the latest trends, the status and security of the clique and crowd affiliations of his classmates, nor what that means or entails at any given time within the socio-spatial zones he navigates.

In this way, Donnie is truly *outside* scholastic space-time and the socio-spatial relations to districts of social value they govern. He moves through but never settles or is settled in a plethora of socio-spatial zones. These include domestic spaces, scholastic spaces, therapeutic spaces, and broader social spaces, such as the one he and Gretchen inhabit when the

pair attend a midnight showing of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* in, unsurprisingly, an empty local movie theater. He also maintains a periphery space in the form of an abandoned plot of land where he and his friends shoot pellets at empty cans, debate the sexual life of the Smurfs, and deliberate on the odd, sad existence of another displaced socio-spatial outsider, author, and potential time-traveler Robertta Sparrow a.k.a Lady Death (Patience Cleveland). Here, Donnie's Outside-of-outsiderness ruptures the assignation of 'nerd' and tends, in its seemingly total disinterestedness in the present, and the tenuous hold on various quotidian spaces that make up his life marked by an essential sense of remove or recession, toward a type of misanthropy-by-dissociation. For Donnie, the interior (and perhaps even inter-dimensional) spaces of his imagination and emotions are of far greater importance to him than the physical spaces of his life and whatever social capital they can educe.

Theorizing the Spatio-Sociology of Donnie Darko: Nerd, outsider, loner

Let me open this section with two broad questions: first, what is the relation between being a nerd and suffering under a particular pathology, in Donnie's case, schizophrenia, for which he is seriously medicated? Second, how does Donnie's pathology influence not only his ostensible displays of nerdishness discussed above, but his relationship with space in general? Donnie's relation to external and internal spaces is a central part of Kelly's thematically dense text. Jonathan Eig, describes the film as a agglomeration of themes including 'time travel, God, free will, education, and mental illness [as well as] child abuse, ageism, body type, and cultism' (**Eig, 2003**). Critics like Alex Blazer assert that Kelly approaches these themes 'without glorifying them; and instead asserts the power of art to traverse coming-of-age anxiety, psychotic fragmentation, and death itself' (**Blazer, 2015: 209**).

Like the nerd within the high-school milieu, the question of the veracity of who Donnie is and what he experiences, beyond being simply abject, remains a mercurial mystery. To this end, Eig notes that Donnie is a hero who 'does not know the true nature of his identity and so is not simply keeping a secret from us. And the audience [...] are not let in on a secret the hero does not know' (**Eig, 2003**). Blazer makes a similar point albeit one which is specifically spatial in nature, asking 'whether the world of *Donnie Darko* (the film) a dream, a hallucination, reality, or merely one reality among multiple universes? Does Donnie Darko (the character) sleep, delude, wake, or imagine?' (**Blazer, 2015: 209**). However, at the center of the film's handling of socio-spatial relations is a presiding kernel of a theme: the paradoxical disillusionment of a potentially hallucinatory teenager surrounded by hypocrisy at every level and in every space his life

subtends – from the familial to scholastic, the amorous, clinical, and even hallucinatory space (**Eig, 2003**). Parsed through various spaces in this way, this theme offers a deep dive into the socio-spatial liminality of the nerd as maladaptive and, ostensibly, permanently displaced within a range of relationships, each with different stakes, which manifest differently in different internal and external spaces.

Kelly's dramatization of Donnie's life, its complexities, pleasures, and pains, glamorizes a strange outsider with latently destructive proclivities, but euphemizes his potential danger through science fiction. Geoff Klock makes a similar observation by noting how *Donnie Darko* is a bildungsroman complicated by time-travel tropes that 'critiques reductive, empty, shallow, suburban surface life' (**Klock, n.d**). Other commentators like Megan Hess posit that the film has nothing to do with time-travel at all, that none of the film's action is 'real' externally to Donnie's internal experience, and as such, the film *in toto* is, despite the fact that Dr. Thurman admits to prescribing placebos in the course of the film, 'just part of a schizophrenic episode that Donnie [has]' (**Hess, 2016**). Such a position is buttressed by the fact that one of the first things the audience learns about Donnie is that he has stopped taking his medication. This allows the audience to conclude that the audiovisual hallucinations Donnie experiences are purely biochemical responses to the interruption of his treatment and, as a result, all perception of socio-spatial phenomena filtered through Donnie's experiences thereof is radically unreliable. However, this sense of hermeneutic uncertainty and play is not only predicated on the post-modern manifold of narrative interpretations available to the viewer, but on the fact that Donnie is subject to a regime of both analysis and medication.

However, the central manifestation of this unreliability takes the form of Donnie's relationship and interaction with Frank (James Duval). One of, if not the most, significant questions the film raises is whether or not Frank is a schizophrenic hallucination. Though perhaps not obviously, this question is actually a deeply spatial one. In the director's cut of the film, Kelly implies that Frank is perhaps an avatar, conduit, or manifestation of a higher cosmic intelligence that exists alongside or over the space of Donnie's diegesis, in a tangent one. As such, 'the director's cut offers the possibility that Donnie's experience of Frank stems from the space outside of his consciousness rather than originating from within' (**Jordan, 2009: 49**). The implication of this higher dimensional hyperspatiality is that the socio-spatial relations of the lower quotidian dimension in which Donnie lives out a strange, stunted, reclusive, yet unpredictable social life despite the predictability of its middle class Americana backdrop is also of lower priority to him. Despite the fact that much of what Donnie experiences in this space does not make ostensible sense to him - liquid pathways

emerging from the torsos of individuals, the liquefaction of mirrored surfaces, and black outs - he is certain that the answers to life's questions are contained in the hallucinatory space (one he treads alone with Frank), not in the spaces of high school or suburbia.

In the socio-spatial gyre that Donnie finds himself in, one that is compounded by inter-dimensionality, Blazer rightly draws attention to the film's fundamental sense of conceptual disorientation and identarian multiplicity - as evidenced in the fact that Donnie is very different behaviorally in different spaces: when he is in English class (disinterested or bold, intelligent, and assertive), with his therapist (confused, clinically depressed, puerile), with his mother (despondent and disrespectful), with Frank (a bleary-eyed time-traveler lost in the unfolding concatenation of disjointed moments), and Gretchen (adroit and tender) (**Blazer, 2015: 208**). The radical implication here is that while the self-identification or assignation of belonging to a specific socio-spatially determined identity can afford comfort and consternation both, it binds the individual to that socio-spatial zone, its rules, requirements, symbols, behaviors, and performativity. It sequesters the mercurial possibilities of becoming that, ironically, are recursively associated with youth and adolescence. It is therefore precisely because Donnie is a 'bad nerd', a 'half nerd', 'not quite a nerd' on account of his unwavering disinterest in the identity that he is and can be many things, in many spaces, to many people.

In analyzing *Donnie Darko*'s interdimensional play of themes across internal and external spaces, it is helpful to assess what information Kelly provides about Donnie's personality and how that sets up the audience's perception and understanding of the character as nerd or not. Initially, Donnie is presented as being rather unsympathetic, specifically as abrasive, sullen, and rude. At a dinner scene that opens the film, Donnie calls his mother a bitch. Later, at his high-school bus stop, Donnie is coarse, ostensibly uncaring, perhaps even latently cruel. While the viewer's reaction might be aptly described as a mix of intrigued and hostile in response to Donnie's behavior and what that may suggest about who he is, as the film progresses, this changes. Whether one sees Donnie as sympathetic, sad, sequestered, stunted, sick or stifled by the realism with which Kelly depicts teenage life in late '80s American suburbia, Donnie:

> *…reveals his intelligence, bravery, and passion. He gets a friend in Frank and a girlfriend in Gretchen. He even seems to find that time travel may answer the questions of morality and free will which plague him [...] Even his death is shown as positive. [Donnie states, in earnest] 'I hope that when the world comes to an end, I can breathe a sigh of relief because there will be so much to look forward to'.* (**Eig, 2003**).

In a sense, this ostensibly thanatotic desire for experiences divorced from the hypocrisies and inconsistencies of a world he feels bound in, one whose ultimately meaningless socio-spatial structures and zones of value are on the verge of an apocalypse he cannot prevent, is perhaps the non-nerdiest thing about Donnie.

This seemingly passive *amor fati* is countermanded by the presence of an underlying volatility within Donnie, regardless of its provenance – clinical imbalance or inter-dimensional intervention. One notable scene of this kind involves Donnie committing a serious act of arson. Ostensibly, this act is irredeemably destructive – an addled youth, selfish and uncaring, burning down an innocent and reputable, albeit insufferably caricatural and ostensibly disingenuous, man's house. Donnie's apparent amoralism is redeemed as later it is revealed that Cunningham (Patrick Swayze) has been a purveyor of child pornography. To some viewers, Donnie therefore attains a measure of righteousness and personal vindication in and through destruction. This may be a convenient coincidence to yet other viewers. However, the point of duplicity that Eig comments on relates to the duality of the figure and subject position of the nerd itself: 'Darko's plot indicates there is often little distinction between what we perceive as good and what we perceive as evil' (**Eig, 2003**). Interestingly, this entire act of arson occurs outside of the space of Donnie's conscious mind and the space of his volition and agency. This makes the moral rectitude of this passive immoral act without a sense of direct meaning to Donnie himself. Being outside of the basic socio-spatial zone of full consciousness, the ostensible moral and emotional ambivalence with which Donnie carries out the act of arson is as ambivalent as Donnie's waking regard for the socio-spatial zones of school and suburb in which the act occurs. Despite this seemingly radical ambivalence, a sort of anti-socio-spatiality, or supra-socio-spatiality, both the theatrical and director's cuts of the film tend to frame Donnie, his experiences and actions, in a sympathetic light. In contrast to this seemingly nihilistic solipsism, in one scene Donnie corners Cherita Chan (Jolene Purdy), a pariah in their school harboring a secret infatuation for/with Donnie, and says earnestly to her 'I promise that one day everything's going to be better for you' (**Kelly, 2001**). This powerful and seemingly uncharacteristic and surprisingly sudden display of altruism, empathy, and a mutual understanding of marginalization might suggest that beneath the multitude of behavioral modes he expresses, Donnie is ultimately a 'good kid'. In another example, during one of his therapy sessions, Dr. Thurman asks Donnie about his feelings concerning death and solitude. She asks him whether he feels alone in that very moment the question is asked, to which Donnie answers with earnest uncertainty, that he would like to believe he is not, but that he has never seen any proof contrariwise, so he considers the question both absurd and

moot. Dr. Thurman follows up by asking: 'the search for God is absurd?' to which Donnie answers 'it is if everyone dies alone.' Dr. Thurman then asks: 'does that scare you?' to which Donnie answers 'I don't wanna be alone' (**Ibid**). In this scene, a viewer may be driven to empathy by the earnestness of Gyllenhaal's moving performance of a teenager grappling with his own mortality, but also his strangely un-egotistical, earnest belief that he can prevent not only his own death, but the end of the world itself.

This sense of isolation and paradoxically nihilistic fear, and their latent tension with Donnie's obvious assertiveness and intellectual vigor, extends and is intensified by his domestic situation. In one scene, Donnie's mother attempts to comfort and (re)connect with her disturbed son. She states 'you know, it would be nice to look at you some time and see my son. I don't recognize this person today' to which the frustrated and antagonistic youth responds by calling her a 'bitch' (**Ibid**). As stated above, these behavioral expressions of what we can now begin to concretely conceptualize as pseudo or even anti-nerdism are socio-spatial phenomena. Donnie's latent volatility, as well his irrevocable loneliness, take different shapes and hues in different spaces, and are expressed variously in and through different relationships. When alone, Donnie might be seen as an example of a type of transcendental Nietzschean loneliness. With his friends, he appears to be the misunderstood genius whose intellect and its seemingly inextricable boredom and disillusionment with reductive social and educational ideologies at school leaves him permanently frustrated and terse. Within the space of his family bonds, Donnie is perhaps best described as symbolic of the loneliness experienced by a so-called 'problem child'. Within the amorous space of his and Gretchen's mutual attraction, Gretchen regards Donnie as attractive, strange, and unique specifically because of his loneliness. Gretchen, like Donnie, cares little for how she is perceived and fits in (or does not). It should be noted that the reason Gretchen is so important to Donnie in specifically socio-spatial terms is due to her ironic socio-spatial status. While Gretchen is the most important aspect of Donnie's young life, she emerges from a space which is devoid of value for him; namely their shared high school milieu against which both share a critical disinterest.

Donnie's non-socio-spatially conformist encounter with the cruelties, paradoxes, and aporias of life draws together themes of self-sacrifice, martyrdom, violence, and suicide. While Donnie is indeed an outcast, he is not a submissive one. He is intelligent, well-spoken, outspoken, and sure. Though intellectually engaged, he is awkward in his forwardness with Gretchen, but successful therein. She is receptive to him, they trust one another. In contrast to the traditional nerd described at the beginning of this analysis, Donnie has a specific kind of outsider charm. One that is not concerned with being humiliated by or intimidating or harassing other

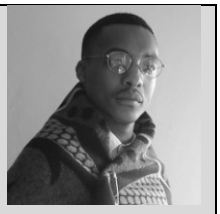
students. Equally, he is not intimidated by any other student, save perhaps for Gretchen, whom he is attracted to. However, the clear intensity and advancement of his intellect is shown to intimidate others, for example during his masterfully improvised hermeneutic insights into a passage of *The Destructors* being studied in Karen Pomeroy's English literature class.

Whenever it does emerge, Donnie's aggressivity is directed almost entirely toward what he deems to be instances of fakery and disingenuousness that indelibly mark the typified flows of power and value in the socio-spatial structures of his school and his home. Jocks and Preps are beneath Donnie's ire, the target of which is precisely the system that produces and perpetuates types of absolutist identarian delineations, and over simplifications of this kind represented by Cunningham's Love/Fear binary. Nor does Donnie spend his highly idiosyncratic passion seeking to gain approval and status by mocking his school's unpopular crowds – the Goths, Freaks, and Punks to which he and his cadre are socio-spatially adjacent to. Donnie's pseudo-clique of outcasts have no specific individual within their cohort to intervene in defense on Donnie's behalf because Donnie, despite his *angoisse* and ennui, does not require it. As their unofficial, reluctant leader, Donnie takes it upon himself to fight his battles individually and for no purpose other than righteous, passionate youthful indignation. He has no inclination to destroy this system because he is engaged in a puzzle in a higher dimensional space upon which the continuation of the meaningless of the lower socio-spatially determined dimension depends. In this way, neither Donnie nor his friends are cowards in the way stereotypically expected of nerds. Donnie is also popular enough, despite his outsider status, to find pleasure, respite, and connection in this space. He and Gretchen are invited to a raucous Halloween party during which the pair are physically intimate with one another. These nerd/anti-nerd paradoxes point to a taxonomical irony with Donnie: based on his clear status as an outsider, but an atypical one, Donnie would, according to Bishop et al.'s framework examined above, be best described as a 'normal' on account of his liminality – and yet, there is clearly nothing normal about Donnie.

Conclusion: Donnie Darko & The socio-spatial relations of nerds, outsiders, and loners

The above analysis of Donnie ultimately suggests that there is an important difference between the identarian positions and socio-spatial value of nerds, outsiders, and loners. On the one hand, Donnie is not a nerd precisely because he does not direct his attention and care to the various socio-spatially determined points of interest and disinterest that a traditional nerd in a typical North American high school milieu would. Nerds of a traditional kind value the socio-spatial dynamics of high schools

because within said spaces, being a part of a group - even a maligned, low prestige group - affords one a sense of community, shared experience (joy and hardship), and safety, regardless of how meagre. In this sense, the socio-spatial dynamics of the high school milieu are just as important to a jock as they are to a nerd. A loner, on the other hand, finds no value in these spaces, can endure, permeate, and/or ignore them all but entirely. They afford a loner no protection, no community, no purchase on popularity precisely because these affordances are valueless to a loner. What studying Donnie as a nerd reveals is the key difference between nerds, outsiders and loners predicated ultimately on each type's socio-spatial relations to zones of value. While a nerd might see this valuelessness as a terrifying untethering, an outsider and loner would see it as an opportunity, a freedom to try a variety of becomings whose value cannot be circumscribed by any single or joint zone(s) of socio-spatial structure.



Aside from lecturing full-time in the HSS Department of Ashesi University, Kwasu David Tembo's research interests include – but are not limited to – comics studies, literary theory and criticism, philosophy, particularly the so-called 'prophets of extremity' – Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida. He has published on Christopher Nolan's The Prestige, in *The Cinema of Christopher Nolan: Imagining the Impossible*, ed. Jacqueline Furby and Stuart Joy (Columbia UP, 2015), and on Superman, in *Postscriptum: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Literary Studies* (2017).

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Endnotes

[i] Examples of films featuring nerds and loners as protagonists include but are not limited to: *Psycho* (1960); *Peeping Tom* (1960); *Bowling for Columbine* (2002); *Her* (2013); *Paterson* (2016), *I Don't Feel At Home In This World Anymore* (2017), *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Ex Machina* (2014), *The Machinist* (2004), *Blade Runner* (1982), *Stoker* (2013), *Youth in Revolt* (2009); and *Brick* (2005).

Loneliness as the New Human Condition in Murakami Ryū's In za miso sūpu: Otaku-ness, space, violence and sexuality

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Abstract

This article analyses how loneliness is depicted as a diagnosis of the time in Murakami Ryū's (born 1952) hard-boiled novel In za miso sūpu (In the miso soup). Three conceptualisations of loneliness are hermeneutically analysed to show how loneliness is narrated and contextualised. As the analysis reveals, loneliness functions as an utterance of crisis experiences and of perceived insecurities and highlights socio-psychological phenomena considered characteristic of 1990s Japan.

Keywords: Japanese literature; Heisei literature; loneliness; Murakami Ryū; Kabuki-chō; Tokyo; otaku

On Loneliness in Early Heisei Japan

Until the 1990s, contemporary Japan was considered to be characterised by continuous economic growth. For a large number of people in Japan, economic strength enabled improvements in their living conditions, mass consumption and upward mobility. Accordingly, for many decades a narrative of progress through growth and a general middle-class consciousness (sōchūryū ishiki) were dominant. However, the assumption of a large middle class in Japan—behind which social and gender inequalities always already existed—was considered a guarantor of political and social stability (**Schad-Seifert, 2007: 105–106**).

Since the beginning of the 1990s, the self-image of Japan as a middle-class society has been shaken and a sense of crisis began to sediment into the collective consciousness. The bursting of the Japanese bubble economy and the long-lasting economic recession that followed contributed significantly to it. Due to the dissolution of certainties long considered guaranteed the Japanese contemporary period is perceived as a (ongoing) state of uncertainty. The—at times—overburdening uncertainty and an increasing desideratum for adjustment culminate in stagnation.

With regard to growing socio-economic differences in contemporary Japan, in the late 1990s the term 'kakusa shakai' emerged in the Japanese economics and sociology and was also widely adopted in non-Japanese research on Japan. It refers to the social decline of large parts of the population, the individual perception of crisis, and thus increasing social inequality (see **Allison, 2013; Baldwin & Allison, 2015, Chiavacci & Hommerich, 2016; Goodman et al., 2012; Oguma, 1995; Schad-Seifert, 2007; Zielenziger, 2007**). A sense of uncertainty and differences was further reinforced by (1) an increasing pressure of globalisation; (2) multiple traumatic shocks, such as the poison gas attack by Aum Shinrikyō in the Tokyo underground (1995), the Kōbe earthquake (1995) and the triple disaster in Tōhoku (2011); and (3) demographic change that is the direct consequence of Japan being considered the world's first super aged society since 2005 (according to the United Nations definition) and at the same time facing a significant decline in births. Socio-economic differences intertwined with various further differences—such as gender, sexuality, and urban-rural disparities—and display an enormous impact on the socio-cultural climate.

The literature of Heisei Japan (1989–2019) is considered to reflect on these differences, on uncertainties and on multiple experiences of crisis. The highly heterogeneous Heisei literature is characterised, inter alia, by variously expressed feelings of unease, boredom and loneliness, the emergence of a new literature of the precarious, an increased emphasis on transgressions (ekkyōsei) and global orientation (**Gebhardt, 2010; Gebhardt et al., 2019; Iwata-Weickgenannt & Rosenbaum, 2014; Kawamura, 2009; Tan, 2019; Urata, 2015**). Countless works tell of characters who are drawn as deviating from the norm. These deviations range from anti-social behaviour, via postponed adulthood, to self-injurious practices, avoidance of interpersonal interactions, and to highly peculiar patterns of behaviour and thought. The radicalness with which these characters are depicted is notable, as it can be read as an expression of unease and coincides with a refusal to conform. In this they point directly to the world into which they are placed, as well as to its nature and structures. The literary critic Urata thus notes that not only has literature and the interest in literature changed thoroughly, but that the world in which literature is created has also undergone a fundamental transformation:

> *Since the beginning of the Heisei era, the interest in literature seems to have changed drastically: Creole culture, which reflects a multitude of racial and ethnic groups, has come into the limelight, and cross-border literature, which reflects the borderlessness of exile, refuge and migration, has attracted attention. As symbolised by the fall of the Berlin wall, the Cold War has imploded and the world map has changed drastically. At the same time, the phenomenon of economic globalisation has accelerated the movement of people across borders. There has also been an increase in the number of asylum seekers and refugees as a result of regional conflicts and the spread of terrorism. In addition, people from all over the world are increasingly enjoying cross-border travel.* (**Urata, 2015: 338**)

Further, literary depictions of contemporary Japan published during the 1990s are overshadowed by the economic crisis and the traumatic experiences of 1995. They reflect on that decade's disillusionment and promote loneliness as their leitmotif. In Japan, too, loneliness evolved into being a key issue in literature and culture—at least since the modern era (i.e. since the second half of the 19th century)—, and likewise is crucial to scholarly and general discourse (**Fleischer-Heininger & Schulz, 2020: 337–42**). As modernity is closely linked to several manifestations of social disintegration—such as urbanization, domestic migration, and the erosion of families and communities—that are most visible in times perceived as caesuras and characterised by various transformations and crises, it is not at all surprising that in Heisei Japan a new boom in loneliness is on the

horizon. Allison, thus, even describes various forms of loneliness as the 'new human condition for Japan/ese in the 21st century' (**Allison, 2012: 349**). Loneliness now increasingly appears as an overall social phenomenon that leaves no area of life and no field of interpersonal interaction untouched. It is no longer limited to certain processes (such as modernisation from the second half of the 19th century onwards) or social groups (such as the elderly, since the post-war period), but appears to be universalised. Loneliness is revealed as part of a reality of life to which not only everyone can relate, but also as a cross-linking of various developments and manifestations of late modernity.

I argue that in the hard-boiled novel In za miso sūpu (1997, trans. In the miso soup, 2003) by Murakami Ryū (born 1952) loneliness functions as a diagnosis of the time. By analysing motifs and content I aim to investigate how loneliness that is omnipresent in contemporary Japan and its literature in In za miso sūpu serves to negotiate recent tendencies and deficits of early Heisei Japan. I analyse three conceptualisations of loneliness that might be considered both representative of Heisei period literature and central to the novel and its analysis. I look at how the clichéd image of an otaku—a Japanese-style nerd—is created to gain entry into the subculture of Tokyo's nightlife, to—as a character who does not conform to social normativity and has to be considered a figure of the social-cultural margins—discuss the 'other' in the 'own' and to display deficiencies in contemporary Japan. I examine places as major constituents of identities (as a sense of belonging) and as symbols of a nostalgic longing to the past which in itself states insecurity and loneliness of contemporary Japan. Finally, I analyse how drastic and at times exaggerated depictions of violence and sexuality are operationalised as expressions of alienation, existential threatening and a loneliness contingent on underlying social structures.

Murakami Ryū's In za miso sūpu and Early Heisei Japan

Murakami Ryū is one of the most provocative and polarizing writers of contemporary Japan. His fiction constantly oscillates between the conventions of the 'bundan' (i.e. the literary world that as an informal network of writers, literary critics and publishers, etc. exerts a decisive influence on the success of works and (up-and-coming) authors, especially of 'high literature') and the escapism of popular literature. Right from the beginning of his literary career, Murakami's books were bestsellers and won him numerous awards. His first novel Kagirinaku tōmei ni chikai burū (1976, trans. Almost Transparent Blue, 1977)—a harsh critique 'on the overdetermined power relations between Japan and the United States' (**Inoue, 2016: 155**)—was awarded the most prestigious prize for 'high literature', the Akutagawa Prize. Then again, as editor of his own email

magazine Japan Mail Media (JMM), as (co)host of several television shows and as producer of music and ebooks (Murakami Ryū denshibon seisakusho, since 2013) he bypassed the rules of Japan's literary mainstream. In this sense, Murakami is to be seen as a pioneer of a literature that does not conform to attributions and that appears as prototypical for the eclecticism and the border-crossings of Heisei literature. He is nevertheless a controversial author who has repeatedly been criticised for conservative or even right-wing tendencies—for example, with regard to the novels Koinrokkā beibīzu (1980, trans. Coin Locker Babies) and Gofungo no sekai (1994, trans. The World in Five Minutes From Now). In za miso sūpu's harsh criticism of Japan is also to be seen in this respect.

In za miso sūpu, like most of Murakami's novels, is based both on highly performative depictions of violence and sexuality, and on frequent references to the practices of global popular culture. The novel's plot is set in the metropolitan area of Tokyo. Mainly it takes place in the nightlife district Kabuki-chō, located in Tokyo's Shinjuku ward. Temporally, the novel is set in the immediate present (at the time of its release). With the exception of minor analepses, the narrative is organised chronologically. The language is simple and straightforward. The text critically (and often polemically) discusses what it means to be human in late modern Japan.

In za miso sūpu is told by the 20-year-old first-person narrator Kenji who works as an unlicensed guide to the red-light districts of Tokyo and as such encounters a notorious and psychopathic killer. On the morning of December 29, the US-American traveller Frank calls Kenji for the first time and books his services until New Year's Eve. Frank's appearance coincides with several brutal murders: Violence begins to sneak into Kenji's life when during Frank's first telephone call, he reads that a high-school prostitute is found murdered in Kabuki-chō (**Murakami, 2005: 10**). Later, a homeless man is killed and burned at a batting centre in Kabuki-chō, a place Kenji had visited with Frank. The story peaks when Kenji is forced to witness Frank's brutal killing of all guests and staff at a nightclub. The sole reason why Frank does not kill Kenji as well is that he sees him as a man who has become a loyal friend, but has simultaneously retained a stable autonomous self and is—in contrast to most other characters—capable of love. In Frank's eyes, Kenji thus stands for the possibility of interpersonal connectedness and counters loneliness.

Kenji spends his life as a freeter (furītā, i.e. a person who, at the age of 15 to 34 years, is either underemployed or unemployed (excluding housewives and students)). He considers his English to be 'far from perfect', but works as a 'nightlife guide' for tourists (**Murakami, 2005: 9**):

> *Since AIDS, the sex industry hasn't exactly welcomed foreigners with open arms—in fact, most of the clubs are pretty blatant about refusing service to gaijin—but lots of visitors from overseas are still determined to play, and they're the ones who pay me to guide them to relatively safe cabarets and massage parlors and S&M bars and 'soaplands' and what have you. I'm not employed by a company and don't even have an office, but by running a simple ad in an English-language tourist magazine I make enough to rent a nice studio apartment in Meguro, take my girl out for Korean barbecue once in a while, and listen to the music I like and read the things I want to read.* (**Murakami, 2005: 9**)

Living in Meguro (approximately 3.6 miles from Shinjuku) distances Kenji from the world of his professional life in Kabuki-chō. A further disruption in Kenji's lived-in world can be identified in his family's home in Shizuoka Prefecture. There, some 180 kilometres away from Tokyo, his mother 'runs a little clothes shop', assuming that her son is 'enrolled in a college preparation course' (**Murakami, 2005: 9–10**). Kenji rejects his mother's aspirations, which rely on a hope of social advancement via education and him domestically migrating to the metropolitan area of Tokyo. He matches a type of outsider that is widespread in Japanese literature of the 1990s: the 'moratorium person' (moratoriamu ningen). He prolongs his adolescence. Relying on psychological procrastination, he tries to avoid social responsibility. (cf. **Gebhardt, 2010: 272; Straub, 2002: 60–61**).

To Kenji, too, the life he lives seems neither satisfying nor viable in the long run. He hopes to 'save up a fair amount of money to go to America' (**Murakami, 2002: 10**). While this hope is just another way for him to remain passive, he is very aware that in his own interest he should change his lifestyle: 'Most of the guys I know who've done this job a long-time sort of worn thin—not physically run down, but like something's eroded away inside. Even when you're talking to them face to face you have this feeling of not connecting, as if the words just pass right through them' (**Ibid: 19**).

In In za miso sūpu Frank is the only character who considers himself as belonging to the (upper) middle class. He claims to be a tourist from the USA, but occasionally falls into a 'strange British accent' (**Ibid: 84**). He tells Kenji that he imports Toyota radiators from Southeast Asia and that he 'came to finalize the licensing agreement' (**Ibid: 13**). This is not plausible to Kenji: Frank's hotel as well as his clothing are much too cheap (**Ibid: 13**). From their first meeting on, Kenji feels that he can neither trust Frank's words nor his facial expressions and feature.

> *It was a very average sort of face, but you couldn't have judged his age from it. Depending on the angle of the light, one moment he looked like he could be in his twenties, and the next in his forties or even fifties. (…) The skin. It looked almost artificial, as if he'd been horribly burned and*

> *the doctors had resurfaced his face with this fairly realistic man-made material.* (**Murakami, 2002: 12**)

Frank's face appears to Kenji like an empty but versatile projection surface. On the one hand, he is isolated from people and their natural interactions; on the other hand, he is almost arbitrarily adjustable and thus able to connect with anyone at any time.

Beyond the character level In za miso sūpu is based on a dichotomy of the 'other' (US-America)—using the terms American and foreigner ('gai(koku)jin') almost synonymously—and the 'own' (Japan). The dichotomy of Japan and America is already implied in the novel's English-language title, which is written in the syllabic katakana-alphabet; it pervades the novel as a leitmotif and in culturalistic boldness.

The novel is a harsh critique of early Heisei Japan that is depicted as saturated, disillusioned and desolated. The 'middle-class' Japanese are drawn as being driven without serious reason. Their concerns are presented as what might be called 'first-world problems'. They live in a state of relative prosperity and security, but feel insecure and threatened by fears of decline and diffuse dangers. They appear both resigned and ossified. They are less and less capable to relate to others and the world around them.

In his thoughts, Kenji recapitulates questions that his foreign clients continually ask him and that enable him to see Japan as seen from an outside perspective:

> *Kenji, why are there so many vending machines? Who needs them, with convenience stores everywhere you turn? And why do you need so many different types of canned coffee and juice and sports drinks? (…) Japan is one of the richest countries in the world, why do you have this karoshi problem, people literally working themselves to death? Or: Girls from poor Asian countries I can understand, but why do high-school girls in a country as wealthy as Japan prostitute themselves? Or: Wherever you go in the world, people work in order to make their families happy, so why doesn't anybody in Japan complain about the tanshin-funin system that sends businessmen off to live on their own in other cities or countries?* (**Murakami, 2005: 43**)

Unacceptable living and working conditions appear to counterbalanced by amenities that seem alienating and dispensable. Against the backdrop of post-growth Japanese society, the novel's characters are depicted as dealing with both a longing for a fortune and stability once guaranteed during the decades of economically (high) growth, during which the same conditions have been shaped not insignificantly, and a struggle to find their way in times of crisis.

Throughout the novel, Kenji repeatedly digests Frank's critique of Japan and approves to it. However, he neither engages in an actual controversial discussion about it, nor does he defend, relativise or contextualise any aspect criticized by the US-American. It is only in the closing sequence where Frank declares the life of homeless people unworthy living that Kenji begins to dissent to Frank (**Murakami, 2005: 178**). Kenji shares most of Frank's sentiments and cites examples that support his claims. Nevertheless, he keeps red lines. Frank's criticism to him thus appears to be valid in essence, even though it is clearly exaggerated.

Not Exactly in an Otaku's Shoes: Ostensible otaku-ness as a gate-opener and a measure of deficiencies in early Heisei Japan

From the start, In za miso sūpu reads as a negotiation of identities. In the very first sentences, Kenji contemplates on how to say 'My name is …' in Japanese and thus directs the readers' focus on the impact of language on the formation of one's individual identity.

> *My name is Kenji.*
>
> *As I pronounced these words in English I wondered why we have so many ways of saying the same thing in Japanese. Hard-boiled: Ore no namae wa Kenji da. Polite: Watashi wa Kenji to moshimasu. Casual: Boku wa Kenji. Gay: Atashi Kenji 'te iu no yo!* (**Murakami, 2005: 9**)

Ralph McCarthy, who translated the novel into English, decided to keep original phrases in transliterated Japanese. Therefore, he had to add further information such as 'hard-boiled' or 'polite'. These are not necessary in Murakami's original text. Due to the novel's highly performative quality and by means of semantics the text shows rather than discusses forms of constructing socio-cultural identity in Japanese (**Murakami, 1998: 6**).

Identity here is first constructed through the self-addressing personal pronoun. 'Watashi', 'boku', 'ore', 'atashi': they all literally mean 'I'. But each of these terms indicates its own specific degree of (im)politeness and gender conventions. By letting Kenji consider these aspects, Murakami allows to glimpse at various identity markers and their semantic and linguistic transmission.

Further, these few lines of text illustrate that identity is thus shaped in interplay with the 'other'. Each way of saying 'My name is …' described here refers to a distinct social context and group. These references in the novel's opening sequence already suggests that the self-association with and the admission to certain (subcultural) groups is significantly controlled by language.

Ostensible otaku-ness in In za miso sūpu is a pivotal device for the construction and communication of identity on an individual level. It also serves to access Tokyo's nightlife subculture and to reflect on the condition of contemporary Japan. Although the word otaku does not appear once in the entire novel, due to Frank's self-fashioning the otaku is constantly represented as a cliché.

The otaku is a distinct form of the nerd inherent to Japanese literature and culture. In its current usage, the term otaku can be traced back to the early 1980s (**Morikawa, 2012**). This is well before on an international scale nerds entered the mainstream media through popular formats such as The Big Bang Theory (2007–2019). Its history reaches back far less than that of the nerd, which was already in use in 1950, and first representations of the nerd on TV (cf. **Lane, 2018**).

The evolution of the Japanese term otaku is as complex as that of the English term nerd. It has undergone various changes and reinterpretations. The otaku subculture is highly heterogeneous. Basically, an otaku is regarded as a person with an enormous interest in one special field—such as public transport, music, anime/manga or programming. An otaku is often considered an outsider, a person with a barely developed social life and difficulties in dealing with people (**Morikawa, 2012; Galbraith, 2015b: 205**).

For the general public otaku appear to have predominantly negative connotations. This still widespread, stereotypical assessment results from the assumption that otaku are fundamentally different, engage in deviant sexualities and are attracted to images of prepubescent girls. With regard to sexuality, the perspective on otaku not only derives from—as Galbraith puts it—a 'prehistory of "otaku" sexuality' (**Galbraith 2015b: 205**), but also from criminals who, for instance because of their media consumption, are considered otaku. Probably one of the best-known perpetrators of this nature is the serial killer Miyazaki Tsutomu (1962–2018), who brutally murdered, posthumously abused and dismembered four girls of pre-/primary-school age. On the contrary, those who, e.g. associate themselves as otaku or share an understanding that links otaku with a globally circulating popular culture made in Japan, consider otaku as positive. Otaku culture, thus, also serves as a means of feeling affiliation with a group and of constituting a sense of belonging (cf. **Galbraith, 2015b; Galbraith et al., 2015; Morikawa, 2012**).

The otaku has also made its way into contemporary Japanese literature. Yet, both the respective works per se and the otaku characters portrayed are extremely heterogeneous. They range from stories of normalisation to those of emancipation. Other works retell or recontextualise the nerd (cf.

Cervelli's article on Summer Wars in this issue). Therefore, it cannot be assumed that there is such a thing as the otaku in Japanese literature.

Densha otoko (**2004, Train Man, 2004),** a prominent and widely cited work of realistic fiction, tells the rather shallow boy-meets-girl love story of a young, unconfident male otaku with no dating experience and a young woman whom he saved from a drunkard on a Tokyo subway train. Due to the advice from the internet, the otaku gradually transforms into a person who is capable of having a relationship and conforms to social norms and thus becomes 'normal'. The text is based on edited (and at times presumably 'faked') posts from the internet forum 2channel (cf. **Nakano, 2007; Fisch, 2009; Freedman, 2009; Galbraith, 2015a**). The novel is read as a story from the immediate present: In terms of content, it tells about an age where—as with Ryang—people seem to be connected to the internet and are yet alone and lacking 'real' human connection (**Ryang, 2006: 97**); in terms of form, it intersects Japanese literature and new media (**Galbraith, 2015: 56**) and thereby illustrates another specific feature of Heisei literature not mentioned here so far.

Unlike in Densha otoko, Murakami's Frank cannot exactly be understood as an otaku at all. He is rather creating a selective and stereotypical otaku-ness in order to achieve certain purposes. Besides being an unreliable character in everything he reveals about himself, his statements and obvious facts also contradict one another. Therefore, Frank as a character remains altogether elusive. He claims to have been in psychiatric treatment since his early childhood and even mentions that he had undergone a neurosurgery. His life, the way he narrates it, is a life of a psychopathic killer who is not capable of empathy and felt 'lost' for his entire life (**Murakami, 2005: 155–67**).

Frank declares himself a sex maniac. He pretends to be eagerly interested in Japanese nightlife as if he was an otaku with a special interest into this very specific and stereotypical field. However, his fascination with nightlife soon turns out to be merely pretended. As little as he is interested in the consummation of sexuality, he is sexually attracted by media images. This is actually what distinguishes him most from (stereo)typically depictions of an otaku. The otaku Frank pretends to be is a foreign, self-confessed one who is only superficially acquainted with Japanese otaku subculture. He embodies an otaku in the context of media worlds based on the simple equation otaku=sex. As such, this is similarly under-complex as his psychological drawing as a character. He is less the cliché of an otaku than the cliché of a somewhat simple-minded western man with interest in the otaku subculture of Japan. At the same time, as a notorious murdering psychopath, he is also linked to the stereotype of the otaku associated with violent crimes.

Frank's performed fascination with nightlife serves him as a gate-opener to the local nightlife subculture and thus allows him a deeper look into early Heisei Japan. While he chats with girls at a nightlife location in Kabuki-chō, Frank reads from his Tokyo pink guide. This promises to male Western nightlife tourist '(e)verything (they) need to know about Tokyo's sexy pleasure spots' on its cover. The guide provides Western sex tourist with general information on the Japanese sex industry, details of various establishments, maps and directions, a list of phrases considered relevant as well as a Japanese-English and an English-Japanese glossary (**Langhorne, 1997**). Though intertextual references to and quotations from this guidebook seem to implicate that the very special milieu is depicted in an authentic and trustworthy manner and that they are meant to serve Frank to self-fashion as a potent and a little exotic sex tourist, they prove to be superficial and are mere caricatures. He quotes phrases from the booklet that amuse but not enable a serious understanding. These also reproduce stereotypes. Using the guidebook Frank underlines his obvious incapability to translate, and thus marks a gap that exists between him and the girls at the nightclub.

Frank pretends to have an immense interest in all things sexual, but neither comes close to nor seriously strives for intimacy—be it romantic or commercial. He resembles the cliché of an extremely sexualised western otaku only in performing one. His ostensible affirmation is merely strategic. Where an otaku integrates the 'foreign' into the 'own', Frank's use of being otaku-ish in turn serves to trivialise the external 'foreign' into a then familiar 'own foreign' that appears understandable and controllable. He thus acquires access to nightlife that acts as burning glass of Japanese society. It is only because Frank adopts the supposedly norm-deviating behaviour of an odd sex-obsessed and lonely otaku that he is finally in a position to reveal the loneliness, alienation and insecurities that appear to be deeply anchored in the consciousness of the Japanese majority society and thus stimulate corrections. Frank personifies a sentiment of crisis that sediments into the reality of people's lives in late 20th century Japan. He can be read as a kind of deus ex machina who, coming from the outside, reveals a certain imbalance in Japan's post-growth society and indicates a sense of alienation and disintegration in the own.

A Place to Belong: Locating loneliness in Heisei Japan and Murakami Ryū's In za miso supu

Urban places and spaces are of outstanding significance for understanding late modern, post-industrial societies and its literary representations, since any form of private and public life, production, trade, politics, art etc. interconnect there. Urban centres are home to the narratives of progress-

generated prosperity, irreversible globalization and intensified acceleration, all of which are hegemonic in late modernity. In urban spaces, individual memory merges with collective memory and forms a collective identity. Urban planning practices—as Ferrar points out—further 'help to cultivate or diminish our understanding of the past and our place in it' and the way 'we choose to build history into or eradicate history from our cities and towns shapes our understanding of identity, community, and responsibility' (**Ferrar, 2011: 723**). The interweaving of places and memory carries a particular meaning in In za miso sūpu, as places symbolize a nostalgic longing to the past. This period, however, is shaped by narratives of prosperity through growth and internal homogeneity, which in itself show to be a gauge of insecurity and loneliness of contemporary Japan.

Kabuki-chō is the largest nightlife district in Asia. Roughly 36,000 square meters are densely packed with bars, shops, restaurants, love hotels and theatres. At the same time the district is a centre of administration hosting the city hall of Shinjuku. As the district is located next to Shinjuku Station, one of the world's busiest transportation hubs, it is directly linked with Japan and Tokyo which, more than any other city in Japan, for many writers and intellectuals symbolizes the experience of a modernity embedded in global contexts and promising prosperity. Kabuki-chō is the home of choice for members of various marginalised groups—such as ethnic, cultural and sexual minorities, migrants, precariously employed and (minor) criminals. Though innumerable literary works, films and non-fictional literature perpetuate its reputation as a place of crime, drugs and yakuza (**Azuma, 1998; Mizoguchi, 2009**), ordinary passers-by are unlikely to get into any kind of trouble there. Most buildings in the area were (re)built after World War II, but today a marked lack of investments into their maintenance can be seen. As a small number of old buildings in this area become unattractive for residents and businesses alike, they turn into facilities seen through nostalgic eyes. They therefore are eventually regarded as implying a nostalgic longing that first of all is 'a sentiment of loss and displacement' (**Boym, 2001: xiii–xiv**) for the post-war period that again highlights criticism on a Contemporary Japan that is perceived as uncertain and exceedingly demanding.

The novel displays an abandoned clinic as a modern ruin. It is a symbol of the steadily accelerating rate of change, not only in its material and structural makeup and past purpose, but also as a symbol of society as a whole (**Harrison & Schofield, 2010: 67–70**).

> *We'd reached the end of a cul-de-sac, and I followed Frank into a narrow gap between two buildings. No light from the houses or streetlamps made it into this space, and it was so narrow we had to*

> *shuffle along sideways. The path ended at a ruined building that looked as if it had been in the process of being torn down by the land sharks when the real-estate bubble burst. Mortar had fallen from its outer walls, which were draped with canvas dropcloths and sheets of vinyl. (…) The building must have been a clinic: in one corner was a pile of discarded medical equipment and broken chairs. A bare mattress lay on the hardwood floor (…).* (**Murakami, 2005: 145–46**)

As depicted in In za miso sūpu, in the metropolitan areas (and not just in the depopulated rural areas) there are several small backstreets and numerous wooden houses much older—some of them abandoned (akiya). These signify a Japan that is perceived as unspoiled and long gone. Such tiny old houses in/around Kabuki-chō could easily be overlooked, as they hide in the shadow of Shinjuku's skyscrapers (**Murakami, 2005: 143**). They do not function for the purpose of value creation, welfare or administration etc. But they do contribute to stabilize people's sense of belonging:

> *Who would have guessed you'd find a neighborhood like this, full of old wooden apartment buildings, pretty much smack dab in the middle of Tokyo and only about a fifteen-minute walk from Kabuki-cho? Not me. Amid the tenements were a few ancient, one-story wooden houses, like the kind you see in samurai dramas, so small I almost wondered if they weren't scale models.* (**Murakami, 2005: 144**)

The houses mentioned here seem to be relicts from pre-modern and/or early modern Japan. Encapsulated in the urban sprawl, they are witnesses of times long gone. As such, they represent a more distant layer of nostalgia that is directed towards pre-modern Japan. It offers a kind of virtual anti-modern rootedness by linking people with places (e.g. a shrine or temple), and thus strengthens local memory, which serves to construct identities.

Kabuki-chō as depicted in In za miso sūpu is populated with characters working and living in economically and emotionally precarious conditions. Against the backdrop of perceived instability, the novel draws attention to precarious working conditions and to loneliness. Both serve as major manifestations of the background social dynamics. Stephen Snyder reads the characters of the novel as symbols of the social ailment of contemporary Japan and argues that 'for (them …), the mundane represents a kind of threat from which they must flee, an anxiety for which they seek therapy in violent conditions and degraded situations' (**Snyder, 1999: 201**). Carl Cassegård adds that '(u)nlike in the 1970s and 1980s, when the vision of society as a stable and peaceful naturalized modernity was most pronounced, during the 1990s the "prison" against which Murakami Ryū had been revolting seemed to have cracked open'

(**Cassegård, 2007: 206**). Thus, the criticism on early Heisei Japan articulated in In za miso sūpu is not least aroused by the fact that the freedoms and opportunities that open up are not utilised. Instead, the focus remains on the numerous uncertainties and insecurities, resulting in numbness, alienation and grotesque substitutionary actions. The loneliness of the characters thus appears to be endogenously created and can be overcome through new forms of interpersonal connectedness, the shaping of life, solidarity, etc.

While upper-class elites and middle-class people do not appear directly, the narration clearly focuses on the bottom end of Japan's gap society: all characters can be classified as lower-class or marginalized people, and the novel shows empathy for them. The marginalized people at the low end of society, e.g. migrant women forced into prostitution, are portrayed as living in perpetual danger and as struggling with their precarious living circumstances. But they are still given respect rather than being criticized, as long as they are interpersonally connected and try to master their life with all they have and can give.

If marginalized people are (no longer) fighting and seem to spend their life in resignation and inactivity, empathy is not certain. When Frank and Kenji see a homeless man spending his time at the batting centre, neither of them shows any willingness to help. While Kenji does not articulate much empathy in general, Frank shows extraordinary disgust and hatred (**Ibid: 46**).

After visiting a peep show Kenji guides Frank to ‘a batting center at the outskirts of the love hotel district’ (**Murakami, 2005: 43**) that is likely modelled after the Shinjuku Batting Centre. This place is embedded in bleakness: the characters are surrounded by a fence as if they were in a cage, with nothing but ‘the neon lights of the love hotels and their sad, dimly lit windows’ in sight, and the only sound ‘the syncopated clank of metal bats’. It is a symbol for the whole of Japanese society which barely seems to give a chance to opt out and to find one’s way into a self-determined life, to an own pace, and proportions that fit an individual scale.

Further on, a woman urges a man hitting the ball not to lose: ‘Don’t let ‘em beat you!’ she screams (**Ibid: 43–52**). This episode refers to the terms ‘kachigumi’ (winning team) and ‘makegumi’ (losing team), which have been widespread in Japan's general and media discourse since the 1990s. They connote an increasing (perceived) social inequality (cf. **Schad-Seifert, 2007: 115–16**). The literary-fictional outline of a competitive situation set in the time of leisure that it is all about ‘winning’ and ‘losing’, points to a deeply internalised dichotomic view on contemporary society as well as to ubiquitous pressure to perform and the fear of failure—a mindset rooted

in (high) growth Japan. These ultimately disembogue in desolidarisation and thus inevitably reinforces forms of loneliness.

Read from its end, i.e. from the concluding sequence, the novel reports not only on the capacity for friendship and love that Frank identifies in Kenji, but it also pleads for a reconsideration and reconstitution of communality as an antithesis to the loneliness of people in early Heisei Japan. This relies on the notion of a pre-modernity that is static and stationary and characterised by the local and mutual interconnectedness of people: On the afternoon of December 31, Kenji and Frank leave for Tsukiji hongan-ji, a Jōdo-Shinshū Buddhist Temple in the Tsukiji district of Tokyo's Chūō ward. Frank is desperate to listen to the traditional ringing of the bells on New Year's Eve, the so-called Joya no kane. Each year, the bells can be heard 108 times (107 times on New Year's Eve and one last time on New Year's Day). Frank had heard about the bells and that it is commonly believed that they are a means for healing:

> *(…) there's a certain gentleness here you can't find in other countries, and that they've come up with these incredible methods of healing. Like the bells. Ringing them at temples on New Year's Eve is a custom that goes back more than a thousand years, right? How many times was it they ring the salvation bells?* (**Murakami, 2005: 144**)

While In za miso sūpu pays only very little attention to noises that form the soundscape (**Belgiojoso 2014: 34**) of a urban city (e.g. trains, trucks, construction sides), this sound of a bell plays a prominent role. The bell, which is the bell of a temple, represents the sonic geography of the city and it doubles the city's sacral geography (**Assmann, 2010 [1999]: 303**). It stresses the static state of the temple set within a dynamic urban space. In its timelessness and fixedness, the bell do not only properly signify a basic need for holy places that are associated with miracles, atonement and healing, the Joya no kane also traditionally serve a need for local belonging growing the midst of intensifying complexity and accelerating global interconnectedness (cf. **Boym, 2001: xiv**). The ringing of the bells is rooted and rooting at the same time. They signify temples (and shrines) that appear as a supratemporal, static place facilitating a sense of belonging and stand for the fundamental need for connectedness.

Quite a Horror Show: On violence and sexuality as benchmarks for alienation

Like Kenji, the characters who populate the nightlife of Kabuki-chō are lacking a regular job and/or a promising education. Thus they earn their living outside the primary labour market. Cassegård argues that in Murakami's oeuvre these characters 'share the aversion to living in a

normal, indistinct world which makes them irritated and bored', so that even 'violence is preferable' to them (**200 Cassegård, 7: 198**).

I would add here that frequent and extremely explicit depictions of violence (as well as boredom) are to be understood as an expression of a mentally overloaded subject and as a reaction to existential threats and an environment that is perceived as hostile. A fear of loneliness and isolation, which drives to radical brutality. The excessively depicted violence formulates an unease about the condition of contemporary Japan:

> *It looked as though Maki had another mouth below her jaw. Oozing from this second, smiling mouth was a thick, dark liquid, like coal tar. Her throat had been slit literally from ear to ear and more than halfway through, so that it looked as if her head might fall right oft. And yet, incredibly, Maki was still on her feet and still alive, her eyeballs swiveling wildly and her lips quivering as she wheezed foam-flecked blood from the wound in her throat. She seemed to be trying to say something. The man beside her was the manager. He and Maki were leaning against each other, as if they'd been positioned to hold each other up. His neck was twisted in an unnatural way, his head turned as though to look over his shoulder, but drooping limply, chin resting on his shoulder blade. Just beyond Maki's high heels, Yuko and the waiter lay in a heap on the floor. A thin blade, like a sashimi knife, was buried deep in Yuko's lower back, and the waiter's neck was twisted like the manager's.* (**Murakami, 2005: 112**)

Contemporary Japanese literature is rich in authors who incorporate the most explicit depictions of violence into their texts (**Kanehara, 2003; Kirino, 1997; Kirino 2004; Kuroda, 2001**). The usage of violence, however, as provocation often serves the purpose of promoting the author and his or her work.

In In za miso sūpu disturbing and even dangerous sexual practices serve to criticise recent negative tendencies of late modern Japan. They 'confront a complacent Japanese collectivity with unsettling images of itself or what it can become' (**Snyder, 1999: 103**). The novel depicts sexuality and sexual violence time and again. Nonetheless, it is not at all presented as related to love—yet the reader may assume that at least the loving relationship between Kenji and his girlfriend is also sexual in nature. Sexuality instead is shown in terms of sexual service such as prostitution. The first woman who appears in the story is a murdered schoolgirl prostitute Kenji reads about while talking to Frank on the telephone for the very first time. The simultaneity of her murder and Frank's first appearance suggest that they could be connected (**Murakami, 2005: 10**). The reader learns about this girl only after she is already dead. Kenji is rigorous in his judgement of girls like her:

> *(…) although generally speaking these girls are just spoiled, selfish children, physically they're adults, and I warn you that there's no telling how bad things could get if we don't clamp down and punish them accordingly, and of course I'm referring to the men who patronize these girls as well, they too are responsible for this state of affairs.* (**Murakami, 2005: 66**)

In 1990s Japan, a phenomenon euphemistically named enjo kōsai—compensated dating—entered the common consciousness. These concerns (often underage) high school girls who in exchange for favours let themselves be financed by wealthy, often much older men. The crossover to prostitution is fluid (cf. **Ryang, 2008: 96**). In 1996 Murakami also published a novel entitled Rabu & poppu (Love & pop), that tells the story of two high school girls who engage in compensated dating. Two years on, a film adaption under the same title was released by the celebrated animator and filmmaker Anno Hideaki (born 1960).

In the course of the further plot, Frank and Kenji meet five women involved in sexual services at a Kabuki-chō omiai ('matchmaking') bar. A conversation between Maki and Yuki, two of the women, with Kenji and Frank soon evolves into a miniature model of early Heisei Japan and its shortcomings. Contrasted with sex workers from poor Asian or Central/Southern American countries who prostitute themselves out of need and for their families back home, these female characters are equated with Japan. The text is unabashedly contemptuous of these women. Like contemporary Japanese society, whose product and expression they are, they are criticised as 'perverse'. They are said to be 'lonely', which is not contextualised or questioned further. Nor is their 'loneliness' discussed as a form of psychological need or a fundamental insecurity. Only this blank space allows the dichotomous drawing of the Japanese (semi-professional) and the immigrant prostitutes on the one hand, and the association of prostituting Japanese women with weakness on the other. This weakness is the basis for the indulgent view of them and could be read in the sense of a conservative-reactionary lament about an insufficiently self-confident Japan that became virulent again in the Japan of the first Heisei decade. In this sense, these characters serve to bear witness to and critique trends that are diagnostic of the times, without, however, reflecting them in their conditionality:

> *A woman like her turns to prostitution because she has no other means of making money. Which isn't the case with high-school girls involved in compensated dating, for example, or the ladies in the omiai pub. Most Japanese girls sell it, not because they need money, but as a way of escaping loneliness. That seems particularly unnatural and perverse to me, compared to the situation of all the women I know who made it*

> *here from mainland China only by having relatives pool their resources to come up with the price of an airplane ticket.* (**Murakami, 2015: 128–129**)

While the women signify what are perceived as maldevelopments of Japan, Frank, the psychopathic killer, acts as a sceptic and critic who distances himself from them and seeks for corrections in his own way. Watching the five girls singing and touting in the shabby bar, Kenji starts to wonder, 'if there's still such a thing as a perfectly respectable woman in this country' (**Murakami, 2005: 91**).

Maki wears a 'white mini dress and a lot of makeup', and thus does not look 'like an amateur' to Frank (**Ibid: 90**). She says 'she'd dropped in here just on a whim, because she had the night off from her job at a 'super exclusive members' club' in Roppongi where simply sitting down already 'costs you sixty or seventy thousand Yen' (**Ibid: 95**). She uses what she perceives as luxury goods to live a lifestyle she actually cannot afford. Consumption is her last resort to attain some kind of social prestige and to maintain her self-consciousness.

Neither Maki nor Yuko are honestly interested in communicating and connecting with other people. Lost in alienation and desolation, they are not even interested in whether they are understood at all. Yuko admits that she does not speak English and Kenji adds that Maki is 'chattering away in Japanese as if it were the only language in the world' (**Ibid**).

However, their inability to communicate with Frank is not limited to their poor knowledge of foreign languages. Rather, what hinders them is their exaggerated focus on their very self. Longing for love, but not being able to love another person, they live sexuality without love. The division of sexuality and love, of body and mind, distances humans from others. It leads to a rise of isolation and may on a societal level culminate in a decline of solidarity.

Increased domestic consumption is a political strategy that was perceived as essential for the Japanese economy. It was established in the post-war period and re-energised during the 1970s global oil crisis. Moreover, it was fundamental to the middle-class consciousness established in (high) growth Japan (cf. **Leheny, 2003: 79; Schad-Seifert, 2007: 111**).

Unable to love others or themselves, people come together not for love, but for sexual intercourse or luxury consumer goods. Consumer goods like designer clothing, technical devices or toys evolve into being 'transitional objects' (**Winnicott, 2006: 1–20**). As Ryang argues, the 'disconnection of body and soul enables people to sell their bodies as sexual goods and to buy luxury goods with the money they earn. Consequently, such a constellation allows loving a Prada bag, but makes it impossible to love a

man or woman' (**Ryang, 2008: 95–125**). The novel also negotiates the preference for luxury goods to emphasise an unwillingness to make an effort and to engage in a serious debate (**Murakami, 2005: 97**).

The explicit depictions of sexuality expose characters in an almost hopeless uncertainty. They exploit themselves and others without reservation to numb their feelings of vulnerability and emptiness. Additionally, they point to structural conditions of that lie behind the increased expression of a perceived loneliness.

Conclusion

The loneliness narrated in Murakami's In za miso sūpu reads like a loneliness within the whole of Japan. It's depiction centre on Frank's otaku-like, norm-violating behaviour serving as a gate-opener to Kabuki-chō as well as to Japan in toto, on secluded and marginal places functionalised as catalyst for reflections on loneliness and acting as insulae that, in contrast to the (self)image of a highly developed, hypermodern Japan It draws attention to misguided developments and on highly explicit depictions of violence and sexuality representing an omnipresent loneliness of people alienated from themselves and from others. In doing so, it enables some corrective imagination of a Japan that better suits humans needs.

Drawing on three conceptualisations of loneliness that function in particular through divergent, alienating and contrasting elements, In za miso sūpu locates loneliness in early Heisei Japan. Thus the novel sensitises the reader to loneliness as well as to its social, economic and psychological implications as a highly debated issue at the end of the twentieth century. By its drastic, polemical and radically pointed approach, the novel from the margins of contemporary Japan encourages the imagining of alternative, liveable realities that better meet human needs. It thus contributes to discussions were highly topical in early Heisei Japan and continue to be virulent and most urgent.

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Carolin Fleischer-Heininger studied Theatre Studies, Modern German Literature and Japanese Studies and recently defended her doctoral thesis ins Japanese Studies at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität (LMU) Munich. Using cultural and literary theories on globalisation, her dissertation analyses world references, (counter)world constructions and identity conceptions in the life and work of Terayama Shūji (1935–1983). She is a research associate at the Japan Centre at LMU. Her research interests include literature, theatre and film in Japan since the post-war period; theories of modernisation and globalisation in Japan; dis/ability and diversity in contemporary Japanese literature.

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Consumable Bodies, Consumable Self: The queer potential of otaku subjectivity in Kio Shimoku's Genshiken

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Abstract

'Nerd' is everywhere a lonely status, but queer identities and nonconforming gender expressions are especially socially isolating. This article examines the intersection of these two lonely identities, 'nerd' and 'queer', in Kio Shimoku's manga Genshiken. Genshiken *is a sort of* roman-fleuve *about a university* otaku *circle. One of the members, Hato, is a heterosexual male connoisseur of BL—homosexual 'boy's love' amateur parody manga—who dresses as a woman. Rather than being doubly isolated for being both queer and a nerd, however, Hato finds that* otaku *culture is capable of accommodating his queerness. This paper argues that* Genshiken *proposes* otaku *subculture as a social space already equipped to accept nonconforming genders and sexualities due to its unique relationship with society and media. Hato represents the queer possibilities of* otaku *subjectivity, entangled as it is with late capitalist commodification. The aesthetic distance that—per Saitō Tamaki—*otaku *must maintain from the objects of their desire translates into an* otaku *acceptance of the aestheticisation of gender, which allows other* otaku *to accept Hato, alleviating rather than doubling his loneliness. Furthermore, for Hato this aesthetic distance becomes distance from his own gender and sexuality, allowing him to enjoy his own masculine body rendered into a consumable commodity in BL featuring himself.*

Keywords: otaku; manga; Genshiken; gender; queer; loneliness

Introduction

Genshiken, a manga by Kio Shimoku, was serialised from 2002 to 2016 (with a break from 2006 to 2010) in the *seinen* (targeted to young and adult men) magazine *Afutanūn* (*Afternoon*) and made into a successful anime. *Genshiken* is a sort of *roman fleuve* about an eponymous 'otaku' circle at the fictional Shīō University, which is understood to be a stand-in for the real Chūō University in the Tokyo suburb of Tama. *Genshiken* is an abbreviation of *Gendai shikaku bunka kenkyūkai,* or 'Society for the Study of Modern Visual Culture.' Despite the impressive and scholarly name, however, it is understood that such 'research societies' are really just clubs for fans to gather and chat about their various interests. *Genshiken* is no exception. The protagonist of the text is the circle itself, and the manga follows six years of circle life as various characters come and go.[1]

Genshiken sometimes playfully highlights the follies of *otaku* excess but is in general a sympathetic portrayal of *otaku* (a type of fan, discussed below). It depicts a university circle (club) where *otaku* can socialise with other fans that share their interests, an insular space where *otaku* can overcome the loneliness of their alienation from mainstream society. The first part of *Genshiken* focuses mostly on stereotypical Japanese heterosexual male *otaku* subjects, but eventually the text opens up to other sorts of *otaku* subjectivities, including *fujoshi* (literally 'rotten women,' an ironically reclaimed self-deprecating term for female *otaku* who may be interested in manga, anime, and games like their male counterparts, but are in particular connoisseurs of amateur male homoerotic parody manga). It also introduces an American, and, most crucially for the current study, a heterosexual male fan of male homoerotica who dresses in feminine clothing named Hato.

We might expect Hato to be doubly lonely; first experiencing the usual loneliness of a nerd, then also experiencing isolation from the recuperating fan community of the Genshiken circle due to a nonconforming gender presentation. Instead—despite some initial awkwardness—the opposite is true, and in *Genshiken* fan space becomes a place that is uniquely capable of accommodating nonnormative genders and sexualities. Kio Shimoku, the author of *Genshiken,* does not (to my knowledge) himself identify as genderqueer, and consequently Hato should not be read as representative of the social reality of queer experiences in Japanese fan culture. Indeed, the text's representation of Hato is somewhat fraught; although Hato is depicted sympathetically and is far from the archetypal transvestite clown often found in Japanese media, moments of outing or sexual harassment by other circle members are often portrayed lightly and humorously. However, I argue that nonetheless, Hato is a medium through which *Genshiken* explores the

queer potential of *otaku* culture as a social space preconfigured to accept reconfigurations of gender and sexuality.

If we understand queerness broadly, following Michael Warner, as a 'thorough resistance to regimes of the normal,' an 'objection to the normalisation of behavior… and thus to the cultural phenomenon of societalisation,' (**Warner, 2011: xxvi-ii**) *Genshiken* argues for the queerness of *otaku* culture in two principal respects: resistance to the normative essential connection between sexuality and social presentation (e.g., gender presentation), and a Butlerian understanding of gender as inessential performance. However, the text accomplishes this in the ultra-commodified hyperreal media environment of modern *otaku* culture where images are exchanged and plastically transformed at a rapid pace. Ultimately, *Genshiken* shows that *otaku* culture 'queers' normative structures of gender and sexuality precisely by commodifying bodies and gender presentations, thus entering them into the 'database' (to use Azuma Hiroki's term) of cultural tropes that can be reconfigured for pleasurable *otaku* consumption, thereby revealing them as neither original nor essential. This can, of course, be exploitative. But unlike *fujoshi*, who commodify and consume the body of the (gay, male) other, Hato ideates his own body and masculinity as reconfigurable *otaku* tropes and is even able to consume his own body by enjoying homoerotic manga featuring himself. *Genshiken* therefore uses Hato to suggest that *otaku* culture and *otaku* subjectivity contain an inherent potential for productive queerness.

The *Otaku*

One important distinction that must be made is that *Genshiken* is not merely a 'fan' circle, but an 'otaku' circle. *Otaku* are a subculture of extremely devoted fans, usually of anime, manga, and video games. In his study of the amorphous and ill-defined *otaku* phenomenon, psychiatrist Saitō Tamaki notes that *otaku* share with other fans and 'maniacs' a compulsion to possess the objects of their desires. However, the object of the *otaku*'s desire is fiction, something with no material reality. Therefore, *otaku* can never possess the object of their desire in the way that a stamp collector can eventually own all the stamps he or she desires. Even if one were to own all the cels (individual pictures drawn on transparent material, originally celluloid, which are composited to create the moving animation) of an anime, after all, one would not really own the anime itself, which is a socially circulating fiction. Therefore, *otaku* generally attempt to possess fiction through the creation of new fiction, fiction which promotes a general fiction to a personal fiction, thereby allowing possession of it (**Saitō, 2011: 20**). Saitō argues that *otaku* are characterised by the production of new fictions such as cosplay and

amateur parody manga, or *dōjinshi,* in order to possess the fictions of which they are fans. He also argues that sexuality is key to *otaku* subjectivity, specifically the ability to be attracted to fictional images with no underlying material reality. He writes, 'to put it very crudely, what distinguishes an *otaku* from a non-*otaku* is whether he is able to 'get release' with an anime character' (**Saitō, 2011: 30**).

Otaku culture, like many fan cultures worldwide, is a despised subculture (**Kinsella, 2000: 128-9**). Normative society views *otaku* as dangerously undersocialised loners who have failed to make the transition into adulthood and become obsessed with childhood objects (manga and anime). Japanese society's view of *otaku* is congruent with Joli Jenson's description of society's views of celebrity fandom (although she is writing in a Western context), that 'the pathological fan is… the obsessed loner, who (under the influence of the media) has entered into an intense fantasy relationship with a celebrity figure' (**Jenson, 1992: 11**). This relationship with the fandom object is 'a chronic attempt to compensate for a perceived personal lack of autonomy, absence of community, incomplete identity, lack of power and lack of recognition' (**Ibid: 17**). The fan is therefore viewed not only as a pitiable loser unable to function in society, but also as an object of fear:

> *The obsessed loner is the image of the isolated, alienated 'mass man.' He or she is cut off from family, friends and community. His or her life becomes increasingly dominated by an irrational fixation on a celebrity figure, a perverse attachment that dominates his or her otherwise unrewarding existence. The vulnerable, lonely modern man or woman, seduced by the mass media into fantasy communion with celebrities, eventually crosses the line into pathology, and threatens, maims or kills the object of his or her desire.* (**Jenson, 1992: 15**)

The disdain for fans as loners and losers, therefore, is always pregnant with an undertone of fear that the failure to properly socialise (and conform to normative society's expectations for 'healthy' interests and relationships) will lead to disruption and even violence, the fatal end result of unregulated new media technologies corrupting society. Although in the case of *otaku* the object of obsession is fictional media images rather than celebrities, with *otaku* there is an additional element of candid sexual (masturbatory) use of media images. The fear, then, is displaced from fear that fans will inflict violence to the object of their obsession itself, to the fear that deep perversion lurks at the heart of fandom and such sexual perversion will eventually be acted out in the real world. *Otaku*, therefore, share with other fans the position of being lonely nerds on the margins of society, viewed with something between pity and suspicion. Recently, of course, Japan has started to capitalise on

anime and manga as part of its 'Cool Japan' soft power initiative. But while the government and businesses are happy to exploit *otaku* images for profit, they have generally kept *otaku* themselves at arm's length (**Galbraith, 2009: 9**).

Hato Kenjirō

Hato Kenjirō joins the circle Genshiken midway through the overall story arc of the *Genshiken* manga. He is a fan of BL, or 'Boy's Love' male homoerotic pornographic *dōjinshi.* He insists, however, that he is himself heterosexual. Because of bad experiences in high school when his classmates discovered his affection for homoerotica, he first appears in *Genshiken* in so-called *josō*—crossdress, or specifically the practice of men dressing as women—in order to fit in with the circle *fujoshi* who also love BL and assume an identity that will lead to acceptance of his hobby as normal.

A word about Hato's pronouns: of course, no pronouns are used for Hato in the original Japanese text, since Japanese uses few pronouns at all, much less gendered ones. Here I will call Hato 'he' because it seems clear he is not a transgender woman. He only presents as female in certain *otaku* contexts. He does not present as female to the rest of society and seems to be perfectly comfortable presenting as and being identified as male in non-*otaku* social situations. He presents himself as female in *otaku* contexts (club meetings and conventions) in order to fit in more easily with those who share his interests—that is to say, *fujoshi* who are also interested in BL—and works hard to make his presentation as seamless as possible for that reason, but he has no apparent desire to be considered a woman (or anything other than a straight cissexual man) by the rest of society. Admittedly, this is complicated by the presence of a spin-off manga, *Spotted Flower* (titled in English). *Spotted Flower* is written by Kio Shimoku for the web magazine *Rakuen Le Paradis.* This text is written for a different publisher and therefore cannot use the names of *Genshiken* characters, but follows characters who very clearly evoke the *Genshiken* characters as they live their lives several years after graduation. In this text the Hato-analogue character has indeed become a transgender woman: *she* presents as completely female to society (her manga editor does not even know she is transgender, despite the closeness of that relationship), and has undergone some amount of gender reassignment surgery. However, *Spotted Flower* is, again, a spin-off rather than a direct sequel. It began serialisation in 2010, while *Genshiken* was still being serialised, and the 'past' that makes up its settings differs significantly from the conclusion that is eventually reached in *Genshiken* in 2016. Therefore, I will treat *Spotted Flower* as a separate text due its own consideration, rather than the inevitable future

of the events and characters in *Genshiken.* In the text of *Genshiken,* Hato expresses no transgender desires outside of narrow, specific *otaku* contexts, so I will use 'he' for Hato in this article.

Queer *Shumi*

However, as Kath Browne (**2006: 885-86**) has written, 'queer is more than short hand for LGBT.' Instead, she argues we should 'locate "queer"' in the radical requirement to question normativities and orthodoxies, in part now by rendering categories of sexualities, genders and spaces fluid. Currently, this project includes the transgressions of dichotomous sexes, genders and sexualities as well as emphasising the artificiality of boundaries around, and connections between these.' Although Hato is not gay or transgender, he certainly renders categories of genders fluid and transgresses dichotomous sexes and genders. Through him, *Genshiken* explores *otaku* culture as a queer space. One way it does this is by configuring otakudom as a social space that accepts that sexuality and gender presentation do not necessarily signify monolithically. At one point Hato finds himself alone with Madarame, an older club member, making awkward conversation about his crossdressing. As if to address the elephant he feels is in the room, Hato says bluntly 'It's not like I'm gay (*homo*) you know' (**Kio, 2011a: 175**).[2] Madarame only responds 'hmmm?' Hato is taken aback: 'You're not interested? I thought it was a pretty shocking statement…' As Mark McLelland has noted, Japanese entertainment media has long represented male homosexuals almost exclusively as feminine men, associating homosexual attraction with transvestitism or transgenderism (often so clownishly exaggerated that the word for this media trope has become pejorative), and entrenched the idea that, conversely, transvestitism and transgender presentation must be associated with homosexuality (**McLelland, 2000: 8-10**). It is no wonder, then, that Hato expects Madarame to assume he is homosexual based on his crossdressing. However, Madarame, a representative of the stereotypical heterosexual undersocialised male *otaku*, says 'Oh, well, I just thought BL and crossdressing were part of your *shumi.* I didn't really consider whether you were gay' (**Kio, 2011a: 176**). The use of *shumi* here is significant. The term literally means something like a hobby or a preference. This may seem too casual an understanding for something as serious as a nonconforming gender presentation. However, in the context of *otaku* culture *shumi* also refers to one's media consumption preferences, especially one's pornographic preferences.

As many commentators have noted, there is often a slippage between an *otaku*'s *shumi*, their sexuality, and their gender presentation. Many people have noted the gap between the *otaku*'s supposedly perverse media habits, or *shumi,* and their 'healthy' sexuality in real life (**Saitō,**

2011: 30). Madarame himself has *shumi* in BDSM pornography but shows no interest in pursuing BDSM sexuality in real life. He later develops an interest in so-called *otoko no ko* games, or pornographic games featuring young boys dressed as girls, without any apparent inclination towards pederasty in real life. An *otaku*'s *shumi,* therefore, might arguably be seen as a part of their sexuality or even sexual identity, to the extent that they receive masturbatory sexual pleasure from viewing these images and form community bonds with others who have similar *shumi.* Yet the important point is that *shumi* rarely translate into real-life sexual practices with real sexual partners. This is not necessarily surprising: as Eve Sedgewick (**1990: 25**) has noted, 'many people have their richest mental/emotional involvement with sexual acts that they don't do, or even don't *want* to do.'

Shumi, then, are a kind of sexuality play one performs in the hyperreal world of rapidly circulating media images which, crucially, have no essential connection to and reveal no information about one's 'real' sexuality. Famously, this is one aspect of *otaku* subjectivity that hegemonic society has difficulty accepting. Normative society believes that *shumi* and sexuality must *signify monolithically*, and therefore antisocial *shumi* must reveal some dark hidden perversity in the real sexuality of *otaku*, always threatening to break out into real sexual acts. *Otaku* themselves, however, might find this a bit mystifying; since fiction is not real life, after all, why shouldn't one have totally separate desires in the fictional and real realms?

This is not to say, of course, that real-world non-heterosexual desire or nonconforming gender expression is equivalent to *otaku* media preferences. It does suggest, however, a certain solidarity or allyship between *otaku* and queer; both are plagued by normative society's insistence that sex, gender, and sexuality must signify monolithically, and that any divergence from this monolithic signification is pathological. Therefore, by having Madarame—the stereotypical heterosexual male *otaku*—frame Hato's gender presentation as *shumi*, *Genshiken* proposes *otaku* culture as a space already capable of accommodating queerness. Again, queer here is not a pronoun for LGBT, but rather the radical challenging of monolithic genders and normative contiguousness between sexuality and gender, whether heterosexual or homosexual. *Genshiken* suggests that the *otaku* acceptance of *shumi* as a form of hyperreal sexuality with no essential connection to real sexuality has the capacity to accept gender as a performance that has no essential or biological connection to sexuality. Therefore, when Madarame encounters Hato's feminine gender presentation he makes no assumptions that Hato is homosexual—indeed, it does not seem to have occurred to him—because he does not assume that gender and sexuality

must signify monolithically. The customs of *otaku* culture that separate *shumi* from sexuality allow him to easily separate sexuality from gender. *Genshiken*, then, suggests that *otaku* culture is uniquely already primed to accept the queering of genders and sexualities: the rendering fluid of fixed categories. Therefore, rather than experiencing isolation from the fan community that recuperates the loneliness of the nerd, that fan community is primed to accept Hato's queer gender presentation and accepts him. He is able to form important social and affective bonds with his upperclassman, ameliorating his *otaku* loneliness and isolation.

The Commodified Self

Beyond this acceptance of performativity, *Genshiken* also posits the hyper-commodified consumerism in *otaku* culture as creating a consumer subjectivity inherently accommodating to queer subjectivity. Some critics, like Jack Halberstam, have tried to posit queer as opposed to capitalism. Halberstam (**2005: 10**) writes that queer subjects 'will and do opt to live outside of reproductive and familial time as well as on the edges of logics of labor and production. By doing so, they often live outside the logic of capital accumulation.' It might seem odd, then, to find compatibility between consumerism and queer. However, here I agree with Amy Stone, Margot Weiss, and others that queerness is a late-capitalist sexuality, where flexible subjects made possible by late-capitalist commodities and social spaces allow new bodies and desires to be explored. Stone (**2013: 1649**) writes that 'flexibility and fluidity are not just a part of queerness, but part of late capitalism's impact on cultural productions in which individuals have a 'dynamic, ever-changing flexible role' within systems… Queerness as a late-capitalist sexuality creates queer spaces that help generate these new flexible and fluid roles.' Weiss (**2011: 14-15**), similarly, explores queer spaces 'made possible by commodities, and thus limited in… accessibility, but also… space where new bodies, desires, and relationships can be created and explored.' Therefore, such communities:

> *Are not oppositional to, but rather complicit with, transformations in capitalism, particularly the consolidation of what is variously called late, flexible, informational, or advanced capitalism. Although different scholars emphasise different aspects of this shift, late capitalism is characterised by flexibility, new relations between production and consumption, a shift from Fordist to post-Fordist production, and the rise of new technologies and informatics… In the field of sexuality, this has enabled new sexual identities, as new sexual practices, desires, and technologies have proliferated in the marketplace. From reproductive technologies and sex therapy to sex toys, phone sex, and pornography, the last few decades have seen a*

> *proliferation of ever-more-specialised niche markets, a shift that also heralds new possibilities for the generation and commoditisation of social difference. Late-capitalist relations of production and consumption have also restructured bodies, subjects, and sociality. Linked to new forms of capitalism are more 'adaptable' bodies, which absorb new techniques, technologies, commodities, and proliferating sexual pleasures as ideal consumers.* (**Weiss, 2011: 14-15**)

Otaku culture is shot through with just such late-capitalist modes of production and consumption that enables more adaptable and flexible subjectivities, including queer genders and sexualities. These include new technologies and virtualities, such as pornographic games that allow the *otaku* subject to inhabit different bodies and virtually perform nonnormative genders and sexualities. The internet has also enabled the rapid authoring, remixing, distribution, and circulation of images, including pornographies targeted at ever-more-rarefied niche sexualities. But even offline, *otaku* culture is characterised by a late-capitalist production and circulation of images and narratives.

By far the most important late-capitalist *otaku* commodity is amateur parody manga—so-called *dōjinshi*—which circulates via unofficial channels. A perfect example of a late-capitalist shift to non-Fordist production, Sharon Kinsella (**2000: 105**) notes that such amateur manga is created through the services of small printing companies using technologies like offset printing that allow for cheaper printing of small print runs compared to older mass printers. The result is that 'individuals from all walks of life could now print and reproduce their own work without approaching publishing companies.' This creates a 'sphere of cultural production spreading beneath the superstructure of mass communications… known as the mini communications.' Now some amateur production has moved online, but the unregulated exchange of amateur manga is still one of the largest forms of mini communications in Japan.

Unsurprisingly, much of this amateur manga is pornographic, including the BL *dōjinshi* that Hato is an avid fan of. BL has its own entrenched practices of production and consumption, usually taking as its referent pop cultural tropes rather than the lived experiences of male homosexuals. This can, of course, be harmful, as was famously highlighted in the 1990s *Yaoi ronsō,* or Yaoi debates, in which homosexual men in Japan accused authors and readers of BL (then called Yaoi) of perpetuating vicious stereotypes about gay men (**Lunsing, 2006**). Be that as it may, *Genshiken* defends BL, and perhaps *otaku* production and consumption generally, by showing that Hato's practice as a reader of BL and experience with its reading practices allows him to 'read' his

own lived experience and his own sexuality from a position of *otaku* aesthetic distance. Hato ideates this 'reader' as a female version of himself, a *fujoshi,* who floats above him omnisciently reading Hato's life as a BL in real time. For example, as Hato enters the apartment of his male *senpai* (upperclassman), he imagines his 'reader' saying 'Yes, yes, hesitating just a little bit is perfect… as if you can't quite get used to it no matter how many times you come here' (**Kio, 2011a: 162**). In other words, he objectifies his life according to the grammar of BL, imagining a reader pleasurably watching his lived present and anticipating the development of homoerotic situations. Then, as he considers taking a shower there to refresh from the hot day, his reader squeals 'kyaaa!' and says 'what kind of flag is that? What if senpai comes home while he's in the shower…' (**Ibid: 165**).[3] Hato, then, is reading his life as it happens according to BL tropes. Although there is nothing salacious about this particular visit, according to BL tropes which the practiced BL reader expects, entering an upperclassman's apartment alone and taking a shower will almost certainly lead to the younger man's seduction and possibly to ravishment. Jeffrey Angles has argued that BL invites its readers to identify with multiple characters, and therefore 'there is a fluid circulation of desire between reader and characters, as the reader is invited into the world of the text to identify with multiple subject positions' (**Angles, 2011: 235-36**). Here the late-capitalist commodity known as BL has allowed Hato just such identification with multiple subject positions, including the position of *fujoshi* readers consuming male homoerotica. BL makes him objectify his own masculinity and his own masculine body, creating the possibility of new sexualities and gender expressions; in a word, queering himself.

While Hato's consumption of BL and his internalisation of BL tropes leads to this productive self-queering, it is worth noting that this happens through inscribing existing BL tropes onto his body and gender, not through self-discovery or a struggle to find a more genuine self. This means that any move towards gender or sexual fluidity is questionable, as gender and sexuality have just been locked into new media tropes rather than becoming truly fluid. For example, BL is famously obsessed with *seme* and *uke* (respectively the 'top' and the 'bottom,' or the penetrator and penetrated) in homosexual male pairings, and figuring out which partner would be which based on the perceived aggressiveness or submissiveness of their personalities. Hato queers his own masculinity by reading his life as if it were a BL, that is, through these BL tropes. He first reads himself as a *seme* vis-à-vis his passive *senpai,* but later when his *senpai* begins to behave in a self-assured fashion suitable to a more confident, mature man, Hato suddenly begins to read himself as the *uke* in that situation (**Kio, 2011a: 193**). While BL

reading practices have allowed him, although heterosexual, to ideate himself as both giving and receiving penetration in homosexual intercourse, at no point does he interrogate himself about what kind of sexual posture he feels more suited to, thus opening up the possibility of queering his own desire and subjectivity.

However, this is more generally how the *otaku* characters of *Genshiken* frame their relationships with others: through media tropes. They constantly describe themselves and others in terms of *kyara,* or characters: not specific characters in manga and anime, but rather codified character types. One club member, for example, tells another she is noticeably 'creating' a *buaisō kyara* (unsociable character), a standard *kyara* type (**Kio, 2005: 112**). Another circle member is said to fit the *oiroke kyara* (mature sexy character) mould (**Kio, 2006b: 178**). *Genshiken* depicts its *otaku* subjects as very self-consciously understanding themselves and their relationship to others and to society based on the reading practices of subculture and its entrenched character tropes. It is therefore, perhaps, inevitable that any *otaku* exploration of gender and sexual fluidity must also be understood through subcultural tropes. So, while Hato's reliance on BL tropes to queer his own gender and body may not lead him to what some may regard as authentic self-discovery, this process certainly creates more possibilities for queer than a monolithically signified body, gender, and sexuality. *Genshiken*, therefore, shows that *otaku* aesthetic objectification and database consumption create unique possibilities for queering heteronormative gender.

A Database of Gender

As mentioned earlier, Azuma Hiroki has proposed that *otaku* culture, and perhaps postmodern culture generally, enters cultural tropes into a cultural database, which individual texts then extract and combine freely in new combinations, with the pleasure of postmodern consumption lying precisely in the ingeniousness of the combination of unlikely elements. He proposes that modern metanarratives (grand narratives) ordered cultural production in the modern period and made up a hidden 'inner layer' in the myriad small narratives (works of fiction) produced in the society organised by that metanarrative. Readers were able to get access to that inner layer by reading these small narratives. Since the noted collapse of modern metanarratives, however, this inner layer no longer functions or is even desired. But unlike the Baudrillardian unregulated proliferation of simulacra proposed by other theorists, Azuma argues that there is still a structure governing cultural production in postmodernity: a 'grand nonnarrative' database (**Azuma, 2009: 29-52**). This database is filled with affective elements, what Azuma calls *moe*

yōso, narrative elements that evoke an emotional response in viewers and readers. This is most apparent in *otaku* culture, which very self-consciously extracts disparate character and plot elements and throws them together in cleverly innovative combinations. Since the database is a nonnarrative, it cannot function to regulate the combination of elements, leading to the random postmodern pastiche that *otaku* delight in. Put another way, the database structure of culture implies that all possible narrative elements are demoted to mere affective database elements, stripped of the gravity of meaning-making and made available for appropriation of their affect in combination with any other element. BL researchers have also made use of this theory. Sandra Annett, for example, points out the database elements in the male characters of the hit comic and anime *Hetalia Axis Powers* that lent themselves to *fujoshi* consumption and pairings (**Annett, 2014: 173-75**). Azuma Sonoko, on the other hand, has both adopted and critiqued Azuma (Hiroki)'s theory, arguing that unlike male *otaku*, *fujoshi* do not just consume individual character *moe yōso* removed from narrative context. Instead, *fujoshi* consume the narrative relationality between the characters as a kind of element, what she calls *sōkankei shōhi* 相関係消費, or 'interrelational consumption' (**Azuma, 2015, quoted in Asano, 2021: 143**). More recently, however, she has acknowledged that *fujoshi* can also enjoy character database consumption without relational context (**Azuma, 2020: 165-66**).

This cultural theory serves as an important framework for reading *Genshiken,* which is, after all, an exploration of *otaku*: those who, according to Azuma Hiroki, are most well-adapted to database cultural production and consumption. In particular, *Genshiken* makes it apparent that Hato has entered himself—or rather his masculine body and gender—into the database, where they have become just another mutable element that can be recombined for pleasurable *otaku* consumption. In other words, by reading his own life as a BL, Hato has demoted his own body and gender from an inviolable source of self-identity into an affective element that can be freely appropriated, recombined with other elements, and pleasurably consumed. This database recombination is a kind of intertextuality, and Tomoko Aoyama has noted that BL reading communities are noted for their penchant for detecting the 'scent' of homoerotic BL potential in other texts or situations and reading them intertextually with BL tropes (**Aoyama, 2012: 66-67**). Accordingly, at one point one of Hato's hometown acquaintances suggests that his crossdressing might fit the BL trope of a homosexual relationship between a macho older brother and an effeminate younger brother (an example of interrelational database consumption), effectively imagining him in an incestuous gay relationship with his

brother. Rather than being disgusted, Hato finds this pairing completely plausible. He says, 'of course there's no basis in reality, but I have to admit that objectively the idea fits.' He then plays along when his friends consider the pairing more deeply, proposing changing the genre to a historical story set in an old-fashioned household: 'Oooh, I see, since the older brother is the only one who will inherit[the household], the younger brother was raised as a girl… that kind of setting?' (**Kio, 2012: 101-2**). Clearly here Hato is treating his own gender and sexuality as database elements—*mere* database elements—that can be combined with other trope elements (like 'old house bound by tradition' and 'gay romance between brothers') and rendered into commodities for pleasurable *otaku* consumption. *Genshiken* attempts to show that the hyper-commodification inherent in *otaku* culture and database consumption allows gender to be denatured, deconstructed, and rendered inessential to identity, becoming just another object of consumption play. As Jay Prosser has written, 'whereas the constructedness of straight gender is obscured by the veil of naturalisation, queer transgender reveals, indeed, explicitly performs, its own constructedness,' (**Prosser, 1998: 31**) thus 'illustrating both the inessentiality of sex and the nonoriginality of heterosexuality' (**Prosser, 1998: 26**). *Genshiken* shows that *otaku* modes of engaging with gender and sexuality encourage such a queering of gender, revealing it as just another commodity that is subject to reconfiguration and therefore constructed, denaturalised, inessential, and nonoriginal.

It should be noted that this commodification of bodies and genders for consumption might, in other contexts, have sinister implications. The commodification of the gay, transgender, or transsexual body for mass consumption robs gay, transgender, or transsexual individuals of the body as a site that can be reinscribed and reclaimed as an expression of the authentic self, and does so in order to satisfy the prurient curiosity of the very normative society that violently excludes such bodies in other contexts. Indeed, this charge might be fairly levelled against *fujoshi,* who are overwhelmingly heterosexual women who take erotic or masturbatory pleasure in the consumption of commodified nonheteronormative bodies and sexualities. The difference here, however, is that while *fujoshi* commodify the body of the gay, male other, Hato is commodifying his own body and his own masculinity. This *self*-commodification allows him to queer his own gender, in other words, to interrogate his own masculinity and heterosexuality as denatured and inessential to his body. This commodification of his own gender reveals that it is, as Judith Butler (**1988: 519-20**) writes, 'in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity

instituted through a stylised repetition of acts.' These acts, denatured from a 'locus of agency' and commodified as disparate database elements subject to recombination, become revealed as 'acts which are internally discontinuous,' which then imply that 'the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief.' Because, after all, if gender is 'not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style.' It is precisely the reading practices of *otaku* in general and *fujoshi* in particular that make this queering possible, through the relentless reduction of all affect to database elements that can be freely consumed in any combination. In this way, *Genshiken* not only positions Japanese fan culture as a kind of queer space ready to accept radical deconstruction of genders and sexualities, but also, perhaps, defends *fujoshi* practices as the source of this subcultural compatibility with queer, even if they themselves commodify and consume the bodies of others.

In fact, this ability to denature one's body and sexuality and accept its entrance into the circulation of database elements extends to other *otaku* in *Genshiken,* even those who do not engage in queer performativity like Hato. Sasahara, another circle member and very much a straight, heteronormative male, is at one point shown BL manga drawn by another circle member that features Sasahara himself having homosexual relations with one of his *senpai*. Although flustered, he is able to view his BL avatar as a completely independent character, rather than a representation of himself, and therefore is able to appreciate the artistic merits of the work on an objective level (**Kio, 2006a: 103**). In fact, the only *otaku* character who seems unable to accept that his gender and sexuality can be denatured and circulated as a commodity inessential to himself is Kuchiki, significantly a member of *Genshiken* who is a clownish figure, given to outbursts of anger and violence, unable to fit in with the other *otaku*, and who exists on the periphery of circle life. Upon being told that the *fujoshi* in the circle view him as the *seme* in a potential pairing with Madarame, he is unable to accept that this is a merely a *fujoshi* commodification of his sexuality and gender presentation, and thinks it must reveal something about his real sexuality. He therefore actually tries to aggressively kiss Madarame in typical *seme* fashion, for which he is quickly punched and restrained by the other circle members (**Kio, 2011b: 170**). It is only the clown *otaku* who cannot maintain cool aesthetic distance from his own sexuality, and therefore cannot

appreciate it as both inessential and commodified. Significantly, Kuchiki also attempts to sexually harass Hato at various points, presumably because he cannot accept his feminine gender presentation as inessential to his body and sexuality, behaviour which the other circle members quickly condemn as unacceptable. While Kuchiki is largely ostracised from the group for his failure to accept the database commodification of gender and sexuality, the other *otaku* are comfortable seeing their own bodies, genders, and sexualities commodified and recombined because *otaku* cultural practices have primed them to understand gender and sexuality as constructed and inessential: just another database element to be mined for affect.

This is shown to be decidedly untrue, however, of society outside of *otaku* subculture. Ogiue, a character who enters the *Genshiken* circle boldly proclaiming that she hates *otaku* and especially the *fujoshi* love of male homosexuality, is eventually revealed to have suffered a trauma that drove her to such extreme positions; while in middle school she drew BL illustrations featuring her classmates. For this, she was summoned to the principal's office in front of teachers and parents and called to account, she was shunned by other students, and the subject of her illustrations stopped attending school and eventually transferred (**Kio, 2006a: 15-25**). She therefore hates herself for her own obsession with BL and overreacts by distancing herself from it and other *fujoshi.* The text shows that members of mainstream society are not able to objectify their own bodies, genders, and sexualities, insist on a gender and sexuality that signifies monolithically with the biological body even in fiction, and will bring in all the powers of society and the state (i.e., the authority of teachers, principals, parents, etc.) to enforce that signification. Members of *otaku* subculture, however, are able to apply *otaku* database commodification to their own genders and sexualities, rendering them objects of play which are mutable and inessential. This is how *Genshiken* proposes *otaku* culture itself as a kind of queer space.

Conclusion

Eve Sedgwick (**1993: 8**) writes that '"queer" can refer to… the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically.' Rather than document the lived experiences of queer *otaku*, Genshiken uses Hato, a heterosexual male consumer of BL and a crossdresser, to explore how *otaku* culture meshes with those gaps. The manga concludes that *otaku* aesthetic distance from objects of desire, plus *otaku* database consumption that denatures and commodifies nearly everything, make *otaku* subculture uniquely amenable to queer

gender and sexualities, quite the opposite of normative Japanese overculture. Therefore, rather than being doubly lonely, marginalised by both his nerd interests and his nonconforming gender presentation and sexuality, Hato is able to find warm acceptance within *otaku* culture that alleviates his loneliness, because *otaku* culture is already preconfigured to queer gender and sexuality. This is, certainly, a somewhat idealised representation that does not necessarily reflect the experiences of real queer Japanese *otaku*, some of whom doubtless find fan spaces oppressive. Nevertheless, the text attempts to frame *otaku* culture and *otaku* subjectivity as containing an inherent potential for productive queerness.

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Endnotes

[1] This description of the text and the below discussion of *otaku* also appears in (**Smith, 2021**).

[2] All translations from *Genshiken* are the author's own.

[3] A 'flag' in this context is a kind of story 'tag' which indicates a defined type of erotic relationship or encounter.

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

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

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

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

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:

> 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:**

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

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.

> 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

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

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

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

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*

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

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.