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War by Metaphor in *Densha otoko*

From the autumn of 2004 through the winter of 2005, the story of *Densha otoko* (*Train Man*) was nothing less than a national sensation in Japan. Emerging from a discussion forum on Japan's reputed 2channel (*ni channeru*) sub-culture otaku Web site, *Densha otoko* concerns a virtual otaku community that coalesces around a supposedly true romance involving a young woman and an otaku sparked by an incident on a train.¹ As an event and topic of discussion, *Densha otoko* drew its currency from a popular discourse on otaku practices with origins in the media and academia.² Marketed as a "pure love story" (*jun'ai monogatari*)—a genre that was extremely popular at the time—the story derived its particular novelty from the assumption that an otaku is incapable of developing normal relations with a woman, let alone an attractive one.³

Part of what contributed to the identification of *Densha otoko* as an otaku expression is the appearance in the story of numerous military metaphors. The metaphors escalate as the story progresses, threatening at times to overwhelm the central romantic narrative. In the following discussion I look at these metaphors not only as instantiations of an otaku culture but, moreover, in terms of their effect in creating the sense of a shared and embodied scene. The latter, I suggest, emerges via the capacity of metaphor to

produce equivalence by vanishing interval, or medium, which is an impulse that I identify as relevant to narratives of technological progress and modern war. I then posit that in contrast to the military metaphors, other textual attributes in *Densha otoko* emphasize medium, relaying an extravagance that is commensurate with computer-generated representations of war. What we can discover through *Densha otoko*, I think, is a transformation of some of the central phenomena of modern technological progress, from the interval in the commuter train to the meaning of the spectacle of war.

AN UNLIKELY ENCOUNTER

Densha otoko was initially an online 2channel dialogue that lasted just over two months. In the course of the event, one of the participants compiled and archived on the server an edited version of the discussion thread, which remains accessible.⁴ The final product is six chapterlike sections, labeled as “Missions,” and an epilogue devoted to congratulations.

The story begins with a posting on an evening in March 2004, by an anonymous individual who describes himself only as a twenty-two-year-old *Akiba-kei* otaku with no experience with women.⁵ He reports that he has just returned from browsing stores in Akihabara and intervened when a drunk began harassing a young woman on the train home. A struggle ensued, he writes, but was brought to a quick conclusion when a young salaryman and then train attendants came to his aid. With the drunk subdued, he and some other passengers were asked to file a police report at the next station, following which the young woman asked him for his address, saying that she wanted to send a gift of thanks for his courage. Bewildered to find himself being thanked by (an attractive) young woman for the first time in his life, he explains that he complied but rushed away, thus missing perhaps the chance of a lifetime.

When a thank-you gift of a Hermès teacup set arrives from the young woman two days later, the otaku again appears on the 2channel forum to report the exciting development and seek advice. Inspired by the event, the 2channel members rise to the occasion. They designate the otaku “Densha otoko” (the “Train Man”)—or just “Densha” (“Train”)—and the young woman “Hermès,” on account of her gift, which they interpret as a sign of her refined character and tastes, and they coach Densha in his courtship of Hermès. They hold council on how Densha should ask Hermès on a date when he calls to thank her for the gift, and they prepare him for the date with a list

of conversation topics, links to clothing stores, hairstylists, and restaurants, ultimately transforming him from an otaku into an apparently regular adult male. In return, Densha relays to the forum members the events of the date and each subsequent date thereafter for just over two months, drawing their envy as well as their continuous encouragement as he works up the courage to confess his love to Hermès.

A few months later, Shinchōsha, one of Japan's major publishers, picked up the story and published it with only minor revisions and maintaining the Web page format.⁶ Emphasizing the challenge to authorial conventions presented by the story's Internet bulletin board origin, the author of the publication is listed as "Nakano Hitori," which works phonetically as a play on words to mean "one among the group" and is meant to refer to Densha as well as all of the anonymous 2channel contributors.⁷ Over the course of the next year *Densha otoko* became an unprecedented success and was serialized in anime, manga, and a minidrama before appearing as a feature-length film. The phenomenon spurred spin-off events and discussions on the Internet and television shows and was the topic of numerous feature articles in weekly and monthly magazines, many of which suggested a need to reevaluate the negative view of otaku practices.⁸

THE MODERN INTERVAL

By virtue of its depiction of a virtual community harmoniously integrating multiplicity, and by the manner in which it foregrounds computer-mediated communication as both the subject and medium of its story, *Densha otoko* is what Richard Coyne calls a "digital narrative."⁹ The pretext in *Densha otoko* for this new social form engendered through the possibilities of digital communication, however, is the modern commuter-train network and the romantic train-encounter trope.

Train cars have provided a *mise-en-scène* for romantic encounter since the advent of the railroad. First in literature and then in cinema, the train encounter is a classic motif that draws on the promises and risks inherent to mass transportation as a paradigmatic space and time of urban life. It foregrounds the train car as an intensified site of the urban crowd in which strangers are brought together, united only by their common subjection to the imperatives of mass production and consumption.¹⁰ The train-encounter trope, moreover, manifests a certain investment of desire, hope, and anxiety in the intervals that characterize modern technological systems. It presents

the interval as an overdetermined space and time that is nevertheless troubled by the conflicting impulse to maintain it as a site of creative potential and eliminate it under the rationalizing principles of a capitalist ethos.

The train encounter in *Densha otoko*, however, is merely a vehicle for Internet encounter, and it is the story of the spontaneous emergence of a virtual community that turns an otherwise unremarkable romance into an unusual event.¹¹ Consequently, the urban train network becomes ancillary to the Internet, rendering themes of transportation supplemental to motifs of communication, and reorganizing the space and time of the urban train under a different set of relations in a manner that reflects the fusion of train and Internet in contemporary Japan. The train car is transformed from a spatiotemporal construct dominated by visual practices (specifically reading and image viewing) into a space and time marked equally by communication. Nothing reflects this better than the trailer for the *Densha otoko* film in which Densha and Hermès share an otherwise empty train, communicating with one another first by *keitai* before coming together, as segments of the digital text from the 2channel forum stream pass the darkened windows (Figure 1).¹²

Concomitant to the reworking of the train encounter motif, *Densha otoko* bespeaks a transformation in the nature of the commuter and crowd that is exemplified in the authorial designation “Nakano Hitori”—“one among the

group.” While alluding to a modern paradigm of alienation, the phrase *nakano hitori* realigns relations to refer to a condition of being-in-connectivity. *Nakano hitori*, one among the group, announces a desire for connectivity that precedes connection. Borrowing from science fiction—in the otaku spirit—like the designation of the character from *Star Trek: Voyager*, Seven-of-Nine, it bespeaks

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perpetual connection to a finite unit within the framework of a larger collective (like nation, or Borg) that, although important, is less significant in one’s everyday life since the unit, rather than collective, is the immediate framework of individual identity. *Nakano hitori* is connectivity to a determinate group that supplants kinship and company as well as the classic binaries of public/private, individual/social. It is why we never hear of Densha’s family, although presumably he lives with them.

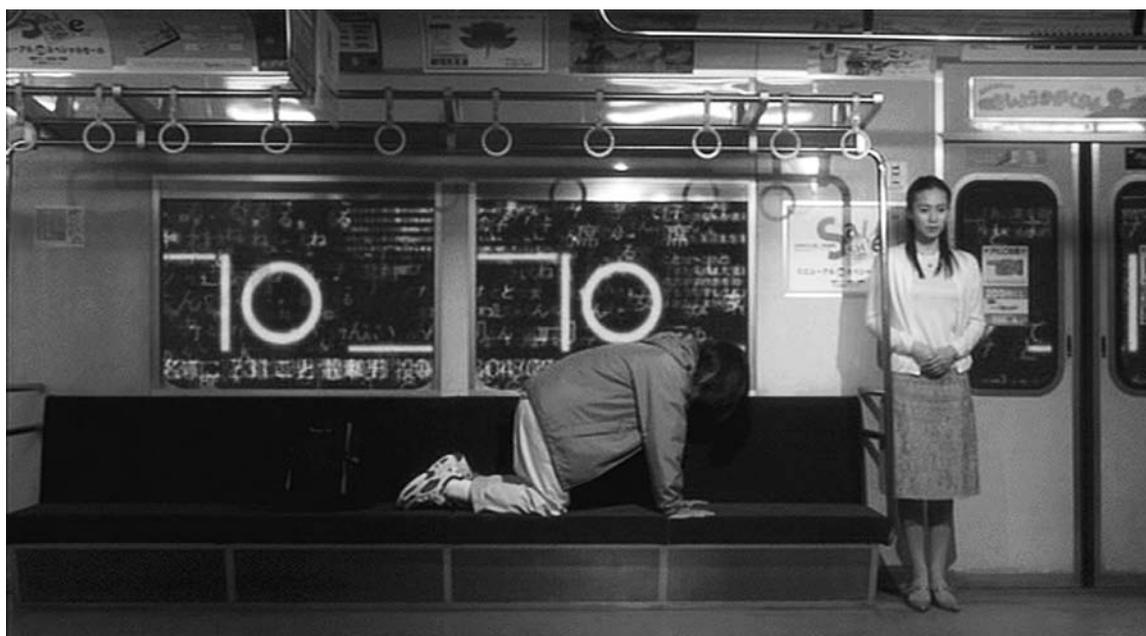


FIGURE 1. Internet and train merge in the cinematic representation of *Densha otoko*.

WAR BY METAPHOR

Military metaphors begin in *Densha otoko* with the designation of the chapters as “Missions.” But they do not gain momentum until after a relatively civil Mission 1, in which the 2channel group coaches Densha through phone calls to Hermès and subsequent preparations for the first date—new clothing, haircut, contact lenses. Beginning with the preface to Mission 2, the language of *Densha otoko* becomes suddenly rich with military metaphors:

In the unbearable anticipation of waiting for Densha’s return, the others’ imaginations run wild and just when they are ready to burst, Densha returns. Slowly but surely he begins dropping the bombs.¹³

When Densha finally appears the alarm is sounded: “Air Raid! Air Raid! To your positions!” As Densha relays the content of his dates with Hermès—the small victories like holding her hand or the first kiss, the 2channel participants respond:

635 Name: Mr. Anonymous Submission Date: 04/04/23 23:02
Air Raid! Air Raid!

All hands evacuate!

654 Name: Mr. Anonymous Submission Date: 04/04/23 23:10

Search team what are you doing!

Lay down a barrage!

All members of unit 1, take your positions!¹⁴

As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri observe, the rhetoric of war is often applied to situations outside actual armed conflict. Military metaphors find their way into sports events, commerce, and politics as a means of emphasizing the associated risks, competition, and conflict.¹⁵ Naturally, these terms are equally applicable to the tensions that accompany a budding romance.

READ AS METAPHOR, THE LANGUAGE OF CONFLICT IN *DENSHA OTOKO* INSISTS THAT DENSHA'S ROMANCE WITH HERMÈS IS AN ATTACK ON THE OTHER 2CHANNEL PARTICIPANTS.

Hardt and Negri also observe that war is invoked as a “metaphorical discourse” in political or social campaigns (like “the war on poverty”) for its efficacy in mobilizing society toward a common goal, which is similarly relevant to the manner in which battle metaphors in *Densha otoko* work to create a sense of community.

Intent as they are on delivering their political prophecy, what Hardt and Negri fail to consider is the potential comic effect of battle

metaphors and imagery when applied to the presumptive antithesis of war—love. For the most part, the military metaphors in *Densha otoko* are simply humorous, performing as otaku self-parody. When the presumably otaku 2channel participants draw on images of armed conflict to convey their sense of shock and envy over Densha’s romantic adventures, it substantiates both initial comic premises behind the story, that the otaku are romantically challenged and that otaku are obsessed with depictions of weapons and war. The language, moreover, establishes a correlation between the two assumptions, suggesting that an obsession with war and weapons is decidedly fetishistic, a substitute for women, romance and sex.

The humor and sense of community invoked through metaphors of violent armed conflict in *Densha otoko* also needs to be situated in a historical context with another Internet-based practice among youths, one marked by violence and often problematized in the Japanese media: *netto shūdan jisatsu*, or “Internet [facilitated] group suicide.” Like *Densha otoko*, *netto shūdan jisatsu* exploits the Internet bulletin board format to bring together complete strangers. The sociality it cultivates, however, could not appear more antithetical to that of *Densha otoko*, with the violence of the latter remaining

figurative while that of the former realized in an abstruse gesture of communal bond. In *netto shūdan jisatsu* the individuals typically meet only once and rent a car to drive to some secluded location, where they seal the windows before igniting charcoal burners inside the car, causing eventual asphyxiation. Amid the anxiety concerning the mental health of the nation's youth that such practices have inevitably spurred, the seemingly innocuous banter and evocations of conflict in *Densha otoko* resounds with a cathartic effect.

THE POWER OF METAPHOR

Humor aside, what is remarkable about the military metaphors in *Densha otoko* is the mostly conventional nature of the weaponry. There are no lasers, no satellite guided missiles, and no futuristic metal battle suits. Instead, there are only simple aim-and-shoot guns, drop-and-explode bombs, and an occasional anti-aircraft missile. The weaponry corresponds to the modality of modern industrial war and to the story's initial thematic device, the train, not only by virtue of the role played by the railroad in modern warfare but also via a common logic of interval. The impulse behind this logic is exemplified in the force of the weapons imagery as metaphor.

The power of metaphor lies in its capacity to establish equivalence between dissimilar things. This is of course the premise behind Hardt and Negri's observation concerning war rhetoric. Although Hardt and Negri tend to use metaphor and analogy interchangeably, there is an important difference between the terms. As Paul de Man suggests, what allows for equivalence through metaphor is a process of abstraction that involves "ceasing to think of the properties by which things are distinguished in order to think only of those qualities in which they agree."¹⁶ Thomas Keenan expounds on de Man's definition, positing that through abstraction the semantic perimeter of a thing is ruptured, opening up the possibility of an "axis of commonality or channel of communication between different things and within different uses."¹⁷ Keenan chooses his words carefully. A "channel of communication" denotes the creation of medium that is nevertheless obscured in the final production of equivalence. Metaphors not only suggest but rhetorically insist that something *is* something else. By contrast, analogy only suggests resemblance. Like metaphor, it opens a "channel of communication" between two things but stops short of vanishing that medium of correspondence by the addition of the preposition. Read as metaphor, the language of conflict in *Densha otoko* insists that Densha's romance with Hermès *is* an attack on the

other 2channel participants. Densha's reports are literally bombs that rain down on the forum participants. As analogy, the language of conflict lacks impact, suggesting only that Densha's budding relationship *is like* an armed attack on the otaku virtual community.

The power of metaphor lies in its capacity to produce through immediacy an affect of presence, which in *Densha otoko* amounts to creating a communal *mise-en-scene* for a social intercourse that otherwise lacks a recognizable terrain. This is demonstrated clearly in one of the more remarkable instances in which the description of romance evokes images of armed conflict. The passage adopts a long soliloquy-like style and appears in Mission 6, when Densha signs off after describing a long-anticipated kiss with Hermès in a car:

It's gotten all quiet here.

It's as if the intense air strike never happened, in the silence, the surviving soldiers huddled together happy to be alive. Had the bombing begun in the early morning? That too, is now a long-lost memory. But still, looking across the field, a mountain of skeletal remains. Random body parts, hands, legs, fingers, hairs, eyeballs . . . what a destructive force. The damage sustained by the few survivors is in itself horrifying.

Next to me stands an otaku soldier continuing to aim his M92 into the emptiness even though he's out of bullets. Staring into the void, he mutters to himself, "he's come." Grinning from ear to ear. Only the continuous clicks of his trigger echo hopelessly across the battlefield.

The gun points in the direction where he [Densha] flew off. He [Densha] said, "We'll resume by the end of today."¹⁸ I can't think at all. My skull is still rattled from the explosions. Surely he's going to begin attacking again in a few hours as promised. The command center has been annihilated. But . . . I . . . can still move . . . and will fight to the end . . ."¹⁹

The tone is poetic, evoking pathos in the desolate scene of the battlefield and its ghostly images. These are not firsthand descriptions of real battle, or even an articulation of a desire to experience real war, but rather filmic idioms borrowed intact and deployed specifically for their cinematic currency and effect in producing a virtual landscape for a context that has no other site than a screen and text. The writer exploits the vision to invoke community in the fraternity of defeat by picturing not himself but the shock and awe of his devastated/envious companions. For a moment we forget that these are most likely the words of someone sitting alone in their room in front of a

monitor. We can see in our mind's eye the soldiers huddled in silence and the skeletal remains, and we can hear the sorrowful clicking of the rifle trigger as we have seen and we have heard it before in countless films and novels.

By virtue of its impulse toward instantaneity and production of presence, metaphor shares a certain spatial and temporal logic with the trajectory of modern technology and communication media. According to what has become a conventional narrative, the history of modern technological progress has been marked by a drive toward the elimination of interval, or a “logic of immediacy dictates that the medium itself should disappear and leave us in the presence of the thing represented.”²⁰ Paul Virilio characterizes this development as a march toward the eclipse of interval by interface, of real space by real time, and the experience of departure and journey by arrival as society succumbs increasingly to the valorization of ends over means.²¹ Modern war, according to Virilio, exemplifies—if not drives—this process under the principle that conflicts are determined in a field of perception whereby to see an enemy is to be able to destroy it. The corollary is that movement of images in modern war is ultimately as significant (if not more so) than the movement of troops or weapons. Cinema and war and camera and gun converge as the sights of a weapon, eye, and viewfinder line up, succumbing to the impulse to eliminate the time and space between event and representation, between the discharge of a bullet or bomb and its impact.²²

In Virilio's and other theories of new media, digital communication technology often emerges as falling comfortably into this narrative of technological progress. Accordingly, digital technology is imagined to do what analog does but better, eliminating almost entirely the effects of mediation. In fact, digital recording and communication technology seems to perform so well, with such instantaneity and lossless efficiency, that it initiates a logic of reversal, giving rise to anxieties over the loss of substance and depth of culture and social relations.

In the following, I look at how the playful manipulation of symbols and characters in the text of *Densha otoko* suggests an alternative to the narrative of technological progress as determined by an underlying impetus to the elimination of the medium. I show that, rather than obscuring medium, the text of *Densha otoko* works to foreground it as a site of empowerment. In representations of war that exploit computer graphics, to which *Densha otoko* alludes, something similar happens. The result is a shift in focus from creating the sense of the real to producing the possibility of being there but being radically transformed at the same time and a presentation of the body as a site symbolic excess.

INDULGENCE IN THE MEDIUM

The text of *Densha otoko* presents a blend of semantic and phonetic wordplays, extensive character transpositions from *hiragana* and *kanji* into *hankaku* (*katakana*) *moji*, *emoji* (picture characters), and elaborate graphics in Japanese ASCII art.²³ The combination and array of textual permutations produce a range of nuance in meaning and affect while foregrounding questions of readability. To begin to understand the specificities of the different expressions would require an extensive analysis that is beyond the parameters of this article. In the following, I want to focus only on the manner in which the text draws attention to its digital medium.

Many of the wordplays in *Densha otoko* operate by means of a kind of textual disfiguring that uses homonymic or phonetically similar *kanji*. One especially prevalent example is the use of character for “poison” (*doku*) together with “man” (*otoko*) to mean “bachelor.” In contrast to the standard combination for the word using the *kanji* for “single” (*doku*) with “person” (*shin*), and “man” (*otoko*), the “*doku otoko*” combination conveys an element of comic cynicism in the implication that otaku are either poisoned by their lack of a (female) partner or alone because they are poisoned. Another frequent textual occurrence uses the *kanji/hiragana* combination for “leak” (*more*) to mean “I,” instead of the proper character for the familiar pronoun, *ore*.²⁴ As the writer and critic Suzuki Atsufumi notes in an analysis of *Densha otoko*, it is impossible to know whether such word plays were begun intentionally or were initially the result of script conversion misses (*henkan misu*)—a kind of typographical error produced when inputting Japanese phonetically via a QWERTY keyboard for a digital medium.²⁵ In either case, the combination foregrounds the real-time temporality of Internet communication, linking the input of text with its transmission (rather than storage) and subsequent impossibility of revision.

Hankaku moji accentuate another dimension of the digital medium. They appear as half-width characters and are technologically distinct in their use of one byte of data, rather than two bytes required for *kanji* and *hiragana*. Significantly, according to the editor in charge of *Densha otoko* at Shinchōsha, prior to the publication, *hankaku moji* were exclusive to digital media, setting them outside the domain of official publishing markets and conventional print economy.²⁶ In *Densha otoko*, words typically written in *hiragana* or *kanji*, like *kita*, meaning “has come,” are regularly converted to *hankaku moji*. The permutation produces a certain affect of playful exuberance and is used especially when Densha returns to the forum following his

dates with Hermès. It plays as well on the expression, “the train has come/ arrived” (*densha ga kita*).

The creation of *emoji* with Japanese ASCII symbols, either on their own or with *hankaku moji*, further embellishes the text with affect, as in the accompanying example expressing irrepressible excitement at *Densha*’s return from a date (Figure 2).

Companions to the emoticon, *emoji* can be input on *keitai* (third-generation [3G] Internet cell phones) or in some computer programs in the symbol format and converted to emoticons by *henkan* or the “Return” key. Infusing the text with sentiment pictorially, their superlative format is typically the animated emoticon, and in some cases in the online text of *Densha otoko* animated *emoji*. Although it seems likely that *emoji* have a significant precedent in manga, they are an unequivocal index of digital communication.

The Japanese ASCII art in *Densha otoko* is diverse and impressive, denoting a considerable investment of time and effort. Some illustrations are only loosely connected with the topic of the conversation thread, appearing more as displays of technological proficiency. A few, however, appear as graphic equivalents of the military metaphors, depicting some manner of military or war-related scene (Figure 3).

Whereas the military metaphors operate via a semantic dimension once removed from the surface of the text to conjure images in the mind of the reader, the digitally specific symbol configurations perform at a graphic level. While all text functions via a graphic element, the inability in the majority of instances to align the symbols with a phonetic register or to apprehend decisively their meaning confines them as an event to the surface of interface and a visual economy that, importantly, conveys unmistakable extravagance; it is not simply that to create these combinations demands a considerable investment of time and labor but also the sense of excess relayed by seemingly unnecessary repetition. Overall, what emerges is a display of indulgence in the possibilities of the medium and its transformative powers. Such

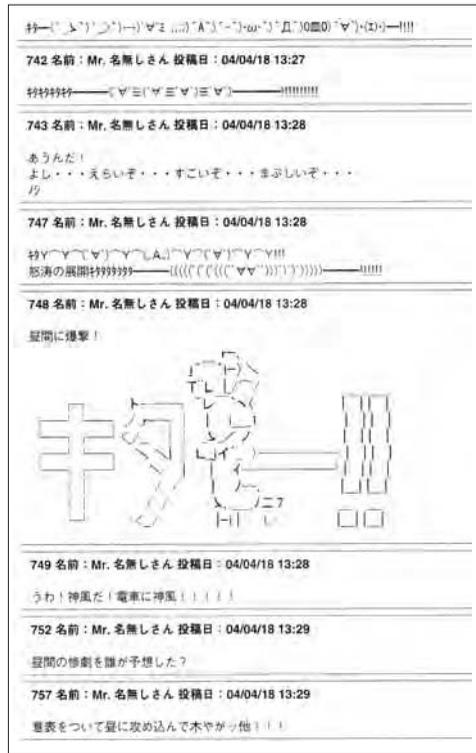


FIGURE 2. A typical section of discussion thread from the story.



FIGURE 3. An ASCII rendition of a tank.

indulgence is precisely the object of digitally empowered representation and nothing provides a more ideal setting than the depiction of armed conflict. Through computer graphics, representations of war are events of graphic extravagance that situate the body specifically as a site of impossible excess. War figures thus not as an inevitable human tragedy but rather as a scene of symbolic extravagance.

SPECTACLES OF EXCESS

A commensurate relation between the performance of digital text in *Densha otoko* and representations of combat rendered via computer graphics is established in *Densha otoko* when Densha insists on giving Hermès *The Matrix* film trilogy (1999–2003) and then discussing the films with her at length.²⁷ The films are an obvious means for acquainting Hermès with the 2channel existence, which Densha cannot disclose to her for fear of revealing himself as an otaku and the possibility that she might discover that he has been discussing their dates in detail with hundreds of strangers. A reality defined by perpetual connectivity is the premise behind both the 2channel world and the construct of the world in *The Matrix*; the condition of *nakano hitori* is also the condition of *The Matrix* and an expression of simultaneous multiplicity and unity as the result of networked minds.

Where *Densha otoko* indulges in the digital medium through a textual excess, *The Matrix* films present scenes of fantastic combat. Combat is the pretext for connectivity within the story and the underlying spectacle for the audience. On a thematic level, *The Matrix* films demonstrate that the point

of the digital connectivity is not simply an increased sense of immediacy and presence afforded by the better connection but rather the chance to be there and be radically transformed at the same time. There is, after all, no point to virtual reality if one is forced to be the same person as in the nonnetworked world. The “there” of virtual reality, moreover, is the medium itself such that “being there” works against the rationalizing ends-over-means trajectory associated with technological progress under capitalism.

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As spectacle, the graphic extravagance of combat in *The Matrix* films recall the kind of symbolic excess that Georges Bataille attaches to sacrifice in a general economy. Spectacular excess, not war as a topic, is the objective of digitally rendered representations of war just as in a general economy war is a means to useless consumption embodied in the lavish sacrifice of prisoners rather than an end in itself.²⁸ The gratuitous violence of digitally rendered combat, like the useless consumption of sacrifice exceeds the threshold of the symbolic economy. The focus of both is the body, with computer graphics-created wars transfiguring and destroying bodies in a manner as sumptuous as the ritual of human sacrifice in ancient Mexico, which Bataille describes vividly as involving a priest who would tear out the still beating heart of a sacrificial victim and hold it up as an offering to the sun.²⁹ Unlike in the horror film, whose force lies in the premise of a viewer’s empathy with the tortured body, in the digitally rendered conflict the body is pure spectacle, transformed into an impossible and otherworldly object like the sacrificial body, thus foreclosing the possibility of viewer identification.

Notes

1. Translated into English, *ni channeru* means simply “second channel.” According to the site’s founder, Nishimura Hiroyuki, the name is a reference to television’s second channel, which in Kantō is an empty space of white noise in Japan’s broadcast spectrum and an opening for other media such as videotape and game machines. Interview with Nishimura Hiroyuki at Kuwasawa Design School moderated by Ozaki Tetsuya, posted to “RealTokyo,” February 10, 2005, http://www.realtokyo.co.jp/english/redesign/004_1.htm (no longer accessible). The OED defines an otaku as “a person extremely knowledgeable about the minute details of a particular hobby (esp. a solitary or minority hobby); *spec.* one who is skilled in the use of computer technology and is considered by some to be poor at interacting with others.” The term “otaku” is embedded within a vast social discourse

on Japanese youth that encompasses concerns over the alienating effects of technology and perceptions of a refusal among the younger generation to submit to conventional structures of labor and production—of either capital or children. Typically male, anywhere from early teens to middle age, the otaku is seen as harboring an obsession for anime and manga, choosing its world of fantasy infused with depictions of fantastic futures and technologies, exhilarating battles, and idealized (impossibly proportioned) female heroines over reality. He commits his life labor to this world, piously collecting related paraphernalia and embellishing, translating, pirating, remixing, and circulating anime within a network among other otaku, which comprises his only ostensible link to other human beings, and remains comfortably within the parameters of his fantasy domain. It is not just that the otaku is skilled with computer technology, but moreover the perception of an inherent commensurability between the ontology of the computer and otaku practices. In the capacity it provides for manipulating, organizing, and storing vast amounts of data, its support of complex fantasy games, and its role in the creation of a seamless and perpetual distributed network for file sharing and virtual communication among discretely situated otaku, the computer seems to have emerged in direct response to the desires of otaku practices.

2. Prior to *Densha otoko* the most powerful images of otaku in the media were by Miyazaki Tsutomu, a serial killer arrested in 1989 for the gruesome murder of four young girls, and Taku Hachirō, a once popular television character whose strikingly unattractive appearance facilitated a negative stereotype of the otaku. *Densha otoko*'s success did much to rehabilitate the social status of the otaku in Japanese media. In contrast to these two images, *Densha otoko* presents the otaku as naïve but ultimately courageous, genuine, gentle, and attentive. International interest in the otaku in academia and the media has been spurred by the perceived relation between otaku and anime, and the ascension of the latter over the past two decades to the status of a recognized global commodity and item. Concurrently, this international attention has provided momentum in Japan to an otaku discourse. The Tokyo University professor Azuma Hiroki is one significant contributor to this discourse. Asserting the notion of an inherent postmodern quality to otaku practices, Azuma emphasizes the otaku's penchant for simulacra, online communication and file sharing, exploitation of a database of characters and narratives in the production of a supplemental fanzine-like body of work, and the otaku's ostensible disregard for the conventions of the mainstream profit-oriented culture industry Azuma Hiroki, *Geemu teki riarizumu no tanjō: Dōbutsuka suru posutomodan 2* (The birth of game-like realism: Animalizing postmodern 2) (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2007).

See also Thomas Lamarre's discussion of Azuma and the otaku discourse in "An Introduction to Otaku Movement," *Entertext* 4, no. 1 (2004/2005), http://arts.brunel.ac.uk/gate/entertext/4_1/lamarre.pdf (accessed June 9, 2008).

3. This assumption was emphasized in the television miniseries of *Densha otoko* by the casting of the well-known model Itō Misaki as Hermès. Similarly, in the film version, Hermès is played by the actress/model Nakatani Miki.

4. *Densha otoko*, "Mission One 1 Emergency Operation (*kinkyū shirei*)," 2channel Web site, <http://www.geocities.co.jp/Milkyway-Aquarius/7075/trainman1.html> (accessed June 9, 2008).

5. An "Akiba-kei otaku" is an otaku who frequents the "Electric Town" neighborhood

around Tokyo's Akihabara train station, which is famous for its concentration of technology-related establishments.

6. Nakano Hitori, *Densha otoko* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 2004); translated by Bonnie Elliot as *Train Man: The Novel* (New York: Del Rey, 2007).

7. The editor in charge of the *Densha otoko* project was Gunji Hiroko, whom I interviewed February 2005. She explained that another editor who often checks 2channel had come across the text by accident and suggested it for publication for a niche audience of readers accustomed to the Web but unlikely to read a long text on a computer screen. The overwhelming popularity of the text was unexpected. Published in autumn 2004, it sold 260,000 copies in just three weeks and half a million copies in two months.

8. See for example, “*Densha otoko ga būmu ni*” (*Densha otoko* becomes a boom), *SPA*, December 13, 2005, 91; Tsubouchi Yūzō, “*Densha otoko wa, aru imi de shōsetsu no dentō ni ntotteru ne*” (*Densha otoko* complies to some extent to the traditional novel), *SPA*, January 25, 2005, 116–19; Uchiyama Hiroki, “*Densha otoko yomu onna no ren'aijukudo*” (The level of romantic maturity of women who read *Densha otoko*), *AERA*, November 22, 2004, 29–30.

9. Richard Coyne, *Technoromanticism: Digital Narrative, Holism, and the Romance of the Real* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999).

10. Similarly, it is a space and time marked by shared sense of alienation from traditional relations. See Lynne Kirby, *Parallel Tracks: The Railroad and Silent Cinema* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997).

11. Okazaki Takeshi points out that if *Densha otoko* had merely been the story of one young man's struggle to confess his love to a woman, it would not have been interesting. It is the effect of the countless anonymous posters who rush to help *Densha* that lends the story its energy. Okazaki Takeshi, “Besutoseraa: Shinsatsushitsu” (Bestseller: Examination room), *Chūōkōron* 120, no. 2 (2005): 264–65.

12. *Keitai* are 3G cell phones with Internet access. They can access special *keitai* formatted Web pages through a *keitai* Web browser (some also reduce regular Web pages to a *keitai* format) and can be used to send and receive email.

13. Nakano, *Densha otoko*, 66. Unless otherwise noted, translations from Japanese to English are my own.

14. *Ibid.*, 209–10.

15. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 13.

16. Paul de Man, quoted in Thomas Keenan, “The Point Is to (Ex)Change It: Reading *Capital*, Rhetorically,” in *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, ed. Emily S. Apter and William Pietz, 152–85 (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993).

17. *Ibid.*

18. I have glossed over a mistype in the original where “by the end of the day” (*kyō jū*), appears as a combination of the characters for “today” (*kyō*), and “gun” (*jū*). This does not appear to be an intentional play on words, like the examples discussed in the latter part of my argument, because there is no recognizable semantic, graphic, or phonetic play from the character combination.

19. Nakano, *Densha otoko*, 305–6.

20. David Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediations* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), 5–6.

21. Paul Virilio, *Open Sky* (London: Verso, 1997).
22. Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (London: Verso, 1989). In Virilio's theory, the corporeality of embodied vision presents the final obstacle in the pursuit of speed in televisual apparatuses, demanding ultimately that the human be displaced as a seeing subject.
23. Japanese ASCII art is distinguished from ASCII art by its use of symbols from the Shift_JIS character set.
24. The use of *more* instead of *ore* also suggests the combination of *ore to monachan*, which refers to the 2channel character *monachan* to mean "me and *monachan*."
25. Suzuki Atsufumi, "*Densha otoko*" *wa dare na no ka: "Netaka" suru komyunikeishon*" (Who is *Densha otoko*: Neta-ization communication) (Japan: Chūōkōron Shinsha, 2005), 19–20.
26. According to the editor, when Shinchōsha initially approached their publishing section with the idea for the *Densha otoko* book they were told that it would be impossible without developing new printing technology. However, this may not be entirely accurate. It seems more likely that the difficulty arose from the slight disparity in the character display among different web browsers and operating systems. In other words, a character, symbol or spacing input on one type of web browser sometimes appears different on another type of web browser. Because of the unconventional use of characters and symbols, combined with the inability to know what web browser and system a specific poster is using, it would be impossible to determine the original text and intention. Again, this is a problem particular to the digital medium.
27. On the second date Densha gives Hermès *The Matrix* trilogy collection on DVD as required viewing, warning her that the story gets complicated. He then devotes later dates to explaining the films to her and they discuss the relations between its central characters.
28. The film *300* (2006) also comes to mind. Far more important than the narrative in this film is the extravagant spectacle of carnage empowered by computer graphic technology.
29. Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy* (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 49–50.