Interview with Murase Shūkō and Satō Dai

Deborah Scally, Angela Drummond-Mathews, Marc Hairston

figurations, as befits her role as *kami* of the Dreamtime, but everyone else's dreams, sometimes malign, sometimes benign, are vivid and complex. From Dr. Shima comes a vibrantly loud totemic procession; a repeated nightmare plus Tarzan from Detective Konokawa; decayed dolls, corpses, and graffiti from Himuro; paranoid butterflies and rape from Osanai; power-maddened tree roots from the Chairman; a cheerful, if large, robot from Dr. Tokita; and, from Dr. Chiba, a charming, low-key romance. Against them are the dull tones of waking reality and cityscape ferroconcrete, which cannot compete with dancing umbrellas, frog bands, or even the abandoned theme parks of the Dreamtime, more accurately, the immensely rich graphic imagination of Japanese art itself. There is no question where Kon stands on *that* issue. In *Paprika,* art wins.

So, unlike *Innosenzu,* where entry into the decadent parallel universes of cyberspace implies profound danger and loss, *Paprika* ends happily. The evil Chairman has been devoured, Konakawa is free of his anxieties, and Dr. Chiba has happily latched onto Dr. Tokita, who does not seem to mind at all. By implication, the DC-Mini machine—with some new access controls!—will be approved by the government, and people will be happier with their dreams. And behind the dreams, the Dreamtime itself beckons.

Notes

1. Yasutaka Tsutsui, *Paprika* (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 1993). The novel was first serialized in 1991. The Sony DVD is in Japanese only, but the Columbia-Tristar DVD is French-made and has French, English, and Arabic subtitles. Both are region 2 DVDs.

2. And goes back to British science fiction writer Peter Philips's 1948–49 *Dreams Are Sacred,* in which psychiatrists invent a machine allowing the therapist to enter a patient's dreams. Like the DC-Mini, their contraption also causes untold problems. Philips's story was translated into

Japanese in 1980 as *Yume ha shinsei,* in *Worldwide humor SF masterpiece selection 1,* ed. Asakura Hisashi, (Tokyo: Kodansha).

3. Shakespeare, *A Midsummer-Night's Dream,* Act 5, sc. 1.

4. She is actually not the only one. In another allusion to *Serial Experiments Lain,* in Paprika's "www.radioclub.jp" bar—where she's a regular and even runs a tab!—the two bartenders are also external to the dream machine. But their voice actors are Satoshi Kon and Yasutaka Tsutsui, the director and the author, so they're allowed to stand outside the dream frame. If you ask where this bar is, the answer is the Dreamtime.

5. Justin Sevakis, "Beyond My Mind: Paprika," *Protoculture Addicts* 92 (May–June 2007): 20–25.

6. For traditional Japanese dreameaters (*baku*), see Hori Tadao, "Cultural Note on Dreaming and Dream Study in the Future: Release from Nightmare and Development of Dream Control Technique," *Sleep and Biological Rhythms,* 3 (2005): 49–55; Adam L. Kern, *Manga from the Floating World: Comicbook Culture and the Kibyoshi of Edo Japan* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asian Center, 2007), 236, figure 4.26. For a modern example of the tapir as dreameater, see Takahashi Rumiko, "Waking to a Nightmare," in *The Return of Lum: Urusei Yatsura,* 141–56 (San Francisco: Viz, 1995).

7. Yokoyama Mitsuteru, *Mahoutsuki Sarii* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 2007).

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Interview with Murase Shūkō and Satō Dai

DEBORAH SCALLY, ANGELA DRUMMOND-MATHEWS, AND MARC HAIRSTON

Murase Shūkō and Satō Dai have worked together on some of the most notable anime of the past decade. Murase was an anima-

tor or director on numerous *Gundam* series and directed *Witch Hunter Robin* (2002, *Witchi hantaa robin*). Satō has written the screenplays or scripts for *Cowboy Bebop* (1998–99, *Kaubōi bibappu*), *Eureka Seven* (2005–6, *Kōkyōshihen Eureka sebun*), *Wolf's Rain* (2003, *Urufuzu rein*), and *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex* (2002–3, *Kōkaku kidōtai STAND ALONE COMPLEX*). They worked together on *Samurai Champloo* (2004–5, *Samurai chanpurū*) and in 2005 collaborated on developing and making *Ergo Proxy* (2006, *Erugo Purakushii*). This interview took place at *AnimeFest* in Dallas, Texas, on September 3, 2007.

DEBORAH SCALLY AND ANGELA DUMMOND-MATHEWS: *Ergo Proxy* was one of the most unique and original anime released in the United States in 2007. We would like to know the origin of this narrative. Did you already have an idea for the series or were you approached by someone else with the idea?

MURASE SŪKŌ: I think I can say that *Ergo Proxy* is almost all my idea. Manglobe, the company that produced it, approached me and just told me, "Make something." They gave me the freedom to come up with any idea I chose for an anime. So the idea I created became the basis for *Ergo Proxy*. In the process of creation, Mr. Satō and I collaborated, along with many other young writers, and produced the final version of the anime.

DS/AD-M: Why did you choose to reference René Descartes in *Ergo Proxy*? Were either of you interested in Western philosophy before you started on the show?

MURASE: At first I wanted to do something about the concept of everyone having another *self* inside of themselves: the idea that there are two personalities inside a person. My main theme for the show was to do something based

on that concept. Descartes' phrase *cogito ergo sum* sort of triggered the idea.

DS/AD-M: We got the sense that the main theme of the series focused on taking responsibility for what you create in the world. But Vincent seemed to be always trying to run away from what was inside him, to run away from what he had created. Is that correct?

MURASE: Yes, Vincent was definitely trying to get away from that other existence inside of himself.

DS/AD-M: In general, do you think anime is strengthened or weakened by incorporating these Western philosophical concepts into the story?

MURASE: Superficially at least, I don't think the Japanese are particularly influenced by these philosophical themes. Essentially, the Japanese do not seem to understand or have the nerve to look directly at their own inner selves, and that is why there are so many problems in Japanese society right now. In that sense, the entire population of Japan is in some way trying to run away from their problems, just like Vincent was running away from those aspects inside of himself. I made *Ergo Proxy* in the hope of representing this problem.

DS/AD-M: We were fascinated by the heavy influence of gnostic philosophy we noticed in the narrative, and we were wondering why you chose to do so?

MURASE: Are you asking about the philosophical question "are human beings born bad (*seiakusetsu*)"? I answer that question by referencing my own inner self. I think I am not perfect: I might even say I am essentially a bit abnormal (*abu*). On one hand, there is the theory that human beings are good when they are born, but they do bad things because of the

outside influences as they live (*seizensetsu*). On the other hand, there is a theory that says human beings are born with both a good side and a bad side (*seiakusetsu*). I personally believe in the latter concept, and think if people only did whatever they wanted to do, then society would collapse. I think the former idea has some flaws. These ideas and views are always in my work.

What I am trying to say is that some people think: "I am not the one to blame for my actions, society is." But I think the ideal society would be where people accept that "I am partially responsible for the fact that I am in such a bad situation." Sometimes, when a person is in a bad situation, that person tends to think that his or her environment is to blame. But every person has some bad aspects inside themselves, and if they are not aware of that, then something will go wrong.

But that didn't really answer your question, did it?

DS/AD-M: We were asking because what stands out in the anime was how much the *language* of gnosticism was used: terms like "monad" and "demiurge" were used along with the concept of the "blind creator."

SATŌ DAI: We didn't explicitly want to express the concepts of gnosticism in the show. It was just that our personal beliefs ended up reflecting the ideas of gnosticism, so *after* the fact, we realized how well these terms fit and used them. For example, the creator forgets the fact that he or she is responsible for what he or she created and consequently becomes a "blind creator." Vince and the others were born with these issues and were running away from them. Although they ran away, they could not escape what they had created and ended up having to face up to their own responsibility.

MURASE: Philosophy and sociology are related to what's in our hearts . . .

SATŌ: . . . something like a mirror that reflects what is in our minds. But we were not making *Ergo Proxy* in order to express that notion. Philosophy is a mirror that reflects the society it comes from, and maybe the same thing could be said about anime.

DS/AD-M: The contrast between Re-l and Vincent in the story is very intriguing. It seems as if Re-l was supposed to be a witness to the transformations in society around her, while Vincent rarely opened his eyes.

MURASE: There are two ways to approach character design. We can start with the aspects of the character and then go on to make the physical design. Or, we can start from the design itself and then add the elements of the character. We tend to go either way in our work. In the case of Vincent, we wanted him to have different facial expressions from the others, so we started out with his eyes closed. The fact that his eyes are closed implies that he is not facing the reality, implying that he is not seeing all the things that have happened so far in a metaphoric way. In the case of Re-l, she is a strong character but we did not intentionally or logically make her design to counter the blindness of Vincent. But at a subconscious level, I think we had the idea of contrasting the eyes of these two characters.

DS/AD-M: The name "Re-l" sounds like the English word "real." Was that done deliberately to be symbolic or was that just an accident between the two languages?

SATŌ: No, that was deliberate. She and her name are supposed to represent reality. Her code number is "1-2-4-c" or "one to foresee." There are multiple versions of Re-l because they represent the multiple versions of reality.

DS/AD-M: So the final version of Re-l, the final reality, comprises the Daedelus and Icarus motif with the "monad" flying away?
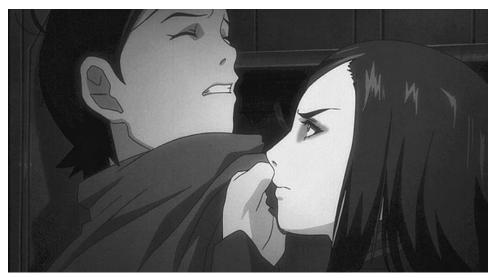
FIGURE 1. In *Ergo Proxy,* Re-l was a witness to the transformations in society around her, while Vincent rarely opened his eyes.

SATŌ: Exactly. No one pointed that out in Japan.

DS/AD-M: So you put in that point *just* for the American audience?

SATŌ: (laughs loudly)

DS/AD-M: Were you frustrated that the Japanese audience did not get the allusion, or were you doing it to try and expose them to these Western myths?

MURASE: Most Japanese people do know the term "the wings of Icarus," but most of them probably do not know the story behind the phrase. They just know the superficial part of it. But the wings of Icarus story is part of larger Minotaur myth, and I wanted to include the Minotaur story in the *Ergo Proxy*.

DS/AD-M: So most Japanese do not know the story of the Minotaur?

SATŌ: That's right.

DS/AD-M: So was *Ergo Proxy* better received in the United States than in Japan because of all these elements with which the American audience would be more familiar?

MURASE: In general, the Japanese missed most of the elements of symbolism we incorporated in our work.

SATŌ: They cannot perceive them.

MURASE: I put many elements of those symbols in the design in hope that they would understand them, but the Japanese audiences could not see them. When I read something like the English-language Wikipedia entries on *Ergo Proxy,* I find Americans are a lot more interested in those elements, and they recognize the symbolism.

SATŌ: The Japanese-language Wikipedia article about *Ergo Proxy* is very short. The Italian and French Wikipedia articles are huge! (laughs) One thing that comes to my mind is that folklore around the world had been passed on orally

from person to person, but today people do not communicate that way. So in my view, anime is a box where we can put this folklore and these mythologies for people to see them and hopefully think about those stories. I think we tried to structure a narrative similar to the Greek myths of the past.

DS/AD-M: Do you have any plans to work together on anything in the future?

MURASE: I am working on several projects and I want Satō to work with me for one of them, but Satō is pretty busy right now. So the timing is the issue.

SATŌ: We met each other for the first time in half a year at this convention, and we have been talking. We have been able to do some research and information gathering on possible projects.

DS/AD-M: Moving on to *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex,* in the episodes where Section 9 deals with the terrorist group known as the "Individual Eleven," the basis for this group's actions is explained by an essay or manifesto in the show. Was there an actual philosophy or series of events on which you based that idea?

SATŌ: Initially, we were going to concentrate on how Japan was going to participate in war after 9/11. But by the time we were working on those episodes, the Iraq war had already started and our Self-Defense Force was sent to Iraq. So it was a fiction intended to portray the future and then the war started. During this time we also had an election. Many Japanese voted for the politicians without realizing that the politicians planned to send our troops to Iraq and Afghanistan. They did not realize the consequences of their votes until they saw the online videos of a Japanese man being captured as hostage and then decapitated. So that part of it started out as a fiction and then became a documentary. I created the episodes of "Individual 11" in order to express the irresponsibility of the Japanese people when they voted for these politicians.[1]

MURASE: So when we started making it, it was meant to be a science-fiction future but became reality when the war started.

DS/AD-M: In one of your panels, you talked about a blending of American and Japanese cultures in animation. For example, I don't know if you have seen *Afro-Samurai* or *The Boondocks* . . .

SATŌ: (breaking into English) . . . I *really* like *Boondocks*! *Boondocks* did one episode that was like *Samurai Champloo*!

DS/AD-M: Yes!

SATŌ: (laughs) I wrote that! [referring to *Samurai Champloo*]

DS/AD-M: So perhaps the Western influences on *Ergo Proxy* and *Samurai Champloo* are quite strong. Can you tell us about your philosophy concerning how the two cultures interact, particularly looking at the racial issues?

SATŌ: People asked me why we portrayed a "black" culture rather than samurai (in *Samurai Champloo*), and I said that it is a story about a minority culture. "Hip-hop" is minority culture and the members of Champloos were a counter- or minority culture in the perspective of that time as well. So connecting them created some cultural meaning. On the other hand, *Afro-Samurai* and *The Boondocks* are influenced by Japanese anime, but *Afro-Samurai* focuses on a black character and shows its Western influences. So the exchange is happening in both ways between Japanese and American cultures. I am not sure if I am going to commit myself to following that flow, but we need to know what we think about the trend and what we want to do about it.

FIGURE 2. Murase Shūkō *(center)* and Satō Dai *(right)* during their interview.

MURASE: This is a complicated question.

SATŌ: Is race an issue here? Does the fact that the Japanese are also "colored" people have anything to do with anime as a form of pop culture that merges both Western and Japanese culture? Do we have some inferiority complex about our "color"?

MURASE: I think we do have some amount of inferiority complex. It is certainly not nonexistent. But we are not making anime to express a sense of inferiority. Rather, I think anime is something that can go beyond all that. Until a few years ago, there was no way any Japanese anime characters could be accepted overseas. But now people just love them. The nationality of the character is not an issue anymore. In live-action films, a character is always recognized as having a racial background. But in anime, unless we intentionally put it forward, we do not have to worry about the race of the characters. I think this is why we can create stories that have global appeal. And that is why I take anime very seriously. It seems like many Americans now love

anything that is very Japanese. But I cannot clearly understand (or analyze) that trend.

SATŌ: I realized after coming here that anime has the power to erase racial awareness. And I am sure this realization will affect my later work.

Notes

1. Editor's note: Satō is referring to an incident in October 2004 when a group linked to Al-Qaeda in Iraq captured a Japanese civilian, Kōda Shōsei, in Iraq. The group issued a video demanding Japanese troops be withdrawn. When the Japanese government refused, Kōda was beheaded and the video of his death was posted online. While this incident received only scant coverage in the United States, it was widely publicized in the Japanese media, leading to a public debate about the deployment of the Japanese troops in Iraq.