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Magical Girls: Queer Identity in Japan

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Magical Girls: Queer Identity in Japan

Abstract

Queer themes have long been interlaced with feminist ideals and "magical girls" within Japanese anime culture. The subject is explored within two iconic magical girl anime, "Madoka Magica" and "Revolutionary Girl Utena", as well as the history of queerness in Japan and its relevancy to modern ongoing franchises.

Keywords

Magical Girl, Queer anime, Madoka Magica, Revolutionary Girl Utena, Queer Japan

Disciplines

Film and Media Studies | Japanese Studies | Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies

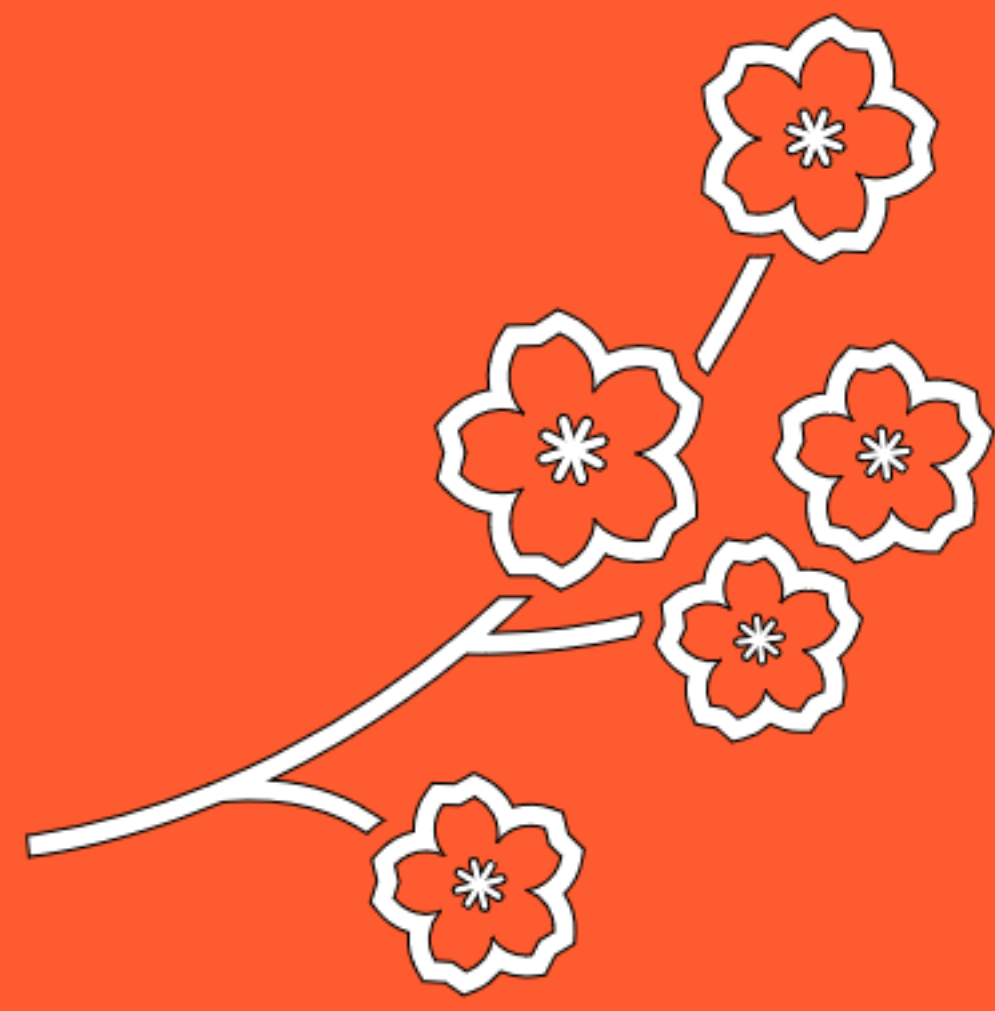
Comments

This poster was created based on work completed for FYS 149-2: An Atomic Lizard, A Robot Boy, Pocket Monsters and Some Very Cute Kitties: Japanese Popular Culture Goes Global, and presented as a part of the eighth annual CAFE Symposium on February 8, 2023.

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Magical Girls: Queer Identity in Japan

by Keira McDevitt

Thesis

The magical girl genre within anime has long been associated with queerness among young women and has normalized it within those spheres. Stories of girls' love within Japanese pop culture contain deeper themes of feminism and rejecting the patriarchy that have contributed towards a hopeful social shift within modern Japan. The slow acceptance of queer identities among Japanese youth which can be seen through the mainstream popularity of queer media and the continual spread of movements advocating for queer rights.

History

Historically, gender non-conforming and queer individuals saw more acceptance in Japan pre-Meiji era (which began in 1868). Previously, the *onnagata*, men who performed as women in the *kabuki* theatre and lived as women outside of the stage, marrying other women and raising children. At this time, relationships between people of the same sex were not seen as different from relationships between opposite sexes. After the opening of Japan to the West after 1868, the Japanese attempted to conform to western ideals and same-sex relationships and their acceptance saw a decline. In more recent years with global gay rights movements, Japanese queer rights have seen a resurgence. This is in part due to the increase of queer media within Japanese pop culture, specifically in the anime sphere.

Analysis

Mahou shoujo, or "magical girl", is a genre of story where typically young, innocent girls gain magical power in order to fight for good. However, this new position alienates the girls from their world. This is reflective of the role of women, specifically lesbians, within Japanese society. The girls' within *Madoka Magica* grapple with not only being magical girls, but initially with the idea of becoming one. The titular Kaname Madoka rejects the offer time and time again, even as the girls' around her succumb to the offer and find themselves twisted in unrecognizable ways. This theme of grappling with an external power is no stranger to the magical girl genre. Inherent to stories about girls' struggles, patriarchy remains a central conflict. Within *Madoka Magica*, the *mahou shoujo* find themselves to be workers of a system at large exploiting them. Japanese women find themselves in a place where their rights are being defended, but their choices are being made for them by the men in power. Therefore, stories about young women going through a similar journey and ultimately rejecting the system put in place to exploit them become more powerful. The magical girls find themselves trapped not by physical bonds, but mental ones. Turning to an older piece of *mahou shoujo* media released in 1997, *Revolutionary Girl Utena* is a story less subtly focused on the liberation of Japanese women through disassembling the patriarchy. It places an important focus on the idea that free women will find romantic and sexual liberation not with men, but with other women. While *Madoka* focuses on the gritty suffering of women at the hands of the system that does not care for them, *Utena* addresses the link between the suffering of women and the key to freedom from the system that harms them. Patriarchy is not embodied in one person but is a deeply rooted way of life and thinking that should be eliminated. The characters within *Utena* are all negatively affected by the patriarchy. Even the men who benefit from it otherwise find themselves to be repressed and unable to be their true selves. A destruction of the patriarchal bonds of society is not a liberation for only women, but for all people forced into roles based on their sex.



Photo credit: U.S. Embassy Tokyo

Conclusion

Homura's love for Madoka is a central aspect of her character in all iterations of the franchise, from the anime to the spin-off games, and it imbues the *Madoka* franchise with a sense of queerness that is impossible to remove. The sentiment is similar for *Revolutionary Girl Utena*—from Utena and Anthy as women engaged to one another, to the multiple kisses they share in the movie *Adolescence of Utena (1999)*—there is no removing the queerness from the staples of the *mahou shoujo* genre.

In the final episode of *Madoka Magica*, Madoka declares, "If any rule or law stands in the way... I will destroy it, I will rewrite it." This quote stands to represent not only her current situation of ascending into a goddess, but a testament to the love shared among girls' that is frowned upon by society. As Utena and Anthy combined creates the power to "revolutionize the world", both Madoka and Homura use their queerness as a catalyst to bring about change in their lives for the better. The *mahou shoujo* ultimately use the power gifted to them by the overbearing patriarchal constructs of their worlds in order to liberate themselves and their fellow girls from the aforementioned constructs. This message extends beyond the screen into the viewer, empowering audiences to welcome change in the name of social freedom.