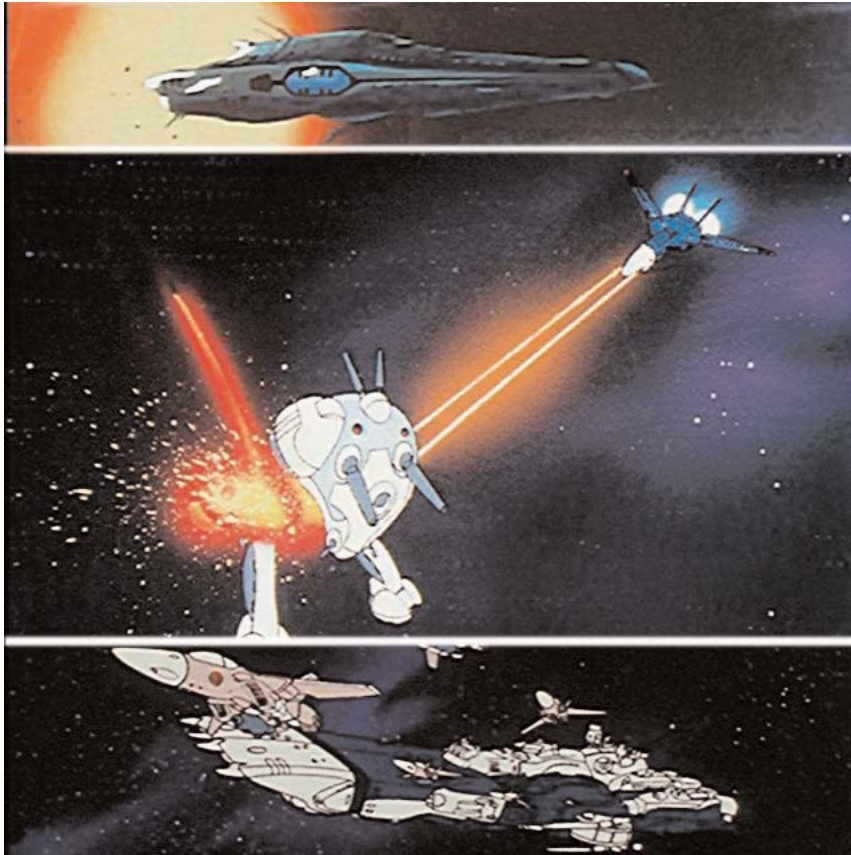


A Japanese Gaze

*Using space to represent time and meaning
in Japanese animation*

*Presentation by Vlad Atanasiu
MIT SP.270 Japanese Animation class
26 April 2004*

We will look at an underlying aspect of Japanese animation: how space is used to represent time and meaning. Since all of us have seen the *Macross* series, I will use it as an introduction to the theme; then I will talk about three types of representations and finally I will give the reasons for the treatment of the material that we will see.



[01 Dogfight – *Macross-25-6*]

1) INTRODUCTION

This is a typical image from *Macross* in regard to the positioning and movement of parties involved in the plot. On the top we see an alien Zentradi battleship coming from the left and on the bottom the Terran Superdimensional Fortress Macross, looking left, while the middle captures an instant of a dogfight between a Zentradi pod (left) and a Terran Valkire (right). Throughout the series this is the predominant orientation in which the enemies are presented: aliens to the left, earthlings to the right.



[02 Alien attack – *Macross-25-0.01.44*]

However it can happen that parties appear from the side that they don't belong to - when characters are switching sides for example. In this image Zentradi Milia is attacking Terran Max...



[03 Swirl in love – *Macross-25-0.03.11*]

...then, losing the battle, falls in love with him, and we see both floating in the air, swirling around each other, until Milia takes the part of the space reserved for humans – the right side – and...



[04 Switch sides – *Macross-25*-o.06.34]

... gets married to Max – seen here piloting a Valkyrie to their wedding party.

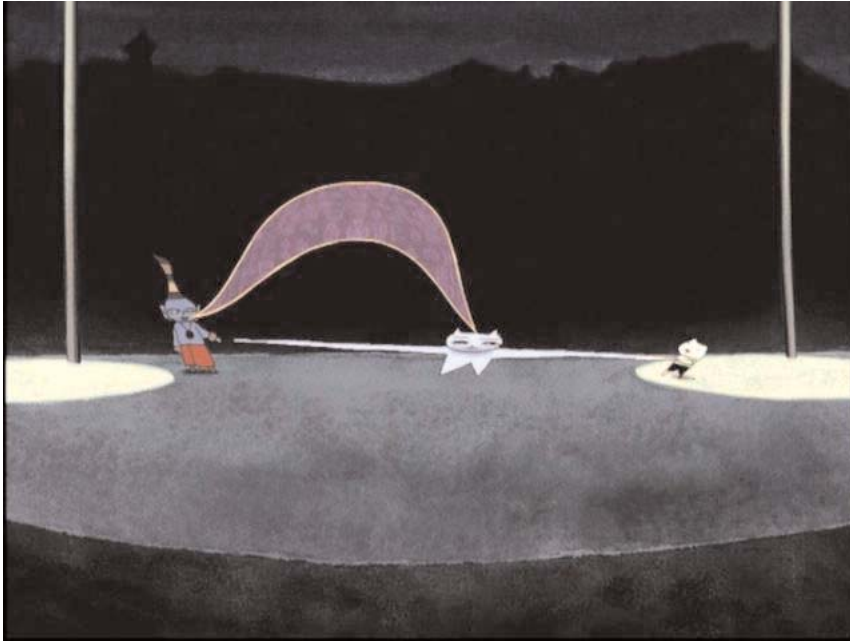


[05 Voyage – Dragon Half-1-0.00.39]

2) TYPES OF REPRESENTATION

2.1) *Time*

The Macross images helped us see how movement is translated to space. Generalizing on this idea, movement can be used to represent time-flow and generate a time-arrow, like that of scientific graphs. While graphs have usually the time origin to the left and develop to the right, in Japanese animation however the time origin is predominantly to the right of the screen. Here we have an excellent example, where the train is traveling right to left (RTL), a direction that is constantly hold throughout this episode of Mink's voyage (7 out of 12 scenes have this orientation).



[06 Life to Death – *Nekujiro-so* 0.04.33]

A more dramatic voyage is that of life, from birth to death, which is the subject of this image. To the left is death trying to take with it on it's way to the left and the real of non-return the cat in the middle that her brother tries to bring back home, to the right, and so to keep her alive.



[07 Resurrection – Nekujiro-so]

Sometimes death is not eternal – there might be resurrection. In a circus God is cutting a maid in pieces, but his power enables him to bring her back to life. To do this he throws her chopped limbs to the right – that is from future back to present (during the animation the head at the bottom is seen moving to the right).



[08 Bad/Good – *Dragon Half*-1-0.00.48]

2.2) *Meaning*

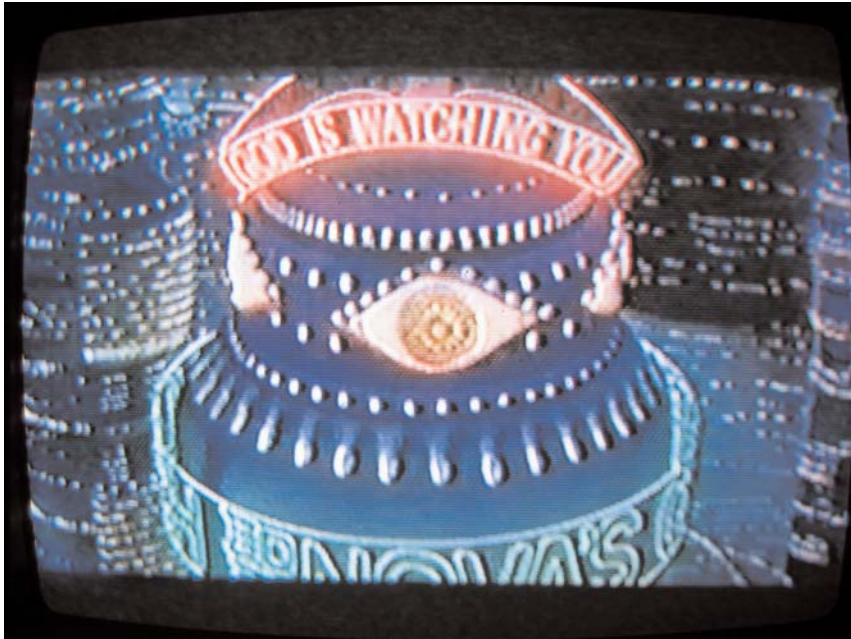
2.2.1) *2D gaze*

Spatial orientation is very useful for representing categorical information, especially of the bimodal type. Here we have the beast – the dragon that in this particular series is the mother – attacking the human – the warrior who is the father. This is the way usually adopted by Japanese animation: the bad guy to the left, the good guy to the right.



[09 Alien/Terran – Macross-26-o.03.43]

The same orientation convention expresses a potential difference in social affiliation: here a Terran officer (right) is greeting an alien ambassador (left). Right represents ‘our’ side, left is for the ‘others’.



[10 God – *On Your Mark* circa 0.30]

2.2.1) 3D gaze

Until now, the gaze of people in the images that we saw or the orientation of objects, is not directed towards the viewer, it happens in a flat, two dimensional space, to which all the movements are restricted. However, eyes can and do look at the anime fan. While the first type can be called the observers gaze, where he is not implicated in the ongoings of the anime world, the 3D frontal gaze is that of the participant.

This type of gaze is a very powerful one, a reason why it is connected to God – the 3D gaze has indeed divine powers. Here, this link is made explicit by the neon lights suspended above the blinking eye overlooking like a Foucaultian panopticon the city: *God is watching you!*



[11 The Father Ruler – *Metropolis* 0.02.27]

The frontal gaze characterizes also worldly rulers, aspiring to god-like power: here the dictator of *Metropolis* is stretching his arms atop a ziggurat to encompass the entire space while delivering a speech.



[12 The Daughter Ruler – *Metropolis* 1.30.00]

And here, his artificial daughter is adopting the same position while sitting on the throne, symbolically placed on a sphere representing the universe, in an empty cross-shaped space.



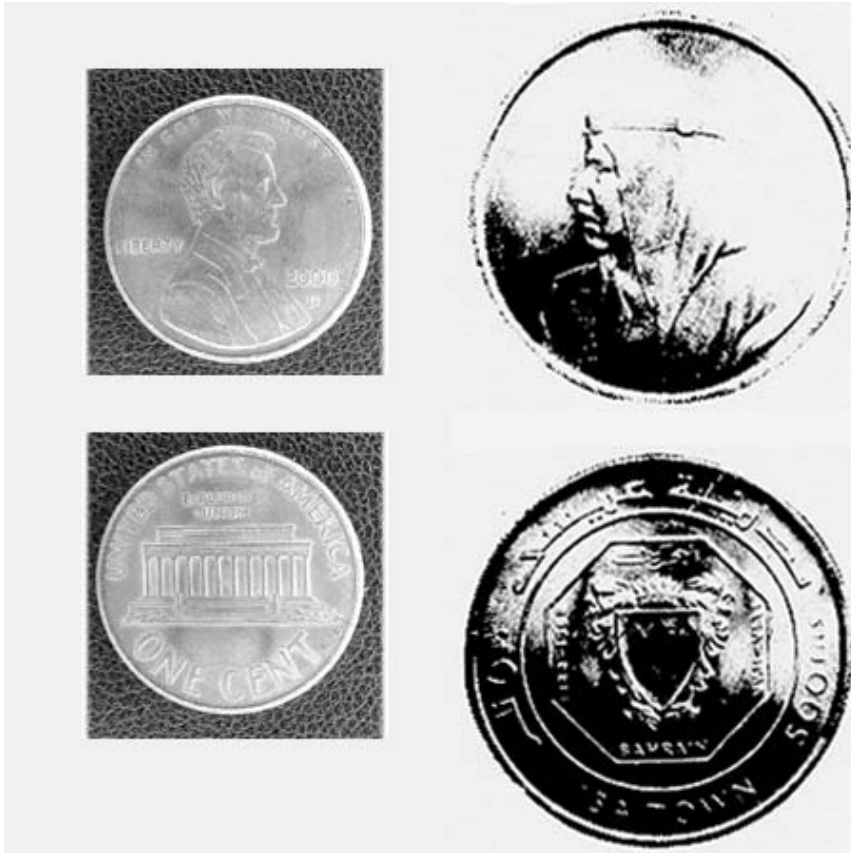
[13 Annunciation – Angel & Mary]

3) REASONS

3.1) Writing direction

This part of the study is introducing examples from outside the Japanese animation. The reason for this is to show that spatialization is not particular to animation, nor to Japanese culture – it is indeed an universal phenomenon.

Reason of the right/left orientation of entities in space is the direction of writing. Historically drawing and writing are two intermixing elements in the most common communication media, books. Being linear, writing is naturally providing a direction for time-flow: we write and then read from left to right (in Latin characters), the past is to the left, futures lies to the right. A famous example is that of the depiction of the Annunciation: overwhelmingly, the representations are putting the angle to the left and Mary to the right. The reason behind this choice is very simple: the angle delivers a message that is written in the image, running literally from his mouth to her ears. In order to keep the text upright so that it can be easily legible, the angel has to be in the left part of the image.



Coins are very good examples for the study of the influence of writing direction on the orientation of represented individuals. Lincoln looks on the US 1 cent parallel to the direction of the Latin script, while the sheikh of 'Oman does it too, but from right to left, because this is how Arabic script is written.

[14 Coins – Latin/Arabic writing]



Compared to other cultures where the writing style follows only one direction – like Latin –, Japan offers the delights of a much greater complexity. Today’s writing directions in Japan are a) top-down-right-to-left, b) left-to-right, c) and sometimes also right-to-left. Despite this variability, it is interesting to see that orientation is strongly influenced by only one of the possible direction, which is also historically the oldest: top-down-right-to-left. Accordingly, the flame blowing over the title in this image is coming from the right.

[15 Japanese writing direction – *Dragon Half* 1-0.00.30]



[16 Implications – Otomo Katsuhiro, *Sayonara Nippon*]

Orientation is an important issue when product adapted for one system are transferred to another. Manga translation is typical example. What to do with the cover that we see here? Would we keep it as it is, the spine part of it would be lost since a book printed in Latin characters has its spine to the right. If we would mirror the image – as is a common practice in manga translation – , then the tip of Manhattan will point in a most unnatural direction! Animation is clearly devoid of such kind of insoluble problems, since there is no physical object the fan has to manipulate in order to watch it unfold.



[17 Powerful – Christ & Basileus]

3.2) *Natural reasons*

As for why the frontal gaze is a preferred representation of power, the reason is that a gaze looking at you has much more potential significance than a gaze that you can evade, that is not aware of you and that you can observe. The frontal gaze is typical of Byzantine coins: on this particular one the avers represents Christ, son of God, and the reverse the ruling Basileus, emperor of Byzantium. Every time you take a coin out of your purse, those two characters will take a look at your actions. They use space and gaze to not only to represent their power, but also to put it into action.



[18 Other world – Nabatean tombstone]

The frontal gaze can act as a gate to a space beyond the three dimensions to which we are used to. By carving it on their tombstones in the Palmyrian desert, the Nabateans provided a link between this world and the world after death.

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I presented here some of the aspects of spatialization of non-spatial entities such as time and meaning. There are many other interesting questions left open: how is writing induced space orientation connected to handedness or brain and body asymmetry; what are their psychological influences (there is a preferred lateralization in the way people bend their head for kissing and the arm chosen by mothers to hold the baby) and how it influences our organization of space.

REFERENCES

For three studies in the spatialization of meaning and the directionality of gazes in paintings of the Annunciation and Islamic miniatures, look:

<http://mywebpage.netscape.com/atanasiuvlad/regards/>

<http://mywebpage.netscape.com/atanasiuvlad/lateral/>

For theoretical treatment of spatialization:

Gattis Merideth — *Spatial Schemas and Abstract Thought*, Cambridge (MA), MIT Press, 2001.