

# The Fighting Spectacle of *Naruto*

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*Anime*, or Japanese animated cartoons, currently dominate the global animation market, constituting over 60% of all television cartoons shown worldwide.<sup>1</sup> Previously a sub-cultural niche in the United States, *anime* and *manga* (Japanese comic books) have entered mainstream entertainment in recent years, appearing on cable television channels such as the Cartoon Network and selling in bookstores across the nation. A few years ago, *anime* stirred public interest for the first time due to the phenomenal international popularity achieved by the *Pokemon* media franchise.<sup>2</sup> *Anime* was still considered a children's medium at that time, a vehicle for cute monsters and simple stories. But shortly thereafter in 2002, Miyazaki Hayao,<sup>3</sup> the acclaimed director of many popular animated films, won an Academy Award for *Spirited Away*, which was followed by the blockbuster success of *Howl's Moving Castle* in 2004. Japanese *manga* now regularly rank among the bestselling books in the US,<sup>4</sup> and the Wachowski brothers have popularized *anime* in the United States as a medium for serious storytelling in *The Animatrix*.

Over the last decade, the rise of Japanese *anime* as an international media phenomenon has provoked questions about the nature of *anime* and the way its content has entered the global popular imagination. I am particularly interested in the properties of *anime* as a medium and how the content of an *anime* is crucially shaped by the limitations and features of an animated aesthetic. To address these questions, I closely examine an *anime* text in terms of its formal qualities to better understand how narrative is visually expressed in *anime*. The text I consider in this paper is *Naruto*, one of the most well-known and widely distributed *anime* in the world today.

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Faiola. "We're Playing Their Toons: Japanese Anime Moves Out of the Fringe and onto the Red Carpet." *Washington Post*. December 6, 2004. Page CO1.

<sup>2</sup> Anne Allison. *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination*. (Berkeley: University of California Press. 2006).

<sup>3</sup> All Japanese names will be written surname first followed by given name.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Wiseman. "Manga comics losing longtime hold on Japan." *USA Today*. October 18, 2007.

*Naruto* is a tale about a lonely orphan named Uzumaki Naruto who dreams of one day becoming the greatest ninja in his village (see Figure 1). Friendless and alone, Naruto is a constant troublemaker, seeking attention the only way he knows. But Naruto, the class clown and village screw-up, carries an important secret hidden in his body, one that has been concealed from him his entire life. Twelve years prior, the leader of Konoha and countless other ninja gave up their lives to seal a demonic fox-spirit in Naruto's infant body, thus preventing the dangerous creature from obliterating the Village of Konoha. Although imprisoned and isolated inside Naruto, the demon fox still lives in the memories of the villagers who fear and loathe him. As a consequence, Naruto grows up shunned and ignored, unable to understand the source of their anger, which drives him to act out even further. The story begins on the day that Naruto finally discovers the reason why the whole world seems to hate him.

The *Naruto anime*, as of November 2007, has aired over 255 twenty-minute episodes over a period of five years, and it is still releasing new episodes every week in Japan with no end in sight. Based on an extremely popular *manga* by Kishimoto Masashi, *Naruto* debuted on Japanese television in 2002 and quickly rose to worldwide popularity, prompting the release of three feature-length animated movies, two video games, a stage musical, and countless numbers of licensed toys. In Japan, *Naruto* is one of the highest rated children's *anime* series with a total audience of 8% compared to all programs in the same time slot, including adult programming.<sup>5</sup> These numbers are impressive given the highly fractured ecology of Japanese television and the major competition from other *anime* series.

In 2005 the Cartoon Network acquired the license to show *Naruto* in America, and subsequently experienced astounding improvements in ratings, even increasing their fickle

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<sup>5</sup> (<http://hashihime.atspace.com/etc/ratings/2007a.html>) translations of Japanese rankings by Hashime. (<http://hashihime.blogspot.com/2007/03/current-anime-tv-ratings-in-japan.html>) based on released data.

“tween” audience (9-14-year-olds) by 70%. The raw numbers indicate that 790,000 American tweens watch *Naruto* on the Friday and Saturday night time slot each weekend, and the child audience (6-11-year-olds) improved by 22%, reaching a total of 654,000 American children. *Naruto* ranks first in its time slot across all television for ratings and viewership among 9-14-year-old boys,<sup>6</sup> and it has now been licensed and aired in Europe,<sup>7</sup> Canada,<sup>8</sup> and most recently Latin America.<sup>9</sup>

The bestselling *manga* on which the animated series was based is published by Shueisha Inc. It appears in a weekly magazine called *Shonen Jump* that has been releasing one chapter a week in the ongoing saga of *Naruto* since the spring of 1999. The *manga* is currently deep in the second and, according to interviews with Kishimoto, final narrative arc of the series. Considering the fact that the first narrative arc in *Naruto* spanned 27 volumes worth of material over five years, it is likely that several years worth of story still remain. The *Naruto manga* has sold a total of 71 million copies in Japan to date – totaling 36 released volumes – and currently ranks fifth on *Shonen Jump*’s all-time bestseller’s list.<sup>10</sup> Viz Media, an entertainment company jointly owned by American and Japanese publishers, acquired the rights to sell English-translated versions of *Naruto* and has sold 2.3 million copies of the *manga* since its release in July of 2003.<sup>11</sup> In 2006, a volume of the *Naruto manga* won a Quill Award, and the series continues to regularly place in

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<sup>6</sup> Aaron H. Bynum. “Toonami: November Ratings.” *Animation Insider*. November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> *Global License Magazine*. “Canada brings *Naruto* to YTV.” Weekly E-News Issue #127. September 13, 2005. (<http://www.licensemag.com/licensemag/article/articleDetail.jsp?id=185323&searchString=naruto>)

<sup>8</sup> *Naruto* imported to Europe - Italy, Spain, Portugal, Germany, Austria and Switzerland. “Panini, TV Tokyo Corporation and Shueisha Inc. Sign Landmark Licensing Agreement.” *Panini Online* press release. February 9, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> “Viz Media Licenses *Naruto* to Chilevision.” *Anime News Network*. April 20, 2007.

(<http://www.animenewsnetwork.com/press-release/2007-04-20/viz-media-licenses-naruto-to-chilevision>)

<sup>10</sup> “The Rise and Fall of Weekly *Shonen Jump*: A look at the Circulation of Weekly *Jump*.” *ComiPress*. May 6, 2007. (<http://comipress.com/article/2007/05/06/1923>)

<sup>11</sup> “Viz Announces Impressive Sales, Again.” *Anime Corporation*. October 1, 2007.

(<http://www.animecorporation.com/news/viz-announces-impressive-naruto-sales-again>.)

the *USA Today* Bestseller list.

Aside from information about global sales from DVD and licensed goods, there is one piece of information necessary to establish the reach of *Naruto*. An enormous number of fans watch the *anime* and read the *manga* through illegal online downloads and on streaming video sites. It would be very difficult to acquire this information; because many popular peer-to-peer download sites do not publish the number of total downloads over the lifetime of an active file. Moreover, the *anime* and *manga* can be directly downloaded or viewed on streaming video in so many different places on the Internet; it would be unfeasible to track every site. From the trace evidence alone, we can guess that the underground activity around this *anime* series is enormous and stretches across a global community of viewers. An indication of the international fan-base of this series exists on Mininova, a popular peer-to-peer file sharing site, where fans compete to be the first one from their country to post a thank you note to the *anime* distributors. Between 25 and 30 countries are represented each time, primarily in areas where the television network has not yet acquired licenses to air the episodes.

Before turning to the text, it is important to understand, even if briefly, the historical context of *anime* and *manga* and its relationship to Disney. The father of *anime* and *manga* in Japan was a man named Tezuka Osamu, a medical student turned artist whose vision defined the way the *anime* medium would evolve. Deeply influenced by the Disney movies he watched as a child, Tezuka took advantage of the collapse of the publishing industry in post-war Japan and the lifting of censorship bans to create a new kind of serious comic book based on the decompressed, cinematic flow of Disney's animation, which would later become the basis of modern *manga*.<sup>12</sup> Emboldened by his success in publishing *manga*, Tezuka turned to creating animation influenced by the Disney movies he so admired. Hand-drawn animation continues to be a cheap, if laborious

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<sup>12</sup> Frederik L. Schodt. *Dreamland Japan : Writings on Modern Manga*. (Berkeley, CA : Stone Bridge Press, 1996.)

method, and Tezuka was able to sell his creations to television studios for sums that undercut his competitors.<sup>13</sup> Over the next decade, Tezuka's creations would dominate and define the airwaves of Japan, setting a high standard of serious storytelling and creating an economic market that encouraged the proliferation and diversity of *anime*. In the intervening decades since Tezuka Osamu first began making *anime*, the medium has flourished and grown in ways that have left its Disney roots far behind. *Anime* media have stabilized into a huge diversity of established genres, splintering off into niche markets and evolving distinct visual traditions.<sup>14</sup> Television *anime* are now primarily geared towards adults, although a reliable industry of children's fare still churns out blockbuster hits like *Pokemon* and *Yugi-oh*. It is into this context which we place *Naruto* and attempt to understand how *anime* has come to operate.

#### CONSIDERING THE MEDIUM OF ANIMATION

Animation, in brief, is the optical illusion of motion on a screen when sequences of images are projected faster than the eye's ability to detect. Animation and film share this feature in common. Animation, however, renders images through illustration rather than photographic capture. As an illustrated medium, animation possesses an elastic ability to portray both the mundane and the fantastic through a single method.

Animation styles in Japan, unlike in some styles of American illustration, do not value optical mimicry of reality. *Anime* styles are characterized as "superflat" or extremely depthless like a paper cut-out. It bears a strong resemblance to previous artistic media in Japan, *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints in particular. The two-dimensionality of the visual medium is emphasized in *anime* style rather than disguised. *Anime* styles reduce the color palette and shade very simply to avoid portrayal of excessive volume. The lines are bold and the forms of objects are highly

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<sup>13</sup> Roland Kelts. *Japanamerica: How Japanese Pop Culture has Invaded the US*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2006.)

<sup>14</sup> Susan Napier. *Anime from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2005.)

simplified and without much detail. *Anime* style embraces the features of its medium, celebrating two-dimensional art and the kinds of motion possible through flatness.<sup>15</sup>

*Anime* style generally emphasizes the abstraction and simplification of forms. These abstractions are often very stylized and distinct, working to represent the figure clearly and simply. At its core Japanese *anime* style prefers signification using streamlined, stylized symbols over detailed, photographic representation. The principle of simplification in *anime* art accompanies a simultaneous simplification of behavior and psychology in many *anime* texts. Excessive behavior and physical action, dramatic and extravagant plots – the amplification of gestures and events are characteristics that appear in almost all genres of *anime*. An equivalent departure from physical and psychological realism always accompanies the increasing visual distance between reality and the representation of reality within an *anime*. This stylization of visual art and narrative has a critical impact on *anime* as an expressive medium.

This argument is best understood by closely examining a scene from the *Naruto anime*. Take, for example, one of the many occasions in which Naruto's irresponsible nature annoys his teammate Sakura. In a moment of self-reflexivity, the character Naruto begins an episode by breaking down the fourth wall to address the audience directly. He thanks them for watching the show and announces that the next episode will commence shortly. This is a huge mistake. Naruto forgets that the show was recently promoted to the prime time slot half an hour later. All the characters stumble out of their dressing rooms, milling around in confusion. Sakura, Naruto's teammate, arrives with curlers still in her hair. Learning that Naruto messed up yet again, Sakura becomes enraged and punches him.

The most interesting part of this scene is not the self-conscious meta-narrative of a show-within-a-show that frames this scene, but the sequence of events that occur when Sakura

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<sup>15</sup> Thomas Looser. "Superflat and the Layers of Image and History in 1990s Japan." *Mechademia*. 1 (2006) : 92-109.

becomes enraged. When Sakura gets angry, her head literally swells with rage (see Figure 2). Her face inflates like a balloon, reaching three times its normal size. Her features become distorted, dominated by the opaque white saucers of her eyes. The vein in her forehead bulges and pulses with emotion, and Sakura shakes with anger. Her mouth is agape with rage as she screams at Naruto. Sakura becomes visually bigger than Naruto, looming over him in the frame of the scene as if propelled forward by the force of her emotion. The distortion of reasoning when we become emotional manifests as a metaphoric physical change in the logic of the *Naruto* animated universe.

The representation of Sakura's anger as a physical, bodily gesture allows the animators to create a kind of visual cue, a signal of some larger meaning. It is difficult to portray emotional, interior states of mind, because they are intangible. In a live action television show, the performance of the actor carries the emotion of the moment. It can be difficult to portray the small, subtle facial movements that an actor would mobilize to portray emotions with an animated character, especially one that is highly stylized and often rendered without a great deal of visual detail. Emotional gestures become extravagant in response to this limitation, amplifying the physical reactions in emotional moments. Emotion is distilled and crystallized into a sign and broadcast outward.

In essence, by telegraphing Sakura's anger as a metaphoric physical distortion, the animation style opens up a new avenue to a character's interiority. *Anime* accomplishes this by mapping the psychological interior onto physical action or physical signs, amplifying these interior moments to crystallize the emotion and conflict that are difficult to express except through excessive gesture. This allows the animators to portray Sakura's internal psychological state without relying on voice overs or clumsy, expository dialogue. Her emotions can be

summed up in a visual action that does not disrupt the narrative flow. What would seem like a comical gesture to Americans is in fact a product of a sophisticated visual literacy, which acts as a window into the character's interior life.

Visual conventions like this one serve to support the narrative complexity of *anime*, and are a common lexicon developed and shared across all *anime* genres. Unlike in American animation, *anime* does not always employ these excessive visual gestures purely for comedy or for their own sake. They are a highly refined visual and narrative schema that encodes a huge range of human emotion. This visual shorthand is a part of the popular literacy of *anime*, a critical aspect of its aesthetic. Furthermore, the Japanese audience is implicated in the production of *anime*'s meaning, because *anime* depends on the audience's understanding of its conventions. Viewers new to the narrative style of *anime* must learn and decode this lexicon of visual signs if they wish to fully interpret *anime* narratives.

To address *anime* as a medium for dramatic storytelling, we must also examine animation as an expression of motion. The animation style found in *anime* is based upon "moving drawings" rather than "drawing movements." Drawing movement is what Americans would consider classic animation. Like the shutter of a film camera, the animator must render a series of illustrations capturing motion at short, fixed, even intervals, decomposing movement into a series of incremental still shots. The Disney standard of animation is twelve frames per second, resulting in fluid, cinematic motion. This is what is called "drawing the movement." The animator must draw the whole range of motion that constitutes one action.<sup>16</sup>

In contrast, the Japanese tendency is to "move the drawing." Rather than illustrating the entire movement, the animator takes a shortcut. They literally move a single illustration

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas Lamarre. "From animation to anime: drawing movements and moving drawings." *Japan Forum*. 14, no. 2 (2002) : 329-367.

incrementally across the shutter of the camera instead. This would be the equivalent of panning the camera across a space, but in reverse – inducing motion by moving the “space” relative to the still camera. This is called “limited animation,” while American animation is called “full animation.”<sup>17</sup>

Limited animation became a popular technique during the global economic crisis of the 1960’s. Due to a shortage in money and materials, Japanese animators could not afford to fully animate films. To compensate, they developed limited animation techniques to deploy during dialogue-heavy sections that required less action and concentrated full animation on segments where a great deal of motion occurred. This material shortage had a profound impact on the development of the subsequent *anime* aesthetic.<sup>18</sup>

The most important development was a bias towards storytelling that was best adapted to limited animation. Because single “shots” were held still over many frames to reduce cost, animators began concentrating on the most visually and emotionally charged poses to maximize the value of each frame (Figure 3). One of the characteristics of modern *anime* style is the way a shot lingers on the close up of character’s faces while wracked with intense emotion (Figure 18). Often, a character will stand completely still except for a small, repetitive motion occurring over a long period. A good example is Sakura’s trembling fist as she heroically resists from punching Naruto. The restraint of the animation embodies an impression of great emotion barely held in check. To continue the film analogy, the result of limited animation became the emphasis on “camera effects,” such as panning across a larger image, tracking up or down, following an object along its path, or framing in and out.<sup>19</sup>

Over time, material resources improved, but the conditions of the 1960’s had solidified

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Lamarre. “The Multiplanar Image.” *Mechademia*. 1 (2006) : 120-143.

limited animation into its own aesthetic. The father of *anime*, Tezuka Osamu, set the standard for these narrative and aesthetic practices. To optimize his resources, he concentrated on bringing engrossing narratives to his films in hopes that the audience would accept limited animation as a trade off. Osamu Tezuka would be shocked that limited animation had evolved into a codified aesthetic philosophy, especially because he aspired to the Disney standard.

The principle of simplification in *anime* which I address earlier can also be understood in terms of Roland Barthes' discussion of spectacle from his essay "The World of Wrestling."<sup>20</sup> I return to this issue now, because understanding the aesthetic effect of limited animation is very important to appreciating how spectacle – or this idea of amplified simplicity – operates visually and as narrative within *Naruto* specifically and *anime* generally. Barthes defines spectacle as moments when the meaning of gestures or actions achieves absolute clarity. This occurs through simplification of action and gesture so that the absolute meaning reveals itself to the audience. Moreover, this simplification accompanies amplification. The meaning of a situation is made clearer by amplifying the gestures and dialogue, making extravagant and excessive every aspect of a scene until all ambiguity disappears. As Barthes eloquently states, "This grandiloquence is nothing but the popular and age-old image of the perfect intelligibility of reality."

Spectacle is most effectively deployed in *Naruto* during fight scenes, where the use of spectacle enhances and transforms what would be a spectacle in the common, pejorative sense – a barrage of meaningless sensory information that numb and distract – into a moment of effective storytelling. Examining a fight scene in the text will more concretely reveal how spectacle works to amplify meaning in tandem with limited animation and visual stylization. The fight scene I examine is important in the narrative, because it is the turning point of personal development for several characters in the *anime*.

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<sup>20</sup> Roland Barthes. "The World of Wrestling." *Mythologies*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972).

Following a failed invasion of Konoha, Naruto and his teammates pursue one of the enemy ninja – Sabaku no Gaara – out of the city (Figure 4). The fight scene begins with Gaara’s transformation into a monstrous, half-demon. Gaara is a *jinchuuriki* – a demon-host – like Naruto, one who is able to access and channel the power of his demon. Calling forth this demonic power makes Gaara a virtually unstoppable killing machine, because the demon’s influence incites Gaara to insane, murderous frenzies. Sasuke, Naruto’s best friend and rival, is initially the object of Gaara’s murderous intent. For Gaara, killing is the only time when he feels alive, a sentiment he shares with all his victims in a moment of twisted intimacy before taking their lives. Because of his demonic nature, Gaara explains, he was shunned by his entire village and the target of assassination even by the one person for whom he cared. From an early age Gaara could only feel his impact upon the world, to see the evidence of his cursed existence, through taking the lives of others. Consequently, Gaara revels in the suffering and humiliation of his victims, forcing them to linger in pain for as long as possible. Gaara fights Sasuke, eventually overwhelming him in a spectacular battle of flying fists and thrown daggers.

Just as Gaara poises to crush Sasuke with a monstrous fist, Naruto explodes from off screen and kicks Gaara in the face. The camera freezes for a few moments in a dramatic tableau of Naruto twisted in the air and Gaara slowly flying backwards from the blow (Figure 5). Gaara retaliates by trapping Naruto’s other teammate Sakura in a sand trap that will slowly crush her to death if Naruto cannot defeat him. With Sasuke wounded, Naruto has no choice but to fight to save his friends despite his fear of Gaara, who has harnessed the powers of his demon in a way that Naruto will not. Gaara toys with Naruto – batting Naruto’s blows aside with his giant fist, taunting Naruto to fight only for himself and abandon the petty human ties that make him weak. Naruto, intimidated by the power of someone with nothing to lose, cannot fight back. He

understands the depth of Gaara's rage, having experienced the same alienation as a child, and so feels like a "frivolous coward" in the face Gaara's furious determination to prove his existence.

The turning point of the battle occurs when Sasuke, unable to even stand, tells Naruto to focus on freeing Sakura and escaping while Sasuke sacrifices himself to distract Gaara. Sasuke – fully anticipating his death – tells Naruto that having lost his family once, he will never allow an important friend to die again. Sasuke's statement of friendship deeply moves Naruto, allowing Naruto to finally understand the source of Sasuke's superior strength as a ninja – the desire to protect his precious friends. Able to overcome his fear of Gaara, Naruto taps into his own reserves of strength – refusing to rely on the power of the demon-fox – and summons forth an enormous toad-spirit to battle Gaara in his full demon form. The two mountainous creatures tear up huge tracts of forest as they struggle for the upper hand, ceasing only when Naruto finally dispels Gaara's demon form. The battle leaves both Gaara and Naruto too exhausted to move. But Naruto, driven by newfound determination to save his teammates, continues to fight. Naruto wriggles and inches his way towards Gaara's prone body, dramatically pulling and clawing his way toward the enemy even though he is too tired to stand. Naruto's passion forces Gaara to admit defeat and acknowledge the superior strength of a person fighting to protect their human bonds.

The visual animation of fight scenes and the emotional spectacle of Naruto and Gaara's personal conflicts work very much in tandem to crystallize the clear division between good and evil. Gaara's descent into murderous insanity is mapped onto his slow transformation into full demon form. The audience can immediately see how far Gaara has succumbed to the demon's influence by the extent to which his body is engulfed by the hideous form of the *tanuki*. Gaara slavers and roars like a monster, because he truly becomes monstrous in body and spirit (Figure

6). Naruto, in contrast, resists the demonic power and remains in human form throughout this fight. During the battle, Naruto and Gaara are often visually juxtaposed to highlight the physical and moral gulf between two boys who grew up in similar circumstances (Figure 7).

Gaara, however, is not a wholly unredeemed character. During tense parts of the fight scene, the *anime* suddenly cuts away to sepia-toned flashbacks of Gaara's early childhood where the narrative reveals the pitiful victimization that turned Gaara into a psychopathic killer. The repeated interspersions of painful memories between moments of violent depravity creates a tension of sympathy and moral revulsion in the fight scene. Just as the text visually emphasizes Gaara's monstrous visage, it equally lingers on young Gaara's emotional and physical victimization. Introducing ambiguity into the spectacle of this fight scene is significant, because Gaara reveals the true depth of his madness during this battle. Just as the text moves to create a visually totalizing contrast of good and evil, it reverses course and humanizes Gaara by showing him in a pitiful state.

Towards the height of the fighting, the *anime* repeatedly cuts from the battle sequence to flashbacks of Naruto and Gaara in similar poses of childish suffering (Figure 8). Even as Naruto and Gaara battle to legitimize their respective, opposing values; the visual manner in which they are contrasted also underscores their similarities. The visual parallels in the flashbacks complicate the clear positioning of good and evil established at the beginning of the struggle. Gaara's exaggerated victimization introduces sympathy and ambivalence into the narrative, while the revelation of Naruto's painful memories redeems his goofy cowardice and repositions him as an emotional hero, one who is heroic because of his ability to forgive and protect those who have wronged him. The spectacle of suffering in the flashbacks is nested inside and simultaneously in tension with the greater spectacle of the fight.

The fundamental emotional conflicts in the fight scene I described do not necessarily need to take place in a battle. The desire for affirmation, anger and alienation, the revelation of strength from selflessness – other texts address these same themes and conflicts without fighting, but they do not attain the same level of emotional amplification as *Naruto*. The extravagance of this emotional spectacle is made powerful rather than comical because it is fused with a visually violent scene that parallels the life-and-death stakes of this struggle. The intangible personal or ethical conflict becomes a conflict in fact. The amplification of archetypal drama in *Naruto*'s fight with Gaara – with its self-sacrifice and impossible odds – succeeds only because it is accompanied by similarly excessive action. This level of simplified, extreme emotion would seem ridiculous in a less visually dramatic situation. But the visual drama of this fight, if portrayed without the accompanying emotional excess, would be equally, if not more, absurd.

Limited animation plays an important role by fusing the visual action and the emotional spectacle together. Traditional fighting and action scenes told in isolation from emotional storytelling are often very fast, concentrating on the rush of flying fists and impacting bodies. The strength of limited animation, in contrast, is the inter-cutting of still shots and slow, lingering moments of emotional exposition. To adapt action sequences to limited animation, *anime* tend to slow down the pace of the fighting and decompose the action sequence into a quick series of snapshots in time.

For example, when Gaara retaliated against *Naruto*'s attack by assaulting Sakura, the sequence began with a still image of *Naruto* shouting for his teammates to run (Figure 9). This shot was followed by a blurred image of Gaara vaulting past *Naruto* and *Naruto*'s surprised, stricken reaction shot (Figure 10-11). The *anime* cuts to Gaara caught mid-air, barreling down towards Sakura, who is crouched next to Sasuke's prone body (Figure 12-13). This is followed

by a short, slow motion sequence of Gaara flying through the air towards Sakura and Sasuke (Figure 14). The scene concludes with Sakura stepping in front of Sasuke to protect him. This final shot is a frozen tableau of Gaara, poised above Sakura, ready to crush her with his huge fist (Figure 15-16). The scene blacks out and opens again with Sakura slammed against the tree, trapped in a crushing sand fist (Figure 17). Close facial reactions shots of all the characters are very quickly inter-cut between each of these major key frames, so that the final product is a very fast sequence composed of a series of stills and slow animations. The action is seldom directly rendered, but only implied through the series of pre- and post-action frames. The *Naruto anime* retains the sense of momentum of a traditional fight scene without necessarily rendering the actual motion of fighting. It primarily creates the impression of fighting and the concomitant emotion of battle.

Even in battle, limited animation style focuses on faces – determined faces, faces in pain, faces of fear. We must remember that *anime* is still produced for a television screen in the home, and the reduced visual scale only serves to heighten a sense of intimacy. Because of the limited animation style's preference for close reaction shots and focus on dramatically posed bodies, the action sequences in *anime* tend to be highly emotive. The most important scenes in an action sequences are the motionless moments before and after an act of violence, like the dramatic freeze frame where Gaara is poised to strike down Sakura (Figure 17). Limited animation seeks to give the biggest bang for each frame rendered, because money is poured into drawing fewer high quality frames. This creates a preference for moments that emphasize the human drama of violence. Moreover, the emotional reactions must be simplified and crystallized so that every frame becomes a whole and total signal of meaning. Simplification and amplification is necessary in action sequences because more subtle, nuanced messages would become lost in the

speed at which shots are cut to achieve a sense of action. Barthesian spectacles, in a way, become a necessity and pre-condition of a well-executed *anime* fight scene.

Now we can tie the issue of stylized art in animation back into the production of spectacle in an *anime* text. Simplification and stylization of figures works to visually cue the viewer into the expectation of the simplified, stylized emotion of spectacle. When we see *anime* images, we no longer expect nuance or granularity, because the visual reduction already hints at an *anime*'s psychological and narrative simplification. Just as the figures are reduced to a more basic rendering of human form, so too are the emotions and conflicts of the characters crystallized and distilled into simpler, archetypal expressions. The visual stylization of *anime* anticipates the simplification of emotional meaning in *anime*.

Animation styles work by signaling narrative expectations to the audience, and each *anime* genre has characteristic styles of art that gesture to varying levels of textual mimesis through a corresponding granularity of image. This visual cuing may point to why spectacle works differently in cinema and film. Because film renders narrative by capturing images from reality, the visual expectations of film tend towards greater realism. Extravagant kinds of spectacle like those in *anime* are usually used only in films that clearly signal this departure from reality. An example would be Frank Miller and Robert Rodriguez's film *Sin City* where the use of black-and-white filters resonates with the exaggerated, comic-style action and narrative.<sup>21</sup>

Roland Barthes' definition of spectacle helps us to understand visual stylization in relation to its narrative function within *anime*, but *Naruto* deploys spectacle selectively, containing it within only the most dramatic moments. The remaining narrative action in *Naruto*, while excessive, does not amplify emotion to the level of pure spectacle. How, then, do we think about the excess of *anime* narratives if not as spectacle? The themes of adolescence in *Naruto*

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<sup>21</sup> *Sin City*. Produced and directed by Frank Miller and Robert Rodriguez. 2005.

point to a narrative mode which operates similarly to spectacle, albeit across a much longer time scale. This mode is a melodramatic one. Peter Brooks lays out the major characteristics of melodrama in his book *The Melodramatic Imagination*, many of which correspond to Roland Barthes' principles of spectacle. The impulse to simplify and lay bare the meaning of events, the polarization of good and evil, and the spectacular excess of emotion are all principles of both spectacle and the melodramatic mode. I switch to the term melodrama to speak about adolescence because the two conditions have a natural resonance within our cultural mindset, and melodrama implies a temporally diffuse mode of operation while spectacle deals with a more concentrated moment. *Naruto* is not, strictly speaking, a melodrama and does not fulfill all the criteria of melodrama, but the term may help us think about the importance of simplification to *Naruto's* themes and narrative impulses.

*Naruto* is a saga about adolescence and the transition from childhood to adulthood. The characters are teenagers, so the use of melodrama is appropriate and even fundamental to the way the characters experience the world. Adolescents tend to interpret events in terms of clear divisions between good and evil because they lack the breadth of experience of adults. Undergoing a confusing and chaotic transition without the ability to contextualize or understand one's experience can call forth extreme, inchoate emotions. An adolescent's attempt to narrate their experiences into comprehensibility likely bears some resemblance to the dramatic, spectacular excess of *Naruto*. Melodrama, in a sense, might be thought of as the native and natural condition of adolescence.

In *Naruto* the teenage protagonists primarily enact the scenes of spectacle and bring the greatest melodrama and exaggerated emotion to the symbolic and physical struggles. Indeed, the audience would expect melodrama and spectacle in the scenes with these characters because of

our recognition of its thematic resonance with the condition of adolescence. The ninja then becomes an appropriate occupation for *Naruto*'s teen characters, because the life-and-death conditions of being a ninja amplify the adolescent's perception of the world as a series of immediate threats to their precarious and fragile sense of self. Moreover, Gaara's compulsion to share, whether appropriately or inappropriately, the details of his childhood abuse indicate a desire to reveal all. Peter Brooks identifies this impulse as a fundamental characteristic of the melodramatic mode. "Nothing is spared because nothing is left unsaid; the characters stand on stage and utter the unspeakable, give voice to their deepest feelings, dramatize through their heightened and polarized words and gestures the whole lesson of their relationship . . . Life tends, in this fiction, toward ever more concentrated and totally expressive gestures and statements." Melodrama is, perhaps, both in nature and in narrative, a resonant expression of adolescence and plays a part in the internal coherence of spectacle in *Naruto*.

Returning to the idea of spectacle in *Naruto*, we must examine the larger structural repetitions of spectacle in the whole narrative. Fighting and battle scenes are points of culminating narrative tension in the *Naruto anime*, moments when the simmering conflicts in the story explode to the surface and take physical form through spectacle. These battles are invariably the climax of the traditional dramatic structure within the narrative arc, and the battles themselves unfold with an embedded dramatic pacing as well. *Naruto* has multiple narrative arcs occurring inside the structure of the greater plot, sometimes simultaneously. As a consequence these battle spectacles occur over and over again, occasionally overlapping with one another.

Each battle has a local significance within its respective narrative arc, but more importantly, every major battle in which Naruto fights also serves as a moment of character development and a reinforcement of the core themes of the *Naruto anime*. If we map out the

lesson learned by Naruto in each fight, the connection of the battles into a whole thematic structure becomes clear. In Naruto's first battle another human being willingly sacrifices themselves to save him for the very first time, demonstrating that his existence was significant to at least one person. Naruto struggles with a selfish, cowardly impulse to preserve himself in the second battle at the cost of his team's lives, and experiences the loss of a friend in the third battle. Naruto masters his selfishness and fights courageously without thought to his own safety in the fourth battle, but does not truly learn the power of self-sacrifice until the fifth battle, which is his fight with Gaara. This battle is the moment that Naruto truly comes into his own both as a ninja and as the hero of the story. Naruto finally connects all of his previous experiences together, realizing that the pain of losing his friends would be even more frightening than losing his own life and that human bonds are his most precious possession. It is at this point that the core theme of altruism and selflessness becomes perfectly clear through the spectacle of fighting.

The structure of spectacle in *Naruto* has a grand, organizing principle, but the text does not cohere perfectly in all respects. There are battles where the spectacle does not achieve clarity and unity with the animation or storytelling, and the timing of simultaneous fights occasionally breaks down, diluting the amplification effect that the battles would have had with one another. *Naruto* is an ambitious text and must maintain a precarious balance between its many parts, especially considering the sheer volume of material. It remains, nonetheless, a rich text despite its flaws.

Finally, to say that *anime* is organized by principles of visual, expressive simplification is not to imply in any way that *anime* is a simplistic medium or that *anime* texts themselves are doomed to simple-mindedness. Simplification clearly operates in a much more complex way within texts than it first appears, as is the relationship of the audience to that simplification as

Roland Barthes demonstrated in “The World of Wrestling.” The impulse to simplify and make legible the underlying meanings of narratives is a mode shared across many types of popular media, ranging from novels to film and television. In this respect, *anime* is one particular expression of the melodramatic imagination, and the most effective adaptation of such to animated motion. The way in which stylized notions of drama and narrative manifest in *anime* texts relates it to many pre-existing, theatrical traditions of melodrama all over the world, such as the famous Peking Opera or Kabuki theater. The prior existence of melodramatic theater may point to why certain *anime* texts are more globally mobile. Spectacle, which is highly visual and less culturally specific than humor or narrative, may also contribute to the global mobility of *anime*.

Moreover, as a children’s text in what is traditionally marketed as a children’s medium in the US, *Naruto*’s success on the Cartoon Network shows that children and adolescent’s appetite for melodrama and spectacle is being addressed by *anime*. While there is programming of this sort on American television for youth, American media does not provide the sheer variety and number of texts that Japan has produced for its own youth, texts that speak to their latent fears, anxieties, and concerns about transition into adulthood. There was only one *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* for young men and women in America, but countless numbers of analogous shows exist in Japan across all media. *Anime* speaks to this youth aesthetic through both the melodramatic and spectacular modes that many cultures share in common, and through the channels of globalization is providing aesthetic nourishment to a global hunger that the American television industry has only recently recognized as such.

APPENDIX



Figure 1: Uzumaki Naruto.



Figure 2: Enraged Sakura.



Figure 3: Rock Lee in a dramatic pose.

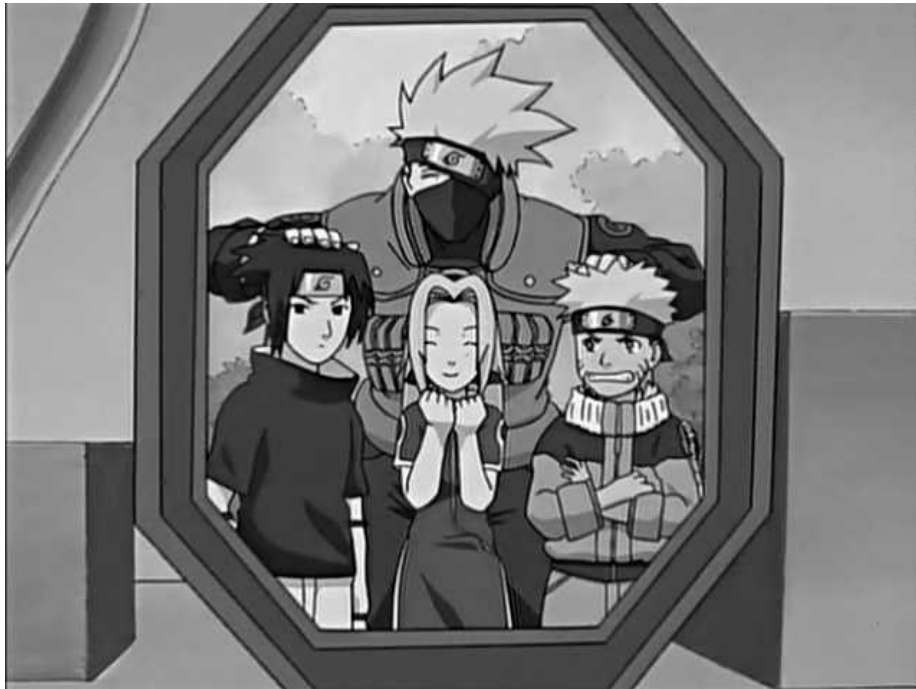


Figure 4: Photo of Naruto's team – (from left to right) Sasuke, Sakura, Naruto, and Kakashi-sensei in back.



Figure 5: Tableau of Naruto after he kicks Gaara.



Figure 6: Monstrous demonic possession.



Figure 7: Visual juxtaposition of Naruto and Gaara.



Figure 8: Parallel visual images of Naruto and Gaara's childhood suffering.



Figure 9: Action sequence still number 1.



Figure 10: Action sequence still number 2.



Figure 11: Action sequence still number 3.



Figure 12: Action sequence still number 4.



Figure 13: Action sequence still number 5.



Figure 14: Action sequence still number 6.



Figure 15: Action sequence still number 7.



Figure 16: Action sequence still number 8.



Figure 17: Action sequence still number 9.



Figure 18: Dramatic close up.

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