

## “SHIROBAKO”: THE REPRESENTATION OF PASSION AND CREATIVE LABOR IN JAPANESE ANIMATION INDUSTRY

### “SHIROBAKO”: REPRESENTASI PASSION DAN PEKERJA KREATIF DI INDUSTRI ANIMASI JEPANG

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#### ABSTRAK

Narasi umum industri anime ditandai dengan jam kerja yang panjang, gaji rendah, dan kondisi yang tidak pasti. Namun, masih banyak orang yang berkeinginan bekerja di industri anime untuk mengejar *passion*. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk menganalisa representasi *passion* dan pekerja kreatif dalam serial anime *Shirobako* yakni film animasi tentang pembuatan film animasi. Studi tentang anime dari aspek visual dan narasi sudah banyak dilakukan, namun tidak banyak yang membahas dari sisi produksi. Studi ini diharapkan dapat memberikan gambaran kompleksitas proses produksi anime dan dinamika pekerja kreatif. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan konstruktif Stuart Hall, studi ini melihat representasi *passion* dari level individual dan kolaborasi. Studi ini menunjukkan bahwa *passion* pekerja kreatif bersifat personal dan subjektif. Selain itu, *passion* membuat para pekerja kreatif tekun mempelajari hal-hal baru dan tahan menghadapi situasi yang sulit. Kemauan untuk berbagi pengetahuan dan informasi dengan pekerja kreatif lainnya dan komitmen merupakan aspek penting dalam proses kolaborasi produksi anime. Secara umum serial *Shirobako* merepresentasikan kesenjangan relasi kuasa antara anggota komite produksi dengan para pekerja kreatif yang terlibat dalam produksi anime.

**Kata Kunci:** *Shirobako; Anime; Passion; Pekerja Kreatif; Jepang.*

#### ABSTRACT

Common narratives of the industry include extensive working hours, minimal wages and uncertain conditions. However, there are many creative workers desire to work in anime industry mainly due to passion. The purpose of this research is to analyze the representation of passion and creative labor in Japanese animation industry. *Shirobako* series provides a case study describing an animated movie production process. Studies on visual and narrative of anime have been conducted; however the study on the production aspect is limited. This study aims to portray anime production complexities and creative labor dynamic. Using constructive approach by Stuart Hall, this study assesses passion on individual and collaborative levels. Based on the results, the passion of creative personnel was personally and subjectively defined. This drive triggers the capacity to acquire new knowledge and endure challenging situations. Furthermore, information sharing and commitment are important qualities of collaborative production. In general, the *Shirobako* series acknowledged a power relationship gap between production committee members and the creative workforce.

**Keywords:** *Shirobako; Anime; Passion; Creative Labor; Japan.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Anime has become one of the major global discussions for over two decades, particularly in Japan. This sector remains consistent in the international television market since the 1970s, and has been the most Japanese element influencing the world's entertainment, youth culture and the creative industry. In addition, the children animated series *Doraemon*, *Candy Candy*, *Sailor Moon*, *Dragon Ball*, *Crayon Shin-chan* and *Naruto* gained massive popularity in Asian countries. Furthermore, productions by Ghibli studio, including *How's Moving Castle*, *Spirited Away*, *Princess Mononoke*, *The Wind Rises*, and *My Neighbor Totoro* are widely appreciated by the global community as high-quality movies, with certain international awards. Another influential animation, termed *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, was debuted on Netflix in 2019 and was known to subsequently attain an extensive worldwide audience.

Despite the increasing popularity of the animation sector, labor-related issues involving the decline of experienced animators, poor living conditions, minimal wages and lengthy working hours, appear very predominant (Schley, 2019; Lewis, 2018; Eiji, 2017; Okeda & Koike, 2011; Yamamoto, 2014). The tension between the industry structure and the artistic idealism tends to aggravate employees' situations. This circumstance originated in the 1960s when production studios began to develop television anime series. Furthermore, the reasons several persons desire a career in the sector, in spite of the precarious state, is gradually becoming a major question. Similar concerns also exist in other creative segments, including fashion/beauty, games, lifestyle blogs/vlogs, films, music and magazine. Particular studies confirmed the significant role of passion in new and upcoming talents (McRobbie, 2016; Duffy 2017; Harvey & Sepherd, 2017; Hope & Richards, 2015; Hill, 2015).

Passion is a known mantra for building a successful career in the creative sector. This factor has been analyzed from various perspectives in the form of individual experience, including enjoyment, job satisfaction,

self-expression and the underlying implications (McRobbie, 2016; Hope & Richards, 2015; Long & Baber, 2015, DePalma, 2021). Relatively, other aspects comprised motivation for women in creative fields (Harvey & Sepherd, 2017; Duffy, 2017) as well as energy and commitment in collaborative production (Condry, 2013; Hill, 2015). Hope & Richards (2015) described enjoyment and passion as crucial cultural elements, where employees tend to invest abundant energy and time, with high exploitation possibilities. Also, passion serves as an essential motivating factor in songwriting career development and quality music production (Long & Barber, 2015). Based on the experiences of nurses, engineers and graphic designers, passion is known to constitute a work ideology or paradigm that motivates workers as a practice of self-care in the new economy (DePalma, 2021).

Additionally, passion is commonly perceived as an entry-level prerequisite in game industries, in relation to the technical skills of game development. This factor is also manifested in production structures, including the ability to work effectively during crisis and overtime periods. Under these conditions, women's role appears marginalized, probably due to less-technical capacities and gender-related concerns, such as childcare (Harvey & Sepherd, 2017). Based on female experiences in digital culture, in the form of amateur blogger and vlogger in fashion and beauty, women tend to believe that acquiring fame by earning from their passion or getting hired in the creative industry, is expected to compensate for the investment of time, energy and capital.

Particular ethnography studies have analyzed passion in collaborative production involving various job types (Condry, 2013; Hill, 2015). Condry (2013) examined the Japanese animation industry and also argued that the social energy from interpersonal contexts is collectively applied in animation development. Anime production involves diverse actors that are not only animators, directors, and *mangaka*, but also publishers, toy companies, seiyu or voice artists, as well as local and foreign fans. In addition, emotional energy

and commitment are very important in creating the best memorable results. Energy on collaborative production is also observed in sport entertainment. Hill (2015) reported that live wrestling event is co-produced by passionate wrestlers, promoters and audience. The success rate in terms of high-energy performance and adrenalin-fueled experience is due to collective efforts. Therefore, both previous studies showed that cultural production did not only employ skilled workers, but also involved the ardent fans. Consequently, certain creative personnel in the animation and game industries were previously fans (Condry, 2013; Creus, 2020). In the game sector, the ability to play and test games serves as a reflection of passion and also a significant advantage during the job application process.

Cultural production issues were also observed in certain animated series, including Japanese idol's life and work in *Perfect Blue* (1997), life of *mangaka* in *Bakuman* (2010-2013) and *Shirobako* (2014). The distinctive issue and description that are closely related to the existence of pop culture attracted scholars' attention. Particular investigations focused on the narrative complexity of *Perfect Blue* and the context of women working in the Japanese society (Napier, 2006; Rickards, 2006; Loriguillo-López, et.al., 2020). Subsequently, *Shirobako* was analyzed, using the actor network theory (ANT) to comprehend human and non-human relations in the production process (Suan, 2018). Therefore, to provide additional information, the present article specifically discusses passion and creative labor representation in *Shirobako*. The series depicted the general situation of the animation industry as well as the production process, including the work dynamics, conflict resolutions and negotiations.

This article examines the passion of creative employees on a personal and collaborative level. Passion is described as a strong inclination toward a self-defined activity, with personal fondness, importance and extensive investment of time and energy (Valerland, 2015). The definition is employed in

this research to fully comprehend the animation sector, in terms of attracting new talents, work requirements and functions as well as employees' time and energy utilization, although the provisions of Condry (2013) were not applied. Also, the passion due to collaborative activities was analyzed in the context of types, negotiations with multiple ideas and conflict resolution. Furthermore, three collaboration levels were known to exist, 1) within the production team, comprising animators, *seiyu*, music directors and so on, 2) across industries, including anime producers, *mangaka*, publishers, toy companies, and television stations, and 3) between fans and official producers (Condry, 2013). This study is focused on the collaborations among anime producers, although the dynamics appear closely related to other industries. Conversely, the teamwork between anime fans and official producers was not illustrated.

Representation connects meaning and language to culture (Hall, 1997). Hall argued that representation is the link between concept and language which enable us to refer 'real' world of object, people, events, or imaginary worlds of fictional objects, people and events. Furthermore, representation theory divided into of three types; reflective, intentional and construction approach (Hall, 1997). Reflective representation is language or various symbols that reflect meaning. Intentional representation is how the language or symbols exemplify the personal purpose of the speaker. The constructionist representation is how the meaning reconstructed through language. According the constructive approach, social actors use the conceptual system of cultures and linguistics and other representational system to construct meaning and to communicate to others (Hall, 1997: 25). This article applies the construction approach to analyze representation of creative labor in anime series *Shirobako* using concept of passion. Moreover, this study applies John Fiske (2010) representation analysis through three level; reality, representation and ideology level.

## DISCUSSION

This session is divided into three sections, with the first describing *Shirobako* synopsis and the setting in relation to the general picture of the animation sector. In addition, the series contextualized anime, in terms of the industry's social economy. Meanwhile, the second and third categories analyzed the representation of passion on a personal and collaborative level, respectively

### **Shirobako and the Key Context of Anime Industry**

*Shirobako* is a television series on anime production. This documentary was produced by P.A. Works in 2014. The studio was established in 2000 and was also responsible for *Angel Beats* (2010), *Tari Tari* (2012), *Charlote* (2015), *Sakura Quest* (2017) and so on. Consequently, *Shirobako* successfully attracted massive viewers and therefore, became a major reference for anime production and the industry in general. Furthermore, the movie refers to the white box that contained the final videos sent to the production staff before submitting to the television station. In the past, VHS tapes were the most popular video distribution formats.

Miyamori Aoi, Ema Yasuhara, Shizuka Sakaki, Misa Tōdō and Midori Imai were the 5 female characters with distinct capacities in *Shirobako*. These ladies had always dreamt of a great career in the animation sector, and had previously created a short animated film after joining the Kaminoyama High School's anime club. The movie was successfully screened and they promised to collectively develop more animations. Furthermore, *Shirobako* emphasized on Miyamori as the production management staff at Musashino studio. This series contained 24 episodes that was further divided into two seasons. The first part described the production process of *Exodus!* (an original work), while the second focused on *The Third Girl's Aerial Squad* (adapted from *manga*).

Additionally, a separate structure and production network was observed in both movie types, where *Exodus!* was produced by Musashino in partnership with dubbing,

sound, and other anime studios, including several freelancers. Musashino has the freedom and flexibility to develop the characters and stories. Also, the structure and production network of *The Third Girl's Aerial Squad* appeared more complex with various involving parties, including anime studio, freelancer, seiyu, sound studio and also the production committee composed of *mangaka* publisher, as well as music, toys, merchandise and entertainment event companies. The production committee plays a significant role in anime industries, and also serves as a major strategy source in solving the high production costs. On average, the expenses for 13 episodes are estimated at 250 million yen (32.5 billion rupiahs). The producer, Takayuki Nagatani, spent approximately 500 million yen (65 billion rupiahs) to produce 24 episodes of *Shirobako* (Stimson, 2015). Furthermore, the committee members were responsible for the production process, including from planning to distribution, as well as providing capital and risk management. As a consequence, the anime production under the production committee appeared more complex. High-hierarchical organization is expected to run the entire production process, based on joint decision. This situation was exposed in the creation of *The Girl's Third Aerial Squad* (episode 13-24).

Musashino studio has a Musashino city setting, a suburban Tokyo district with several animation studios, termed J.C. Staff, Artland, Studio Ponoc, Production IG, Bee Train, and Tatsunoko Production. Also, several art galleries existed, including Kichijoji, where Ghibli as well as *manga's* company, Coamix, are located. In 2016, the animation studios in Japan increased to 622, with 542 (87.1 %) concentrated in certain parts of Tokyo, termed Nerima, Mushasino, Suginami, Nishi Tokyo, Shinjuku, Shibuya, Kokubunji and Chiyoda (AJA, 2019). Since the Toei Doga (Toei animation) and Mushi production were initially established in Nerima (Oizumi and Fujimidai, respectively), diverse studios have also been instituted, particularly along the Seibu Ikebukuro line, followed by subsequent formations at J.R. Chuo and Seibu Shinjuku. Fur-

thermore, the rail transport facilities serve as a primary factor in Japan's urban development, including the animation industry characterized by tight production networks among studios and high labor mobility.

### Personal Passion of Creative Labor

An interesting topic in *Shirobako* is the portrayal of creative labor. Virtually every character was described in this context, and also in other related fields, including publishing, entertainment music, voice artist and toy industries. This article is focused on creative labor in anime production, both at management and production levels. This session discusses the representation of individual passion of creative labor characterized by attraction, enjoyment and motivation, as well as perseverance.

The creative workforce were mostly previous ardent anime fans, with early exposure since childhood and high attraction to certain genres and characters. These experiences motivated their participation in fan-related activities involving the creation of non-Japanese sub title, *cosplay*, anime blogging, unique character sketching, and the distribution of anime-related products. Therefore, it is not surprising that numerous animation fans pursue careers within the industry, as also reflected in episode 19 when Miyamori Aoi (production head) described her interest in anime production. Meanwhile, as a child, she watched *Andes Chucky* that was produced by Musani, the predecessor of Musashino studio. The 'walking in the middle of snowstorm' in *Andes Chucky* scene triggered her curiosity and subsequently developed into a strong desire to generate quality animations. Endo and Shimayonagi, are 2D and 3D artist, respectively, that are also great fans of Meccha's *Idepon*. In episode 6, Endo, Shimayonagi and other Musashino staff attended *Idepon* exhibition, where both fans discussed the character designs, as well as the animation and the narrative processes. Endou said that "I did not think they could describe such a beautiful world. Do not care about your own hopes and happiness. I want to take part in a big project like this. Therefore, I started my career in anime."

Shimayonagi responded affirmatively, as he was also inspired by *Idepon*. Obviously, both desired to replicate similar result. Furthermore, the scenes confirmed the passion of the creative labor for animations. Condry (2013: 219-131) explained that adult anime fans often engage in the production of similar anime that they watched since child. Therefore, the identity of anime fans and anime producer is blurred.

Similarly, Misa Tadou (3D artist) became interested in 3D animation after watching *The Zoo Park Story* by Media Creation studio. She was fascinated with the strength of animal characters, their motion and the moral story depicting bravery and dreams. Therefore, after completing her course on CGI animation, she applied to work at Media Creation, with expectation of developing story-based animation. However, the business core of the organization has been changed, with focus specifically on car animation and its interior. The staffs are engaged with similar tasks on a daily basis to build mastery and obtain higher income, compared to other studios. Misa was not comfortable with this situation, and subsequently resigned to work for a smaller studio that produces story-based animation, although with lower income. This scene illustrated that personal interest occasionally serves as an entry point into a creative career. However, the idealism of an aspiring animator regularly collides with the industry's reality, resulting in a search for new placement where creativity and pleasure coexist.

In episode 12, creative labor appeared to search for diverse enjoyment as a means of motivation. For instance, Ema Yasuhara (2D junior animator) attributed her drawing ability to her animation interest. Shigeru Sugie (veteran 2D animator) works in an animation studio because of similar love for drawing that generates satisfaction when his audiences are happy. Yamada (senior 2D animator) desires to prove his existence by getting involved in the industry. Prior to working in animations, Okura (senior background artist) was a poster film painter. Episode 19 discussed his career and initial involvement in *Choritsu*, followed by other anime projects. Okura also finds several interesting

ideas in every new venture, and has unwittingly worked in this industry for 40 years. Furthermore, personnel in management positions demonstrated different reasons and feelings. For instance, Miyamori Aoi (production assistant) and Isokawa (head of new studio) stated that supporting talented animators to create fascinating products makes them proud and satisfied (Episode 21). Tarou Tadou (production assistant) desires to introduce the business potentials of Japanese animation to other countries.

Passion is also represented in certain scenes where the anime producer showed perseverance. Despite severe pressures from other colleagues and supervisors, complex tasks have to be completed. Therefore, they have to work harder, mostly until midnight and also very early in the morning. In the animation industry, skills and techniques are developed through daily jobs that are probably repetitive and diverse. Also, new job requires additional effort and persistence. This circumstance was experienced by Ema Yasuhara (2D animator) during an attempt to develop a scene where cat was playing with a girl (Episode 7), without any animal drawing experience. In addition, she was criticized by Misato Segawa (supervisor) for not attaining the specified standards, and therefore, had to revise the entire drawings. This situation really discouraged Yasuhara, with fears of not becoming a junior animator. Shigeru Sugie (senior animator) advised that passion for drawing alone is not sufficient, but the art of mastering drawing faster and the ability to meet quality standards. Therefore, the continuous practice is very paramount. Furthermore, the scene described the struggles of aspiring animators, where the mastery of drawing techniques leads to increasing speed. This circumstance is also related to the wage structure, based on the number of completed projects. Obviously, the structure is very challenging for beginners. In summary, hard work and perseverance are important requirements, particularly for young animators trying to survive in the industry. According to Daisuke Okeda, a lawyer of JANiCa,

the work environment and income for beginners have not been modified (Schley, 2019).

An episode 16 scene also described Yumi Iguchi's perseverance, an animator that was appointed as character designer for *The Third Girl's Aerial Squad*. The project was adapted from *manga* resulted in a complex production process. Also, the entire development aspects, including character design, voice artist, story, marketing and also distribution require the approval of a production committee member. Iguchi (key animator) had no experience in design character, but bravely accepted the job, in an effort to improve her drawing skills. Certain designs were generated in line with *manga* version, and were also appreciated by the director and other colleagues. However, Takezou Nogame, the mangaka of *The Third Girl's Aerial Squad*, was not satisfied, and argued that the designs did not match the stipulated personality. This resulted in an adjustment without detail explanation. Therefore, Iguchi had to repeatedly sketch the characters until Nogame finally approved. Furthermore, the scene reflected the animator's position under the production structure involving the committee. The unbalanced power relationship between animators and other creative workers with higher roles, including producers, directors, and mangaka as intellectual property (IP) owners, causes animators to only follow superiors' instructions. In summary, work passion is described as an important aspect motivating creative workers to endure and overcome difficult situations, including hard work and extensive working hours.

*Shirobako* represents the passion of creative labor in the animation sector. These individuals are ardent fans pursuing various careers within the industry, and also derive pleasure in performing assigned tasks, while spending time and energy under unfair conditions. Extensive work hours and sleeps in the studio appear as an everyday experience. *Shirobako* further recognizes the general perception of the working conditions, although, the situations are frequently unfavorable. The series also indicated the acknowledgment of creative labor to these conditions due

to the career passion. However, *Shirobako* did not illustrate in detail the effect of the unbalanced work-life on a personal and social perspective.

### Passion in the Collaborative Production

Anime production involves the collective efforts of hundreds of workers. *Shirobako* reflects the employee's passion in collaborative production, comprising several interrelated stages. Therefore, certain disruptions tend to influence the workflow. Effective team management and staff welfare are imperative to the production process. Shigeru Sugie (veteran animator) was illustrated as a character that reflects care and willingness to guide younger animators. For instance, in episode 12, Sugie was a mentor to Rinko Ogaswara (senior animator) when she was a new staff at Musashino Studio. He also advised Ema Yasuhara on faster ways to balance animation skills (Episode 7) and occasionally organizes workshop for beginners to share his knowledge and techniques in keyframe drawing (Episode 12). Similarly, Rinko Ogaswara (senior animator) also showed interest to mentor Yumi Iguchi and other younger staff members. Iguchi and Yasuhara were pictured standing behind her watching as she reviewed Iguchi's sketches. Subsequently, both ladies are invited to observe her while working. She said that revising lines appears as a minimal task, but greatly affects the final result. Episode 16 also detailed Ogaswara's mentoring of Iguchi when she was appointed as character designer for *The Third Girl's Aerial Squad*. In season 2, Ema Yasuhara appeared more confident and now mentors a younger animator, Ai Kunogi. This scene represents a collaborative production process, with a high sense of care as well as information and knowledge sharing. Moreover, teamworking often creates a feeling of pleasure and satisfaction among creative workers (Hesmondlagh & Baker, 2011).

An effective team relationship is crucial in developing superb anime scenes. Creating animations require a solid team consisting of workers with various skills but common

vision. Solid teamwork is represented in the scene creation of galloping horse in episode 12. Seichi Kinoshita (director) intends to use this part to close *Exodus!* and attain climax. However, due to tight production schedule, Miyamori Aoi (production assistant) decided to engage a freelance animator, but none consented. A senior freelancer recommended Shigeru Sugie (veteran animator) that is currently an expert in animal scene. This was the same person that was previously considered unsuitable for *Exodus!*. Sugie gladly accepted the offer and promised to deliver in six days, on a daily schedule of 9 am to 11 pm. However, if he only sketches roughly and the drawings are finished by other staff, the completion appears faster. Consequently, the younger animators, including Ema Yasuhara, Rinko Ogaswara, Yumi Iguchi, Endou and other key animators were involved.

Commitment is crucial element in anime production that involve massive workers under tight schedules. The production process is divided into several interrelated stages, although certain obstacles tend to disrupt the workflow. Therefore, a high level of commitment is required to complete tasks on time and meet the specified standards. In this case, the production management staff play an important role in handling the workflow and ensure jobs are submitted on time, despite frequent schedule changes. Production assistants, including Miyamori Aoi, Erika Yano and Tarou were responsible for task distribution, scheduling and provide related explanations. These individuals also collected finished drawings and transfer to other staff. Frequently, complains are generated due to the uncompleted tasks from other divisions. Based on a previous ethnography research, production management team, also known as production operators, often speak slowly and clearly to ensure animators fully understand the work scope needed to perform the job quickly (Morisawa, 2015).

High commitment is also reflected in Misato Segawa, a freelancer animator supervisor. This professional, diligent, and reliable personality always completes her work on time, with a high-quality standard. Episode

1 reported that she works very hard to accomplish tasks until exhaustion or sickness, and is consistently maintaining work quality. Also, she does not hesitate to reject certain frames of Ema Yasuhara (young animator) and complains about the lower work rate of Taitanic Studio's animator, causing a loss of confidence in her production team (Episode 21). Furthermore, in episode 22, Segawa stated that 'every episode is a calling card for a creator', and is essential in upholding her reputation. In addition, she also refuses job offering from other studios while handling projects for Musashino. Freelancers play a very significant role in developing Japanese animation industry. In addition, great social networks, specific skills and expertise, as well as high professionalism serve as capital for acquiring jobs.

## CONCLUSION

*Shirobako* describes the anime production process involving a wide range of individuals from diverse job roles and companies. The series highlights the struggle of creative workers in pursuing their dream and career in the industry. As a consequence, passion appeared personal and subjective, based on the creative employees' work experience on attraction, enjoyment, motivation and perseverance. Strong interest in animation since childhood was also a possible significant motivation and when engaged in anime projects, the creative workers tend to derive various pleasures and values. These feelings and importance include continuous drawing, making audience happy with their works, and being proud to support animators in developing great films. The passion of creative workers was described as perseverance, learning new skills, and the ability to endure unpleasant work situations. Furthermore, the passion observed in the collaborative production process encompassed the attitude of caring and assisting other colleagues, willingness to share knowledge and animation techniques, and demonstrating adequate work commitment. *Shirobako* generally represents creative labor with a strong passion for animation that also

work collectively to create films that involves complex production structures.

The series further describes an unequal power relationship between creative workers and capital owners that are also production committee members. This documentary also reflects the hierarchy of creativity in the industry, including *manga* writers (*mangaka*) and publishers, as copyright holders demonstrate a higher authority in the production process. Similarly, companies that are also production committee members are equally authorized to participate in determining anime production and marketing. The animators only perform tasks that have been approved by committee members and the director responsible for the production workflow. Therefore, passion is represented as a mantra for creative workers to continue working in the anime industry, despite certain unfavorable conditions, including extensive working hours, overwork, tight-schedule, and working during crisis situations. However, the series does not reveal the implications of the featured anime industry on working conditions, in the form of minimal wages, uncertainties, unbalanced work-life and multiple jobs by freelancers. *Shirobako* also does not describe the impact of work situations in the animation industry on the personal lives of these creative workers.

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