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EVERYTHING OLD IS NEW

ENDANGERED SILENT-ERA ANIME GETS A VOICE
AND A DIGITAL MAKEOVER

By Andrez Bergen

Historians forever declare that, to succeed tomorrow, you must first understand yesterday. It's a claim that keeps these people in a job, but there is a smattering of truth to it, and nowhere is it more evident than in these very pages. Up until April 2002, this magazine's title was *Anime Invasion*—and without the inroads, ideas and growth of that predecessor, chances are that there would be no *Anime Insider* to hold today.

The same, of course, goes for anime. Take, for example, the fabulous flying machines we see in much of it. Sixteen years before Mamoru Oshii's recent movie *The Sky Crawlers*, there was

Hayao Miyazaki's *Porco Rosso* (1992); a decade earlier, people tuned in to watch *The Super Dimension Fortress Macross* on TVs in Japan, which was a leap-frog from *Super Jetter* in the mid '60s, which is itself possibly directly descended from...*The Plane Cabby's Lucky Day*.

The what? That's what you're probably thinking, and we don't blame you. It's a good thing that there's Larry Greenberg and Digital Meme, which is undertaking the monumental task of unearthing and restoring some of the oldest examples of anime in existence—like *The Plane Cabby's Lucky Day*. It's an especially good thing that *Anime Insider* was able to get a behind-the-scenes look at exactly how these essential bits of anime history are being prepped for a new generation of fans.



REBOOTING OLD SCHOOL ANIME...

Larry Greenberg is right there on the pulse when it comes to this ancient, rickety, black-and-white short about a flying taxi driver that looks like something Walt Disney would've dreamed up just out of high school, before he had a big budget.

The Plane Cabby's Lucky Day may have been made in Japan during the Great Depression, but it predicted life in 50 years' time. Greenberg knows it so well because he and his team at Digital Meme sweated over the original film stock for hours, poring over every single frame, removing dust, grit and grease, removing scratches and digitally upgrading the reel.

"It's interesting to see how someone in 1932 could even jokingly imagine the world of 1980," Greenberg reflected in a recent interview with *Anime Insider*, outside the studio and associated business that takes up much of his day.

Digital Meme is a recently founded Japanese company that aspires to use 21st-century technology to resurrect original 16mm silent classics crafted when our great-grandparents were kids in diapers. Part of the company's mission is to build a digital archive of those black-and-white, low-resolution, often deteriorated masterpieces, and it's selling the output to help fund the process.

The Plane Cabby's Lucky Day was directed and drawn by Teizo Kato a whopping 77 years ago. It was originally screened by a benshi narrator, whose job was to explain the storyline of silent films to the audience. Digital Meme has painstakingly restored the film to its former glory, and has even employed a modern benshi to re-record the narration, a time-intensive process that Greenberg seems to have enjoyed.

"I like the fact that in this far-off, futuristic world, the machines and technology have greatly improved but the people

are still basically people. People do not change—at least not that fast. The way the people interact. The greed and rudeness of the cab passengers. The short tempers. All of the people interact in ways that are not any different than they must have been in 1932. So, the creators understood that as technology progresses, people's lifestyles would change—but people themselves were not going to change all that fast."

...BUT WHY NOW?

While it's true that people don't change that fast, anime technology has progressed by light years. So why is this old, often threadbare animation at all important some 70 years later?

"In order to truly understand a thing, one needs to know where it started, how it started and what the people

who started it were thinking and what motivated them," says Greenberg.

"Without Noburo Ofuji, Yasuji Murata and other early animators, there would not have been

Osamu Tezuka—and without Tezuka..."

He trailed off. It's not necessary to mention essential Tezuka classics like *Astro Boy*, *Black Jack* and *Kimba the White Lion*, let alone the man's eventual influence on *The Lion King*.

Older movies and shorts also effectively capture Japanese society at a time that's been otherwise lost to modern audiences.

"You really get to understand the social environment, what was going on in Japan at the time," assessed Greenberg. "This is very clear in the whimsical and enjoyable anime from the very early period of our collection. The late 1920s and early '30s were a relatively free and open period in Japan. Then, within a few years, the anime got very different—exemplified by *Norakuro*, the creation of Suiho Tagawa, which was basically militaristic propaganda—and that's reflective of what was going on in Japan in the late 1930s. Of course, there were clear Disney influences that are obvious in some of the works, but early Japanese anime also influenced creators elsewhere."

You might not know the name Suiho Tagawa, but without him, his apprentice, Machiko Hasegawa, might never have created *Sazae-san*, one of Japan's longest-running comic strips, and the longest run-





ning animated series in world history.

So while people in the past may have enjoyed picturing the distant future, as in *The Plane Cabby*, it's important to look at the past.

"Anime is loved around the world, but for the most part much of anime creation nowadays is done using very fast and very good computers. The work of the early animators was much more creative, and involved much more intensive labor and imagination. The results are clearly much more 'human' and much less robotic. This was recognized by Hayao Miyazaki, who decided to not use computers at all for his latest animation, *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea*. All 180,000 cells were hand-drawn. There really is a difference in the work of the early animators, and I think that the people who love anime around the world deserve a chance to see that."

Greenberg's enthusiasm for his work and the old Japanese movies he's restoring is infectious, and well-timed—some of the films Digital Meme is restoring might have vanished forever.

"I came to Japan in 1985, and have lived here ever since. I've always loved Japanese film, and anime was a

discovery I made while researching silent Japanese cinema. The urge to restore these old films came about ten years ago, when I realized how badly they were being stored and preserved. There still are old films that are slowly but steadily deteriorating, and we're working hard to restore them through our Talking Silents project, through which we restore old silent films and package them with benshi narration and various language subtitles. By doing so, we hope to preserve as many films as we can, and make them available both for Japanese and global audiences."

GETTING YOUR HANDS DIRTY

Digital Meme is currently working to restore more than 1,500 silent movies, anime, TV programs, documentaries and educational films from Japan. Before that, only limited restoration of the film stock of most of these celluloid gems had been undertaken by national film institutes and archives.

The restoration process is a slow and painstaking one. "Moving pictures," as films used to be called, are created by showing single images in rapid succes-

sion to create the illusion of movement. In fact, in each second of a movie, you're seeing 24 individual images, each in an individual frame!

"When we restore the old films, we actually have to go one frame at a time and examine each image," explains Greenberg [photo, left]. "We start by cleaning the film, utilizing a special method of water and chemicals to dissolve the oil and dirt that accumulated over the years. Then we manually repair scratches and tears in the films, frame by frame. After that, we scan the images, and use various digital processes to clean them up one frame at a time. [photo, p. 39] Sometimes we even cut and paste images from one frame to another one in order to lay the clean images of one frame on top of the dirty or torn images of another frame."

But even though these films contained no dialogue, they were accompanied by recordings of narration, something that Digital Meme has also restored.

"The films in our *Japanese Anime Classic Collection* include both the original benshi narration performances that were recorded 70 years ago, and new sound tracks that we created in the studio from a new benshi script written by Ms. Midori Sawato especially for this project."

Sawato, a reputable film critic and essayist, is one of the few remaining silent film narrators still active in Japan, and thereby preserves the unique Japanese art of narrating the silent movie storyline to audiences, through both general commentary, bridging plot-gaps, and speaking for the characters themselves.

This, Greenberg says, is an essential factor in the Japanese silent movie and anime experience, on par with the film itself. "Our collection allows global audiences to view these films as they were meant to be seen—with music and a benshi performance. Nobody has done that before."



The 4-disc Japanese Animation Classic Collection is available on amazon.com and includes English subtitles.



1. Olympic Games on Dankichi Island; 2. Our Baseball Match; 3. Sankiki the Monkey: The Storm Troopers; 4. The Plane Cabby's Lucky Day