

Darling in the FranXX: Japanese anime series about fighting for the survival of humanity

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Written and directed by Atsushi Nishigori

Darling in the FranXX is an original Japanese animated (*anime*) television series that aired between January and July 2018. It includes 24 episodes and was created by Studio Trigger under the direction of Atsushi Nishigori, who was the character designer for the popular series *Tengen Toppa Gurren Lagann* in 2007. The series is now available on the streaming service Crunchyroll, which specializes in East Asian media.

The series takes place in a future dystopian world where humans live in self-contained, glass-domed cities, defended by young teenagers who operate the FranXX—giant robotic weapons (*mecha*) that require a pair of pilots, one male and one female, to operate. The children defend the cities from klaxosaurs, a mysterious race of beings who live underground and regularly attack the cities.

The children themselves are indoctrinated in regard to the history of humanity and the overall circumstances surrounding their service. They aspire to be “adults,” a number of whom live in the center of the cities, but with whom they never get to interact. The people in power are collectively referred to by the children as “Papa,” and they pray to them, as though to a deity, before each meal.

The series’ main protagonist is a young pilot named Hiro, who once showed great promise, but in recent years has found himself unable to operate the machinery with success. The operation of the FranXX is associated with the onset of puberty, with the male and female crew members assuming positions within the machines that are overtly sexual.

The principal aim of the show’s creators seems to be to examine what it means to be a human. (But how enriched and developed is their conception?) We learn that the society’s “adults” are humans who underwent a process whereby they could become immortal at the expense of their reproductive systems. They live in an advanced state

of unchanging age, but no longer have interactions with each other and live sterile lives where they do not even speak.

Ironically, in order for the FranXX to function and defend humanity from the klaxosaur threat, scientists had to reintroduce children with reproductive systems and found they had to create environments where the latter could develop emotions and “normal” human experiences rather than the empty lives of the so-called adults.

Anime is a complex medium, with many divisions and subdivisions. Its roots in Japan are generally traced back to the early twentieth century, but it was not until the 1970s and 1980s that the form became a part of mainstream Japanese culture. This was no doubt a contradictory phenomenon.

As in the United States with the *Star Wars* phenomenon, there was a shift toward space operas and “real robot” series like *Yamato* and *Gundam*. A subculture developed around such shows and animation magazines started to be published. This continued into the 1990s with the popular *Pokémon* series, adapted from video games of the same name, enjoying entry into mainstream culture in Western countries by the end of the decade.

Japanese anime no doubt has mobilized considerable skill and even artistic brilliance. But like other artistic forms that emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s, it inevitably bears the stamp of the cultural and social problems of the time. The receding of the radicalization of the late 1960s and early 1970s (which had been very intense and explosive in Japan) had consequences. No matter what its admirers may say, there is an element of escapism in anime. That doesn’t disqualify it, but one has to be honest. It cannot be a coincidence that the rise of anime coincided with the collapse of the Japanese cinema as a serious intellectual force. One of the greatest national cinemas of the postwar period, Japanese filmmaking has produced almost nothing enduring or penetrating about

the reality of life in that country over the past several decades.

While anime is a niche form of entertainment in Western countries like the United States, especially for adults, it has a wider acceptance and prevalence in Japan. There is a wide variety of genres within the anime industry. Some of the most popular are fantasy and adventure series, but just as popular are “slice of life” stories, which involve a “naturalistic” (albeit often melodramatic) representation of real life and often focus on teenage romance and family relationships.

Many of these series do have their charms, as does *Darling in the FranXX*, and the animation is very skilled, but there tends to be a larger focus on more juvenile themes, which express themselves in the ultimate plot and character progressions in many series, preventing them from saying anything truly insightful about life.

In *Darling in the FranXX*, for example, as the series reaches its conclusion, it becomes apparent that the children and klaxosaurs are really fighting for the ability to live their lives out fully, despite hardships and pain, because a life without feeling and love is not worth living. The audience is left in the final episode with several messages instructing them how to be human. We are told to “enjoy every experience. Fight when you have to. Keep working toward your goal. Never half-ass things, and go all-out. Try and get to know another person better. Choose your destiny with your own hands. Be honest with your feelings, and be someone’s wings.”

The themes involved here are fairly banal and platitudinous, and the view of life one takes from them is inevitably limited. The creators of this and most anime series are trying to “teach messages,” but such advice doesn’t amount to much more than empty moralizing in a world racked by escalating social inequality, poverty and war. That state of affairs rarely enters into anime, which more often deals with teenagers and other young people living in economically sound middle-class families, which allow the works to explore whatever emotional problems their characters might have, isolated from difficult material conditions (to that extent, this resembles the contemporary state of Japanese cinema).

In another example, *Darling in the FranXX* addresses climate change in superficial ways, complete with depictions of scientists discovering new energy sources and then capitalists overexploiting them, resulting in the desertification [the process by which fertile land becomes desert] of Earth. Much of the latter half of the series depicts the children growing their own crops in small

communes, promoting popular community gardening movements without addressing the fact that billions of people have died whose continued existence would have required a centrally planned organization of resources.

Social inequality is mentioned in passing, but the focus is on interpersonal relationships and sexuality as the real defining characteristics of what it means to live and be human. In their arrogance, adults threw away their ability to reproduce in a selfish attempt to become immortal, but “nature” had other ideas and forced the children to regain their sexuality in order to survive and propagate the human species. The idea of human “progress” is depicted as inherently flawed.

From a technical standpoint, *Darling in the FranXX* is quite well made in comparison with many other anime series, with very talented voice actors as well as animators and sound designers. However, as with much of the comic-book style filmmaking and animation in the West, when the more intimate moments are over, the screen is all too filled with bombast, gratuitous destruction and gore. Unhappily, one is left with almost no idea of Japanese life after completing the series.

Anime is a very popular medium with different levels and different impulses at work. Some of these are healthy, but others are more juvenile and limited. *Darling in the FranXX* does have some redeeming qualities in that it pushes the viewer to consider larger social questions and shakes up one’s view of reality, but the lack of a real commitment to thinking through the problems of contemporary life means that the viewer, in the end, is not pushed far or challenged enough.

Darling in the FranXX is currently being adapted as a manga (comic) series that closely follows the anime. There are currently no known plans to continue the story, which at this point is self-contained.



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