

Magia Record, Kakushigoto, Fruits Basket and Sword Art Online: A general review of anime in 2020

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Anime is an immensely popular entertainment and art global medium, particularly among young people. It is one, however, to which socialist criticism or general sociological criticism is never (at least consistently) applied. There are millions of texts, blogs and words devoted to comparing one anime with another, but this is almost always done from a fairly superficial or purely personal standpoint rather than one that contextualizes the medium politically and historically.

We are writing about anime to encourage audiences who, at this point, tend to accept the material that passes before their eyes rather uncritically from a social point of view to begin demanding more substantial work. We live in acutely tense and complex times, and the generalities and banalities that anime has thrived on to this point are wholly inadequate.

Here, therefore, is a review of a selection of anime that aired throughout 2020 with an eye on different genres, source materials and studios as well as popularity and, admittedly, the author's own personal interests.

Magia Record: Puella Magi Madoka Magica Side Story

Adapted from mobile video game

Winter Television, 13 episodes

Puella Magi Madoka Magica was as an anime television series that aired in 2011 and has since spawned several films, novels, and manga volumes that expand on the story and characters. *Magia Record* is an anime adaptation of a spinoff smartphone game originally released in Japan in 2017 that takes place in the same universe but with a new set of protagonists.

The story and the drama revolve around a group of middle-school girls who have been approached by an otherworldly being named Kyubey, who offers them the ability to become "Magical Girls" in exchange for one wish of their choosing. The caveat is that they must spend the rest of their lives fighting "witches" who prey on the negative emotions of humans and drive them to commit suicide and other more reprehensible acts.

What the girls discover is that the witches are in reality former magical girls who fell into despair and lost their conscious minds, and that Kyubey is one of many "incubators" who have set up the magical-girl system in order to harvest their energy to fuel their own civilization in a distant galaxy. The girls were each selected as prey based on their own past psychological scarring, and the overarching story deals with moral questions of sacrificing a small number of people (the magical girls) for the "greater good" as well as themes of childhood trauma and neglect. What appears to be an innocent fantasy story on its face is in reality very dark and disturbing.

While the story and character development are limited to individual psychological and moral questions, the reason the *Madoka Magica* series stands out is due to its unique animation and production. The anime is produced by Shaft, an animation studio known for its advanced cinematography and use of traditional animation juxtaposed with real-

world objects in its visuals. The animation style at times reminds one of the methods used by Terry Gilliam in *Monty Python's Flying Circus*.

Shaft also makes interesting use of several other techniques that make their anime a visual treat to experience. Many of their works take place in urban settings with ominous factories and industrial settings as backdrops, and there is also heavy use of geometry and architecture to frame the drama, reminiscent of Wes Anderson's visual style. Numbers and lines and colors are all used intentionally to stimulate the viewer in various ways.

Kakushigoto

Adapted from manga written by Kouji Kumeta

Spring Television, 12 episodes

Kakushigoto is a comedy series about a single father who by day works as a relatively well-known manga artist but by night pretends to be a run-of-the-mill business executive because he does not want his 10-year-old daughter to know what he does for a living. This is because his primary work is considered to be "ecchi," which means that it is playfully sexual and inappropriate for children. The title, which also serves as the name of the father, Kakushi Goto, is a play on words, meaning both "secret" and "work of drawing."

The story is narrated by the daughter, Hime Goto (also a pun for "secret") and takes place at two different times. The primary story takes place while she is the age of 10, but the episodes are bookended around her discovery eight years later of a cache of boxes that her father left for her to be discovered on her 18th birthday. The story is told by the older Hime who has uncovered her missing father's secret.

Where the story breaks with much of what the typical anime and manga series of today is that despite Kakushi running his own manga studio, the social life of he and his daughter has much more of a working-class character. Hime is confronted by classmates who come from more affluent families and tease her about her meager house, and Kakushi as a widower puts a lot of effort into improving his cooking and finding things to increase his daughter's joy even though they are somewhat impoverished. It is a welcome break from the typical "slice-of-life" stories that take place in upper-middle-class homes where the children do not want for anything and have all the time in the world to focus on their emotional problems.

Kakushigoto is also of interest because it is in part a satire of the manga industry in Japan. Kakushi has many hysterical interactions with his editor that underhandedly poke fun at the way manga is marketed and produced. One of the more memorable scenes in the series occurs when the group attend a publisher's year-end party where the editor mistakes Hime for a manga artist based on the fact that she is wearing a "frilly dress that doesn't match her age."

Fruits Basket 2nd Season

Adapted from manga written by Natsuki Takaya
Spring and Summer Television, 25 episodes

Fruits Basket is considered to be the quintessential “shojo” (marketed toward young teen females) manga of the modern day and was originally serialized in 136 chapters between 1998 and 2006. An earlier anime adaptation was produced and aired in 2001, but only covered the first third of the story. This new, complete adaptation comes in three seasons, which have aired / are set to air during the spring and summer seasons of 2019, 2020 and 2021.

The protagonist of *Fruits Basket* is an orphaned high school student named Tohru Honda, who has just lost her mother in a car accident and is living in a tent in the woods while attending school. It turns out that she is staying on property owned by a member of the notorious Souma family, who decides to take her in, where she lives as a roommate to two of the Souma boys who also happen to be her schoolmates.

What she discovers is that several members of the Souma family are possessed by the spirits of the Chinese zodiac (rat, ox, pig, etc.), who turn into their respective zodiac animal when they are weak, stressed or if they are hugged by someone of the opposite gender. Over time, Tohru discovers that the possession is actually a curse, and the overall story is about how the stoic and loving young girl helps the darkened members of the Souma family overcome their inner demons and break their curse.

The story can generally be considered as comedy or romance, but there are also sequences that show the darker underworld of Japan. Perhaps the most powerful story arc in season two of the series deals with the backstory of Tohru’s best friend Uotani, who is a former gang member who came close to death when she tried to extricate herself from the criminal underworld, befriending the seemingly muddle-headed Tohru and thereafter being rescued by her former street hooligan mother, Kyoko.

These elements are contrasted vividly with the Souma family, which is fabulously wealthy and owns vast housing compounds and vacation properties that stun Tohru, who performs janitorial work every day after school in an effort to remain self-sufficient.

However, while the creatives here manage to capture everyday real-world problems in many respects, the solutions and focus here are on emotional problems and individuals overcoming childhood traumas and fears. In other words, the story is generally about growing up, but, as with *Magia Record* and *Kakushigoto*, neither go far enough to contextualize the socioeconomic situation or how it impacts the lives of young people. Everything is merely dealt with from a psychological viewpoint.

Sword Art Online: Alicization – War of the Underworld 2nd Season

Adapted from light novels written by Reki Kawahara
Summer Television, 11 episodes

Unfortunately, one cannot talk about anime in 2020 without talking about the “ugly,” and that is what the latest season of *Sword Art Online* was. *Sword Art Online* is a massively popular franchise that consists of more than three dozen novels, nearly 100 anime episodes, multiple anime films and several spinoff video games.

The story revolves around the use of what are known as “virtual reality massively multiplayer online role-playing games” (VRMMORPGs), where the user dons a headset that not only allows them to view games in virtual reality, but actually connects physically to their brain through nerve endings that stimulate the senses while putting the player in an unconscious state. Effectively, the gamer enters a virtual world where they can feel actual sensations, including pain.

In *Alicization*, the protagonist agrees to take part in a Japanese government research project that seeks to develop artificial intelligence through virtual reality. The facility where the experiments are taking place, however, is hijacked by mercenaries hired by the US government’s National Security Agency (NSA) who wish to steal the technology for its own military needs.

This series is a joke and not to be taken seriously. It waxes philosophical

about life and human existence and in particular about artificial intelligence—whether or not beings created in the virtual world have “souls” and should count as real people. The antagonists are not only bloodthirsty “bad guys” who love death and destruction, but they are also sexual deviants who attempt to molest helpless female characters, which encourages viewers to cheer for the protagonist as he cuts them down.

According to a 2018 study by the Association of Japanese Animations (AJA), the anime industry is worth approximately ¥2.1527 trillion, the equivalent of about \$19 billion, an increase of eight percent over the previous year. The report shows that the industry had grown every year since 2013, nearly doubling its estimated value since 2012.

A report from Grand View Research in 2020 projected that the global anime market size will grow by 8.8 percent between 2019 and 2025. This is due in part to the growth in streaming services such as those offered by Amazon, Netflix and Crunchyroll. The process will be accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the increasing numbers of people in quarantine and consuming digital content.

The statistics indicate there is enormous interest in the anime media form, but as is the case with other art forms today this is severely hampered by limitations in the outlook of the artists involved. There is a severe contradiction between the breathtaking technical achievements and the ability of writers and storytellers to assimilate reality and imbue their work with a meaningful perspective on social life.

This is in part due to the massive money-making machine and the corporate structure that the art form finds itself beholden to, as is generally the case with live-action cinema and television. But even in cases where writers and animators are more serious about creating an artistic work full of meaning, their social outlook tends to be sophomoric and juvenile at this point, and this comes through in the conflicts the characters face and the conclusions intended to be drawn.

All artists—including filmmakers, musicians, manga artists and animators—need to take critical stock of the exploding social situation in which they find themselves in this third decade of the twenty-first century. It is the responsibility of such artists, if they want their work to be meaningful and endure, to navigate these waters and adopt a more critical position in relation to political and social life.



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