

Saved by the Bat: Anxiety of Agency in Paranoia Agent

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Spoiler Warning! The following contains ending details on Paranoia Agent; you may wish to skip this summary unless you either have finished the series or have no respect for the author's intended mode of presentation of his opus. (Your author attended the presentation for the latter reason.)

Brian Bergstrom came to UchiCon to discuss Paranoia Agent's exploration of the meaning of agency in the age of omnipresent media. Bergstrom's presentation started five minutes late due to the apparent Shounen Batotage of the sound system -- though it is possible that technician Jim merely used his superior A/V expertise to create a smokescreen to deflect guilt from himself onto a mysterious gremlin in the gears, a point which will be returned to later if I remember.

As his jumping-off point Bergstrom recapped the denouement of Paranoia Agent: ten years ago, poor Tsukiko's dog Maromi got hit by a car and killed because Tsukiko wasn't paying attention. To avoid taking responsibility for Maromi's death Tsukiko made up a story about a guy with a baseball bat and roller blades arbitrarily clubbing Maromi in passing. Shounen Bat hence came into existence as Tsukiko's defense mechanism, a form of denial tantamount to disowning her own actions -- that is, relinquishing agency. Ten years later, Shounen Bat returns when economic realities threaten to separate Tsukiko once again from Maromi, the latter now being embodied in a cutesy character-good. Shounen Bat appears whenever a person is torn from their place of comfort and find themselves unable to deal with their own beinghood, removing them temporarily from their crippling inner conflict. This is what Bergstrom calls "anxiety of agency."

Bergstrom sets Maromi up as a foil to Shounen Bat. Both are shields against the anxiety of agency, but they operate in opposite ways: Maromi's role is to protect, where Shounen Bat's is to assail. (The three suicidal characters who look to Shounen Bat for protection scare him off, ostensibly because protection is not Shounen Bat's portfolio.) Bergstrom says that Maromi and Shounen Bat are inseparable; each one's existence is necessary and sufficient for the other's. As evidence he offers that during Paranoia Agent's denouement, it is only by forcing his way past the protective Maromi that the detective is able to force Tsukiko to assume agency for her dog's death, revoking Shounen Bat and averting the apocalypse.

By way of a number of compelling examples, Bergstrom made the case that Paranoia Agent addresses with special force the problems of agency raised by the media -- by which he seemed to mean broadly any mode of the transmission of information. From electronic media, such as the video games from which our false Shounen Bat derived his delusions of herodom, to more conventional "media" such as gossiping old women, Paranoia Agent definitely stresses the potential for use and abuse of information to affect social identity. Bergstrom emphasized in particular the way the anime's extras use cell phones to distance themselves from the people with whom they are communicating and make use of that distance to deceive, and asked whether such an action amounted to the relinquishment of agency a la Tsukiko's treatment of Maromi or Jim's story about A/V problems. Media hence becomes the source of Shounen Bat, even as we turn to it as our Maromi. To use the media irresponsibly is to surrender agency and therefore identity. Citing contemporary Japanese social commentators, Bergstrom pondered whether growing crime in Japan might be a symptom of the inability of young people to establish meaningful identities in an increasingly impersonal and media-saturated world; particularly intriguing was his mention of the Japanese government's policy of protecting the identities of juvenile criminals with the pseudonym "Shounen/Shoujo A."

In summary, be a grown-up or Shounen Bat will get you. Unless that's what you want...