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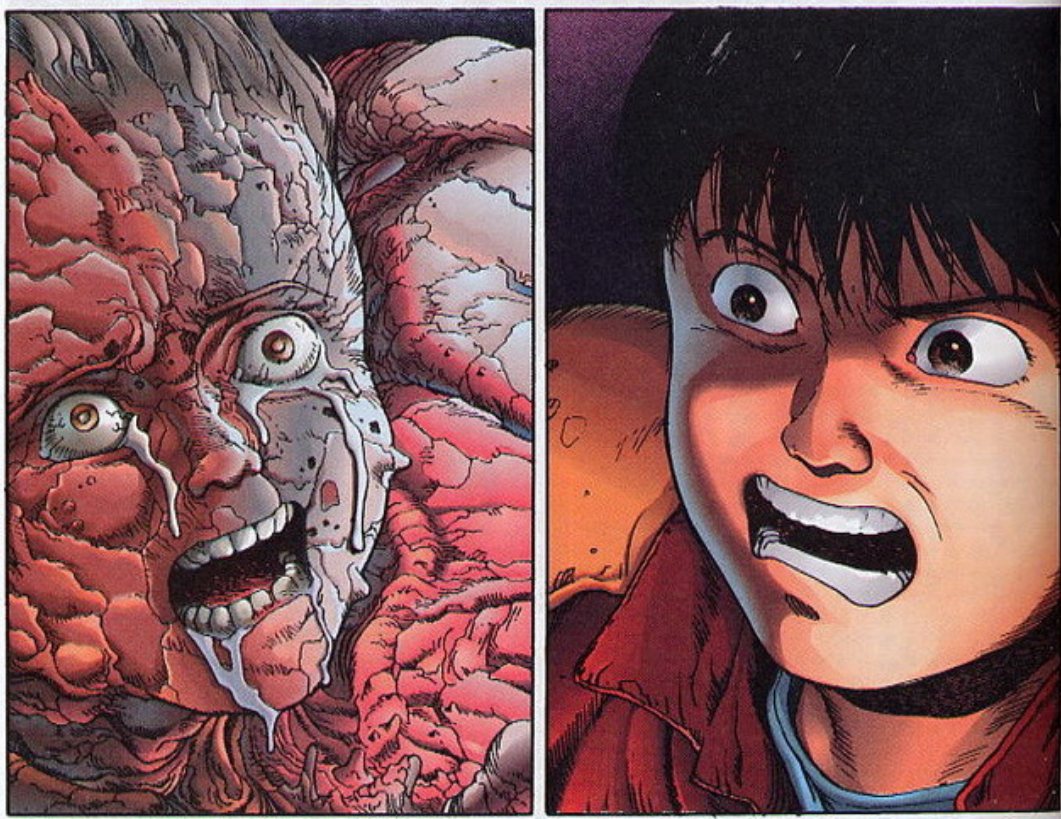
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## Akira in Color with Steve Oliff

by Deb Aoki, Mar 17th 2016

In the 1980's and early 1990's, there was no bigger manga series than AKIRA by [Katsuhiro Otomo](#). Otomo's dynamic, detailed artwork and mind-blowing post-apocalyptic story was a game-changer in Japan, and it made a huge impact on comics creators and readers in Europe, Asia, and North America as a graphic novel and a feature-length anime.

However, when AKIRA was first published in English by Marvel's EPIC imprint in 1988, there were only a handful of Japanese manga titles published in English. As [Kodansha](#) editor [Yasumasa Shimizu mentioned at NYCC 2015](#), Otomo wanted to reach as many readers as possible. So with this in mind, two things were done to make AKIRA more accessible to western comics readers: the pages were flopped to read from right-to-left, and the pages were colored. The artwork was carefully flipped. and in some cases re-drawn by Otomo and his assistants, but as for the color, that was a job for award-winning comics colorist [Steve Oliff](#).



Oliff was selected by Otomo and introduced to him via Archie Goodwin, who was the editor in chief of [Marvel Comics](#) EPIC line at the time. As part of the process, Otomo came to North America to visit Oliff and work alongside him for several days in Oliff's hometown of Point Arena, in Northern California. Oliff and his art dealer Felix Lu recount those days in a [video released on YouTube](#) recently.

Oliff was one of the first professional creators to use computers to color comics pages. His company, Olyoptics, was a pioneer in this field. *AKIRA* proved to be a real game-changer, not only for manga's acceptance in North America, but for how it also changed the way that comics were colored and published. Before *AKIRA*, most western comics were printed on newsprint-like paper and colored with Ben-Day dots, much like newspaper comic strips. After *AKIRA*, more and more comics were published on slick paper to capture the rich colors and subtle shades made possible by computer coloring and separations.

Oliff's work on *AKIRA* earned him a Wil Eisner Award in 1992, one of the U.S. comics industry's highest honors, and he continues to work in the comics profession today. Now, over 25 years later, Oliff has released several of his original colored guides from *AKIRA*, making them available for sale through his art dealer, Felix Comic Art.

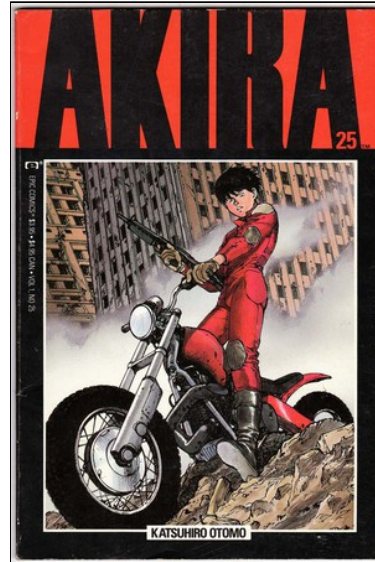
The first online sale of over 100 pages sold out within 2 days. But according to Felix Lu from [Felix Comic Art](#), this is only the first wave of pages that will be made available for sale.

ANN corresponded with Oliff and Lu to get some insights on this pivotal moment in the history of manga in North America and to learn more about the how's and why's behind this rare opportunity to own a little bit of *AKIRA*.

***AKIRA* is a huge series -- six volumes with over 300 - 400 pages per volume; almost 2200 pages in all. The Japanese edition was released in 6 volumes, while the first US color edition was released as 38 serialized issues from 1988 – 1995. How long did the coloring process take, start to finish, from Volume 1 - Volume 6?**

**Steve Oliff:**

It took from 1988-1994. It would have come out quicker, but Otomo took a couple years off to work on a movie (*Steamboy*).



**I know you're definitely one of the leading pioneers of using digital methods for coloring comics, so I was surprised to see that there were artifacts like your colored pages that are manually created using paint and Pantone color films! Can you explain the your process? How did the pages go from these hand-colored artifacts to the printed page readers saw in the Marvel/EPIC edition?**

**Steve Oliff:**

I always did fully-rendered color guides by hand. Then when they went to my computer crew, I made sure they duplicated what was on my original color guide.

**In the video, you explained that you spent time with Otomo at the onset of the project, when Otomo visited Point Arena. Do you have any favorite memories from that time? Have you stayed in contact with Otomo since then?**

**Steve Oliff:**

No I haven't, because Otomo went on to other projects. My favorite moment was having sushi with everyone in New York after I got the job, and I found out Otomo could speak really good English. They laughed at me while I ate sushi (because it was new to me at the time), but now I love it!

**In the video, you mentioned working with Otomo side by side in your studio in California. What kind of guidance did you get from Otomo, as far as what he wanted from this project?**

**Steve Oliff:**

Other than the original guides from Otomo, we really just followed the flow of the storytelling.

**Can you recall any comments or guidance you received from *AKIRA*'s two editors, Archie Goodwin at Marvel or Shimizu-san from Kodansha, while working on this project?**

**Steve Oliff:**

I could go on and on about Archie, he was the best editor I ever had. He was one of a kind, an awesome man. All the Kodansha editors were really cool.

**What were your guiding principles while working on this series? Did you refer to any films or art influences to help you with coloring decisions for this book?**

**Steve Oliff:**

Yes, it was the *AKIRA* anime. They sent me slides from the film for reference before it came out.





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Ah, right! The AKIRA film was released in 1988, right about the time when the Marvel print edition was being released. What were your first impressions upon seeing these color scenes? What was your reaction upon seeing the anime for the first time?

**Steve Oliff:**

Just to be clear, I didn't get to see the anime before I started coloring the book. They did send me some slides to look at for reference, but I didn't see the anime until later. When I did get to see it, my reaction was that I'd never seen anything

like it! This was before *Ghost in the Shell* or any of the other famous futuristic anime. I was also introduced to the anime of Hayao Miyazaki by Otomo. Amazing stuff!

**The anime obviously didn't cover everything that happened in the manga. Were you given relatively free-reign to make coloring decisions for scenes that weren't in the anime, or did you work closely with Otomo on these scenes?**

**Steve Oliff:**

I was given pretty much free reign after the initial 5-6 issues. He just turned me loose after that.

**What were the most challenging or interesting coloring challenges you faced on this project? Was there a particular scene or page that presented special challenges to color?**

**Steve Oliff:**

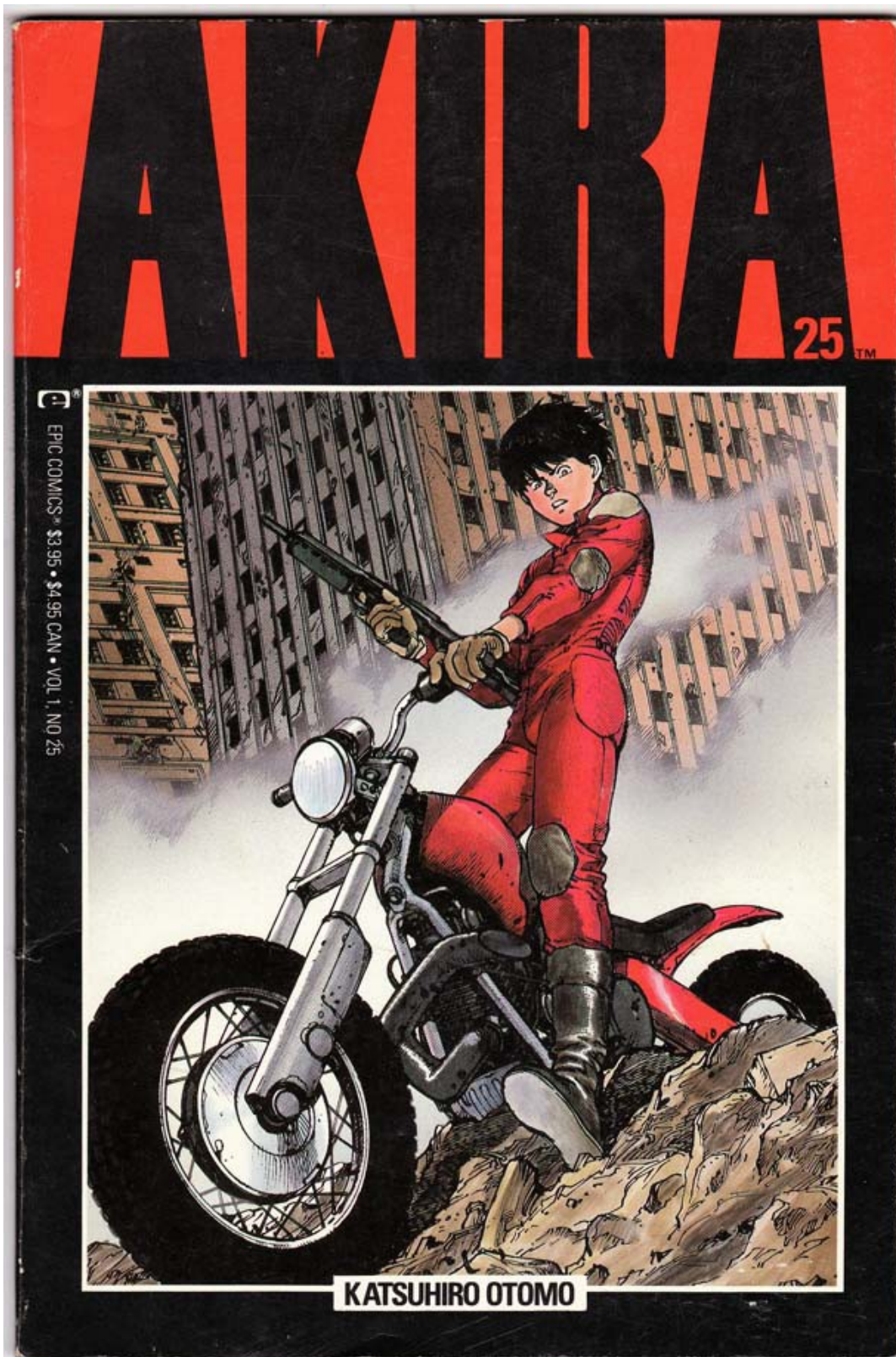
The "blorping baby" (what I call it) was the toughest for me, because I was trying to make his skin look translucent, so you could see the veins and he would appear grotesque and alien.

**This is obviously a very big project! Looking back on it now, how did it change the trajectory of your career or your approach to your art?**

**Steve Oliff:**

*AKIRA* changed everything. Because it was the first comic colored digitally, it was a paradigm shift. The whole industry of comic book coloring changed with *AKIRA*.





What made AKIRA such a catalyst for change in the Western comics publishing business?

**Steve Oliff:**

It began the change in comic book production. After a while, it also changed what the audience saw as possible for what colors could be.

The motto at Olyoptics was "the better you draw, the better we color." With Otomo's art, it raised all of us up a notch.

**A lot of younger comics readers may not recall this, but I remember the days when US comics were printed on newsprint-like paper, with Ben-Day dots and overlapping; very different from the rich 4-color process on slick paper that we see in most US comics now. Was this edition of *AKIRA* a key force in the shift to this type of production in coloring of comics in the U.S.?**

Absolutely. Without question. That's why *AKIRA* changed everything.

**So let's talk about the sale of your original pages for a bit. I recall seeing you selling some of these color guides at the Alternative Press Expo in San Francisco several years ago, but haven't heard of these being for sale since then. What made you decide to start selling these again after what seemed like a several year hiatus?**

**Steve Oliff:**

I thought it was better to get them into people's collection than sitting in my back room waiting for mice to eat them. (laughs)

**Felix, how did you get access to these pieces for sale? Did Steve approach you or did you approach him?**

**Felix Lu:**

I've known Steve for several years, just from interacting at shows. A couple of years ago, I became an art rep. At San Diego Comic-Con last year, Steve stopped by my booth to say hi. It was prompted by several of the artists I rep running into him on the show floor. We got to talking and it became a very easy decision to help him sell his art.

***AKIRA* is a long series – over 2,200 pages! How many pages have been sold so far, and how many still remain?**

**Felix Lu:**

Steve colored every single page. So however many there are in the series! Some of the guides reside in the Otomo archives. Also, over the past 20+ years, Steve has gifted or sold a good number of the guides. I'd say fewer than 20% of the guides are left. That's a rough estimate. Steve was pretty judicious about what he let go, so a good mix still remains.

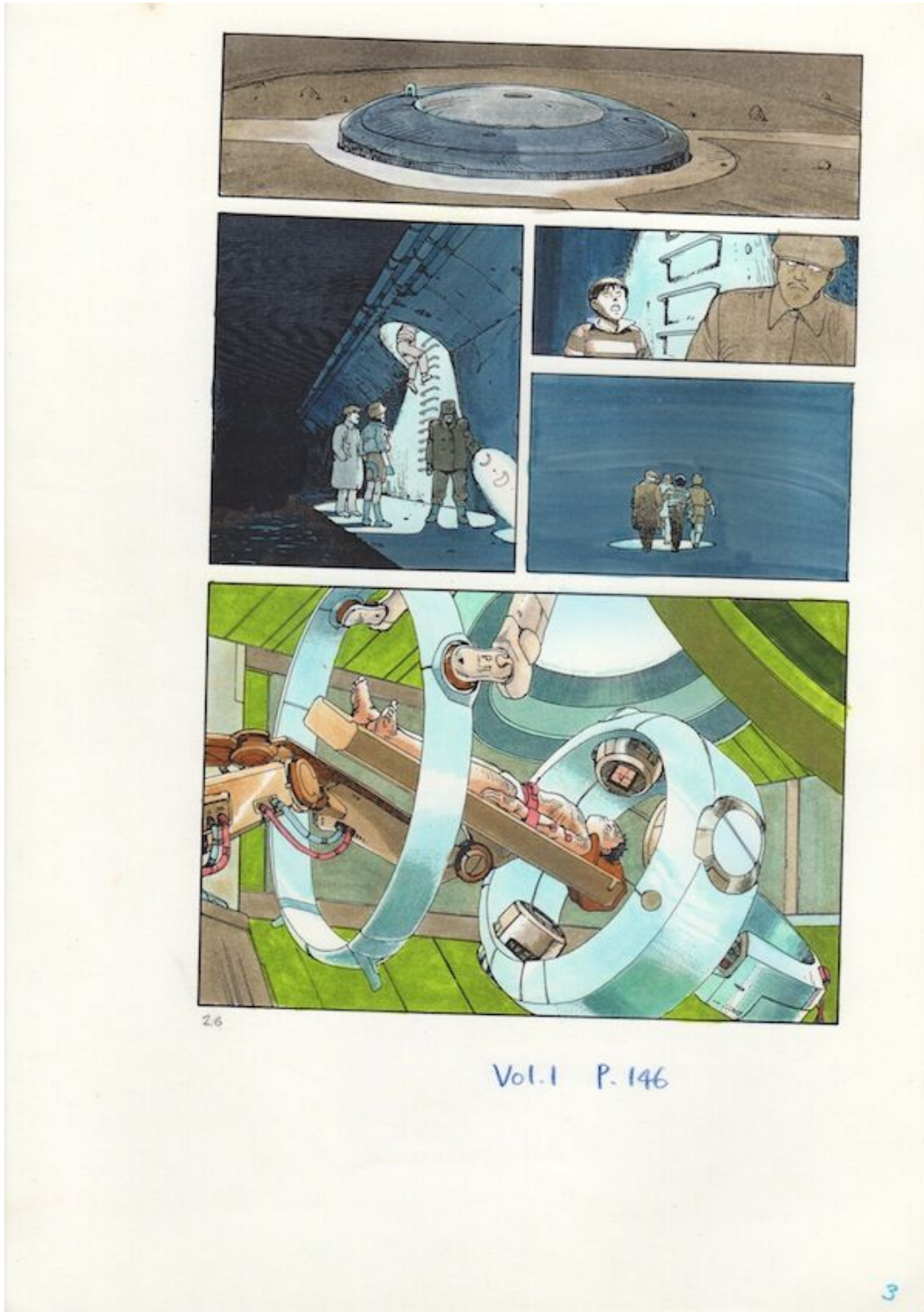
**Are you going to be releasing more pages for sale? If so, when?**

**Felix Lu:**

The tentative plan is to hold one more sale like we just had. To find out when, I



encourage anyone interested to [sign up for the mailing list on my site](#). I always give the list heads-up on any available new art. For an event like this, knowing the date/time when the sale goes live is crucial!



In the video you posted on [YouTube](#), I was amazed to see the copy of *AKIRA* that Steve showed you that had a few pages hand-colored by Otomo. Is that something he's keeping as a keepsake, or will that someday be available to collectors?

**Felix Lu:**

Steve maintains his own permanent archive, and that will be included in it. He has no plans to sell it. I also ask that collectors please respect this and don't bother him about it. The vast majority of guides WILL be made available. He's only keeping a few as mementos along with the personal correspondence he had with Otomo.

**At the end of the video, it says "To be continued" -- what do you have planned, as far as future videos on this?**

**Felix Lu:**

That will be a surprise! In the meantime, I hope everyone checks out the original video. We're quite proud of it!

**To date, there is no full color edition of *AKIRA* available in print. However, when I've floated the idea past the editors at Kodansha, including Shimizu-san, they seemed open to the idea. What do you think about a new full-color edition of *AKIRA*?**

**Steve Oliff:**

I would love to see that happen! I still have the original color files.

**Felix Lu:**

So would I!

**And finally, any last thoughts about this sale of your color pages from *AKIRA*?**

**Steve Oliff:**

I'm delighted! I'm glad that these guides are going to good homes all over the world.

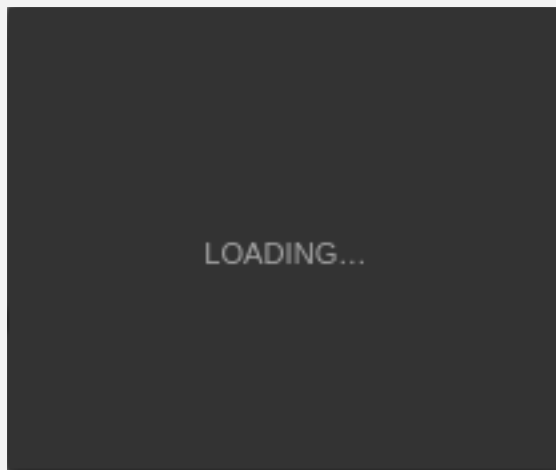
**Felix Lu:**

I'm absolutely thrilled. The response has been stunning, to say the least. We made over 300 guides available, at all price ranges, so that every fan would be able to have a shot at one. I knew the sale would do well, but to sell out was amazing. It's a validation of Steve's work; color guides aren't typically valued by collectors. But as I hope everyone knows by now, these are not ordinary color guides. Steve treated each page as a painting. Beautiful work, and we are happy that these are now out in the world. Thanks to all the great fans who supported the sale, and for those who missed out, another chance will be coming! Again, thanks so much!

For updates on the upcoming sale of more color pages from *AKIRA*, visit [Felix Comic Art](#).



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**COLUMN** [5 comments](#)



## Vice & Luna - Eyelita: Battle Angel

Mar 13, 11:14 [just for fun](#)

They delayed the live-action Battle Angel movie 6 months! What could possibly trigger that kind of a delay??

**REVIEW** [5 comments](#)

Story:  
**YUU KAMIYA**  
**TSUBAKI HIMANA**

Illustrations:  
**SINO**







## Clockwork Planet Novel 1

Mar 13, 10:00 [novels](#)

Clockwork Planet's reputation may have taken a hit after its sub-par anime adaptation, but this first novel proves that the story still has promise. Rebecca Silverman has the details.

**COLUMN** [56 comments](#)



## Answerman - What Makes A Manga Shonen Or Shoujo?

Mar 12, 12:00 [manga](#)

It's the eternal question - is the manga I'm reading shojo, shonen, seinen, josei, or something else entirely? How am I supposed to know just WHO this thing I'm reading is for? Justin gets into it.

**COLUMN** [9 comments](#)



## Shelf Life - Occultic;Nine Part 2

Mar 12, 11:00 [anime](#)

James braces himself for the final episodes of this scrambled Science;Adventure series spinoff, while Paul breaks down all this week's new anime releases.

**AD** [1 comments](#)





## 'Come to Japan' Campaign: Visit the Kizuna AI Booth at Japan Week for Another Chance to Win a Trip to Japan!

Mar 12, 11:00 [japan](#) [tech](#)

Previously, Kizuna AI talked to us about Japanese culinary culture. This time, she'll be talking about Japan's amazing technologies!

REVIEW [4 comments](#)



### Ace Attorney BD/DVD Part 1

Mar 12, 10:00 [anime](#)

Ace Attorney offers a fun story and characters, but its lack of ambition holds it back from being as good as fans of the game might have hoped. Rebecca Silverman explores what went wrong.

FEATURE [60 comments](#)



### Legends of VHS Fansubs: Tracking Down Miami Mike

Mar 11, 11:00 [anime](#)

"This fansub brought to you No Thanks to Miami Mike - I remember what you did to me at DragonCon." It was an ancient grudge that became a meme, but Dawn H. of the Anime Nostalgia Podcast finally discovered the truth.

REVIEW [0 comments](#)



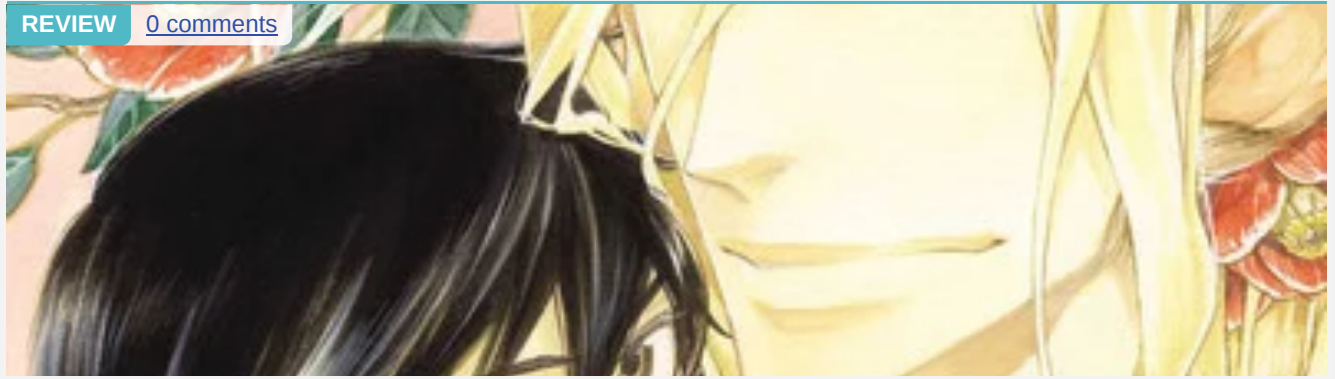
### Captain Harlock: Dimensional Voyage GNs 1-3

Mar 11, 10:00 [manga](#)

This retelling of Leiji Matsumoto's 1978 series largely works, even if it lacks some of the original manga's grandeur. Rebecca Silverman digs into this epic space opera.

REVIEW

[0 comments](#)



## A Strange and Mystifying Story GN 2

Mar 10, 10:00 [manga](#)

Too much telling and not enough showing brings down this boys' love romance, but Setsu's past may be worth sticking things out. Rebecca Silverman has the details.

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