Cartoons from Another Planet: Japanese Animation as Cross-Cultural Communication

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Geisha, samurai, kimono, sushi, sumo...eccentric mind-boggling animation? For years, Japanese animation has been heralded as an exciting, albeit bizarre, artistic phenomenon from the same country that introduced us to the tranquil Zen garden and the shockingly hard-working businessman. Despite often being stereotyped as nothing more than senseless cartoons featuring cutie-pie romping pocket critters, *anime*, as it is commonly called, is a delightfully inventive reference manual into the world of Japanese symbols, folklore, religion, history, social musings and aesthetic traditions. When audience members are no longer exclusively Japanese, *anime* unexpectedly becomes a vehicle for cross-cultural communication. Examining the history of *anime* distribution and fan appreciation in America is a free-for-all revelation into the effects of cultural appropriation, as well as a reflection of Western mores and artistic preferences. It also serves as an example of how art forms can cross national boundaries, uniting audiences from all over the globe under the guise of pure unadulterated entertainment. Disney fans beware; the following just might have dear Uncle Walt spinning in his cryogenic freezer!

Don't Call Me a Cartoon

Once upon a time, in a far away land, there lived a beautiful princess trapped in a shining castle. One moonlit night, a handsome prince rode up on his brilliant white horse and rescued her to live happily ever after. Unfortunately, being the cyberpunk flesh-craving gamine cyborg that she was, the princess had to neuromancer his brain, then decapitate and eat him. Naturally the prince, a genetically engineered resistance fighter, willingly sacrifices himself to her vampire-like appetite in accordance to his people's code of honor. But I digress...

This is not your father's animation. Nor is it really yours. Or is it? Welcome to the world of Japanese animation, a world where any imaginable subject, setting, or theme can pretty much find itself represented in the likeness of entertainment. *Anime* (a term borrowed from the French by the Japanese to refer to the entire medium of animation, but adopted by the West to refer solely to animation from Japan, go figure) is an art form used to tell stories in ways barely even alluded to in Western animation. In America especially, with the Disney name brand practically inseparable from the word "animation," this particular art form unfortunately suffers a restricted and limited fate. Animation here is predominantly kiddy fair (or at least stereotyped as such), stuck in the overly exhausted realm of fairy tales with manufactured happy endings and token animal sidekicks voiced by television comedians who were annoying enough before they were animated. American animation that veers away from the so-called harmless Disney model (Bambi is excluded; I still find it traumatizing!) always seems to be forced into sub-cultural, limited exposure film festivals labeled with names such as "Sick and Twisted."

This is not to say that *anime* (also called Japanimation) is only intended for older viewing generations. Much of it is highly geared to appeal to youngsters of a variety of ages. Japanese animation, however, does have a much freer palette from which to choose its audience and subject matter. It is hard to think of any cinematic or literary genre that is not represented in *anime*. Within the medium of Japanese animation, you can find: wrenching dramas, cheesy romances, storybook adventures, spooky thrillers, historical fantasies, robot shows, gothic fairy tales, slapstick parodies, futuristic dystopias, sports dramas, sci-fi series,

gimmicky sci-fi series, sexy cyberpunk techno-mythologies, misogynistic violent pornography, sword and sorcery stories, spoofs of sword and sorcery stories, epic environmental cautionary tales, Norse Goddess romantic comedies, not to mention your normal, everyday life family soap operas. All of this is achieved with nowhere near the stratospheric budgets allotted to big Disney productions, which tend to reach skyward of $100 million. The most expensive animated film in Japanese history was the recently released Princess Mononoke which cost an unprecedented $20 million; it made $130 million at the box office, by the way. In other words, Japanese animation studios are getting extraordinarily powerful effects with creative storytelling and handmade artistic achievements on only a fraction of the monetary and technological expenditure of Disney films.

So what exactly is *anime*? The most common mistake that people make is in categorizing it as a style of animation—the kind with big eyes, big boobs, big guns, sailor outfits, and little critters with names like Pikachu and Jigglybug. A characteristic *USA Today* article wrote that *anime* is "that fast-paced style of animation rarely seen on TV in the USA." TV stations "don't air the graphic Japanese cartoons known as 'anime.' Anime is so different from what airs here. It's far edgier...and violent...driven by intense moments" (Fujii 14). The paradox of this statement is that US television stations have been airing *anime* since the 1960s, usually disguised and edited so well that the only way you could tell it was from Japan was by looking at the Japanese names during the credits. Actually, the only thing that really classifies *anime* as, well, *anime*, is the fact that it is made in Japan by Japanese artists within a Japanese context. Stylistic experimentation within the medium is expected—rewarded if it's good and critically pissed on if it's bad. The creative realm of *anime* is vast, the possibilities endless. The product ends up as varied as *Pokemon*, a ridiculously popular child-oriented adventure romp of cute and furry battling pocket monsters, to *Grave of the Fireflies*, a devastating World War II aftermath tragedy where two cute little kids watch their mother disintegrate from the firebombing of their city, go live in a cave by a river, and then eventually watch each other die from starvation.

Now, about the whole cartoon thing. Americans often call anything that is animated a "cartoon." I did in the very title of this paper. *USA Today* did in the article quoted above. The problem is that there really is not another word in the English language to describe animation. *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary* defines a cartoon as one of four things,

> a preparatory design, drawing, or painting...a drawing intended as satire, caricature, or humor...a ludicrously simplistic, unrealistic, or one-dimensional portrayal or version...[or] an animated cartoon. (176)

It's no wonder Westerners often treat animation, or "cartoons," with such hierarchical disdain that forces it to be labeled as an inferior art form, whether "preparatory" for some greater art to follow, or "unrealistic" in its portrayal of the human condition. That would explain why animation in the West is generally a medium for telling simplified stories in a funny and pretty (read: safe) manner, perfect for the inexperienced and yet-to-be-educated youths of America. But when the term "cartoon" is applied to the world of Japanese animation, a great injustice is made. Partaking in this mindset is just another form of ethnocentrism, looking at a different culture through your own culturally specific set of values and definitions. There are, of course, many Japanese animated films and series that meet this "cartoon" mentality (the most popular of these being the phenomena that is *Pokemon*). But when you really look at the versatile creative arena of *anime*, such children-only animated fare makes up only a small portion of the greater art form as a whole.

The Aliens Have Landed

Japanese animation is hardly a recent phenomenon, although its newly appointed popularity in the West would indicate otherwise. *Anime* grew out of Japanese comics called *manga*, a form of entertainment whose appeal often puzzles Americans, and whose fascinating history would be another paper altogether. On any subway ride in Tokyo you can witness children, girls, and grown men in business suits reading these black and white comic books. *Anime* actually owes a lot of its characteristics to *manga* culture and aesthetics. The pioneer *manga* (and later *anime*)

artist Osamu Tezuka's stylistic choice of depicting characters with abnormally huge, glistening eyes grew out of the need to show emotion in an art form that was relegated to two-dimensional black and white surfaces. This stylistic trait is even parodied in an episode of the series *Urusei Yatsura* when a case of the girly eye measles quickly spreads amongst a horrified male population. Similarly, the free range of vibrant hair colors in Japanese *anime* is actually not a subliminal attempt to portray different races like many Westerns believe, but an evolution of character depiction in *manga*. To clearly differentiate the characters from one another, *manga* artists would have to shade their hair in varying degrees of white, black and gray. When manga made the transition to *anime*, these shadings naturally translated into different colors (Levi 12). Hair color can have specific symbolic content though. Blondes tend to be trouble and those with black hair tend to be more virtuous (any guess why?).

The popularity of *anime* among various age groups and both sexes in Japan is also related to *manga* culture. Unlike US comics, which are read mostly by boys and young men, sold only in specialty shops and make only a blip on the literary market scene, Japanese comics account for nearly 1/3 of all books and magazines issued in Japan and are stocked in regular book stores and magazine stands (Schilling 263). Comics made especially for girls comprise 30% of the entire *manga* industry (Ledoux 17). Girls are also known to read a lot of the boy-oriented *manga* as well. Contrary to popular belief, *manga* and *anime* artists are not all men. A surprisingly large percentage of these artists are women. Also interesting to note is that these women are not restricted to creating only female-oriented *manga*, just like male artists are not confined to creating works just for men. In fact, the best selling artist Rumiko Takahashi has sold over 100 million copies of her *manga* in Japan (that's pretty much one for every household!) and is coincidentally the most popular creator of *anime* in terms of video sales and rentals in the United States (Ledoux 22-23).

Osamu Tezuka's tendency to depict fallible characters wrestling with such issues as shame, faith, death, rebirth, responsibility, and self-doubt made it acceptable for grown adults to read *manga* and take it seriously as an entertaining art form (Schilling 263). This in turn led to the rise of Japanese *manga* and later *anime* as a dominant force in modern Japanese culture. When Tezuka decided to enter the realm of animation in the 1960's, he wanted to emulate the great Walt Disney in style, but soon realized it was impossible with the budget allotted to him. So he created a system of rather limited animation in which only one part of the image moved (like the mouth or the eyes). He began to collect animation cels with typical expressions and background scenes that could be used over and over again (Schilling 266). Thus, a system for animation was born that allowed it to be made cheaply and on the go. This eventually became the basic practice for Japanese animation, which puts creativity in storyline, detailing, and character development over the importance of having a high, fluid cel count. The work of famed animator Hayao Miyazaki embodies this ideal and often rivals the complex emotional realism of live action films. Never caring much for the simplified and superficial nature of Disney movies, his films place more importance in portraying realistic emotions (and even extreme social and political consciousness) than in the realistic movement so highly regarded in Western animation. Miyazaki's work helped convince many Japanese animators working on unambitious run-of-the-mill television shows, as well as the general populace, that *anime* was an extraordinary medium capable of infinite possibilities for any gender or age.

All that said and done, *anime* is still pretty much reserved for Japanese generations under forty. But this could be in part because of the relative newness of the art form as a whole. A parallel could be drawn to the fact that many older generations around the world are not as interested in computers as their younger counterparts. This in no way defines the object in question as a product for younger audiences, but as a medium for those more willing to accept the changing world around them. *Anime* popularity has actually gone through a recent renaissance of sorts with the advent of *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, a sci-fi series with a dynamic, fresh, and cathartic take on narrative and visual design which, as one observer put it, "may have done a great service by revealing the shameful secret of how many adults are *anime* fans" (Fujii 163).

Guess What? I Am Japanese!

A funny thing about *anime*: no matter how popular it is in the West and how universal it just might be, there is no way to disguise its very "Japaneseness." *Anime* is deeply imbedded in all aspects of Japanese society: folklore, legends, history, religion, moral assumptions, and aesthetic standards, to name a few. Fans around the world might be surprised to know that *anime* is created with only the Japanese audience in mind. The intention to create a boundary-defying art form is not a preconceived goal. The fact that *anime* has become so popular outside of Japan is quite a mystery to many Japanese animators. As Hayao Miyazaki states,

> I discovered that my work was a product of Japanese historical perspective and sense of nature.... So I have no plans to start making films with a global market in mind.... Japan will always remain very much the foundation of my work. (Ledoux 31-32)

Many references to Japanese culture in *anime* are quite blatant. It's hard to ignore that it is Japanese when people are walking around in kimonos, eating with chopsticks, praying to the Buddha at the local temple, and other such stereotypical actions ingrained as "Japanese" to the Western conscience. Surface Japaneseness can range from the obvious to the not so obvious. A good example of the former would be the long running TV show *Sazae-san*, a very "normal" depiction of a family living in suburban Tokyo. The people in the show always do the usual Japanese things at the right Japanese moments. They attend Shinto festivals, eat Japanese food, and sleep on futons on tatami floors. One writer goes so far to say that *Sazae-san* is basically "a manual for proper Japanese social behavior" (Schilling 224). Other surface Japaneseness can be less obvious, and certainly puzzling to Western viewers. For instance, Japanese can often be seen wearing surgical masks while going about their daily lives. This is a common custom for someone who is sick; the mask is worn to avoid spreading their colds to other people. In a particularly funny episode of *Urusei Yatsura*, a whole classroom of sick students is seen wearing surgical masks—a sight that would undoubtedly make uninitiated Westerners think it is a classroom filled with young medical surgeons.

More difficult to decipher is the use of symbols which have specific cultural meanings in their Japanese context. Many foreigners look at Japan and see a level of artificiality in their artistic endeavors. They see a society that places the importance of exterior beauty over taste (in the preparation of food) and unreality over the real (what exactly is going on in Noh theater!?). The problem with this train of thought is that it is not this pretension that Japanese prefer, but the symbolism imbued in it. In Japan, the Zen garden is symbolic of boundless islands scattered in the sea, the tea ceremony is symbolic of the entire social order inside an enclosed space, flower arrangements are symbolic of the relationship between heaven and earth, and scene-capturing woodblock prints are symbolic of the larger world that surrounds each image (Levi 23). So it is rather natural for *anime* to also incorporate such insights into Japanese culture. For example, whenever you see a cherry blossom tree in *anime* you can pretty much make two conclusions: 1) that it is spring, and 2) that someone is going to die. The latter of these two may seem like an odd conclusion, but it is the symbolism contained in the cherry blossom that leads us to it. The cherry blossom only blooms for about three days out of the year. It is this impermanence that makes it so highly regarded and symbolic in Japanese culture. So when you're watching *anime* and you see cherry blossoms falling, it most likely means that someone of great beauty (inside or out) is not going to live on this earth for much longer. Another often-used symbolic image in Japanese *anime* is that of the bleeding nose. Sometimes in comedies, when a male character sees a beautiful girl his nose starts to bleed erratically. This references the old Japanese belief that staring at a pretty girl will make your nose bleed. This symbolic connotation makes a particularly funny appearance in *Patlabor OAV (Original Animation Video) 6*, when a rather trigger-happy character gets a nosebleed when he looks at a really big gun (Poitras 141).

One of the most exciting traits of *anime* is how animators can constantly incorporate ancient Japanese legend, myth and history into their animation with a contemporary twist. Shinto, the native religion of Japan (it's not really a religion actually, but more a way of life) is a natural resource for *anime* artists. Shinto basically pro-

vides thousands of stories and ancient myths which Japanese become familiar with from an early age. The *manga* and *anime* artist Rumiko Takahashi often uses Japanese folklore in her works because of the simplicity in creatively manipulating stories that everybody already knows (Ledoux 20). In a typical Takahashi *anime* episode of *Urusei Yatsura*, the character Ataru comes across what he thinks are *tennyo*, mythological nymphs, bathing in the sea. He steals one of their robes and perversely clutches it to his face only to find out that it's a loincloth. This scene is actually a parody of the ancient story of a farmer who comes across one of these bathing heavenly maidens and steals her robe. When she asks for it back, the man agrees but only if she dances for him (Poitras 135). The character of Lum, also in *Urusei Yatsura*, is a variation of an ancient demon called an *oni*. *Oni* are horned, tiger skin-clad, mythological creatures with wildly colored hair who are known for lusting after humans. Lum is a beautiful flying creature with two cute little horns, green hair and a wild temper. She dresses in a tiger striped bikini and has a frighteningly intense crush on a neighborhood schoolboy.

Shinto mythology could also be the reason for so many wild, strong female characters in *anime*. Unlike much of Western folklore and heroics, many of the ancient Japanese tales of gods and demons are composed of female deities and spirits. Japanese history is also dominated by powerful empresses, priestesses, writers and artisans. As a result, *anime* is chock full of female protagonists and villains. Contrary to the subservient "geisha" stereotype of Japanese women, Japanese society is actually quite tolerant of strong women in the family and in the workplace, quite possibly because ancient history and Shinto belief are filled with powerful heroines that played prominent roles in the shaping of Japan.

If you dig even deeper into the so-called Japaneseness of *anime* you begin to uncover certain themes that reflect the very nature of what it is to be Japanese. A casual viewer of *anime* could make the conclusion that Japanese artists have sado-masochistic tendencies because they really like to kill off their heroes and make bad things happen to good people. However, similar to the cherry blossom example above, Japanese have a time-honored appreciation for short-lasting beauty. According to Donald Richie,

> Unhappy events are simply accepted because they exist. Japanese art observes mono no aware, the transience of all earthly things.... It implies not only an acceptance of evanescence but also a mild celebration of that very quality. (170-71)

The Japanese attitude towards death gets to the very nature of the definition of heroics. In the West, a hero is someone who accomplishes his goal and triumphs in the results even if he dies because of it. *Braveheart*, John Wayne movies, *The Odyssey*, and the recently released *Gladiator* are all examples of this archetype. In Japan, heroics are all about motivation and duty, the intent to do right and be good. Japanese heroes often never achieve their goal and die prematurely, but this is what makes them heroes. Winning and justice are not important because the world is in no position to care. It happens all the time in real life, so why not deal with it in *anime*. In the very first episode of *Space Cruiser Yamato*, two heroic people die for no apparent reason. And why did those two innocent kids have to die from starvation in *Grave of the Fireflies*? There is tragic beauty in these deaths that dig deep into the history of Japanese aesthetics. (This might also explain the extreme popularity of *Titanic* with the Japanese audience.) Such portrayals force the viewer to actually deal with the consequences of death, an issue almost completely missing in Disney animation because no one dies and everyone lives happily ever after (except poor Bambi's mother!). Many of the endings in *anime* are unconcluded, and quite frankly, unfair. The popular movie *Akira* ends with a warning against future applications of rampant scientific technology, ending basically with a big fat question mark on the future of mankind. Such plot lines also give *anime* a heightened level of excitement and tension since you never know what's going to happen or who's going to die next.

Anime often disguises contemporary struggles and themes in its entertaining medium. The fact that so many *anime* shows and movies take place in futuristic or ancient worlds of social upheaval and political unrest, says a lot about the current state of mind of Japanese animators. *Anime* such as these deal with issues of how to reconcile ancient tradition and nature with the advent of new technology. This dichotomy of the ancient and the new is a theme dealt with on a daily basis in Japan, where tourists are often delighted to see

geisha running around the streets of Kyoto in kimonos and wooden geta while talking giddily on their miniscule high-tech cell phones. In *Princess Mononoke*, the ancient Japanese world of forest gods and demons is threatened by an encroaching civilization of humans and their polluting industries. The resulting conflict that ensues is about how to reconcile new advances in technology and humanity with the natural order of the world. Another Miyazaki work, *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*, which takes place in another world and another time so seemingly unrelated to Japan, has a strong ecological theme while romanticizing ancient feudalistic society. This is a strong manifestation of Miyazaki's criticism to rapid modernization and the industrial excesses of current Japanese society (Schodt 279). *Galaxy Express 999* is about people who give up their human bodies in exchange for robotic ones, raising the question of how to retain humanity in a mechanical futuristic world. In *Galaxy Express*, people travel on a train that takes them away from their industrial homelands through the endless possibilities of space and into any galaxy they wish to choose. Interesting enough, the train is not modeled after the high-speed technological achievement that is the *shinkansen* bullet train, but an old man-run steam engine locomotive.

Another such theme dealt with in Japanese *anime* is the subtextual confrontation of women's issues and feminism especially by female animators. Rumiko Takahashi's ever-popular comedy series *Ranma 1/2* is about a cursed boy who changes into a girl whenever he's splashed with water. As a woman, he constantly encounters sexual discrimination and unwanted advances from horny schoolboys. When he takes his martial arts classes as a woman, he learns agility, speed and intelligence—traits other than the sheer strength he deemed so important when he was a man (Levi 131). Takahashi slyly asserts her feminist position through her character's gender-bending experiences and the revelations that he makes because of it. Similar issues are dealt with in manga and anime by the four women team CLAMP, who often delight at objectifying men in their work by exploiting them as pretty male versions of their ample-breasted female counterparts. Female animation artists often manage to remain somewhat anonymous (in terms of gender) behind their creations. After all, who would have thought that the artists responsible for the new renaissance of gothic horror *anime* such as *Ogre Slayer* and *X* would be women.

Anime's symbolic, folkloric and thematic manifestations are not the only elements imbedded with Japaneseness. The very methods of storytelling used by the animator are reflections of centuries-old artistic traditions. The general lack of fluidity in movement and stagnant posing of characters for dramatic effect hark back to ancient Kabuki and Noh theater. As mentioned earlier, realism in movement is rarely a goal in an animator's work. But realism has never really been a motive in the arts of Japan in the first place. It is the essence of movement that is symbolic of the greater motion implied. Similar to Japanese woodblock prints like Hokusai's famous *The Wave*, the essence of the subject at large is all that the artist needs to portray. He leaves it to the audience to fill in the rest. Another example would be the use of puppets in Bunraku theater to symbolize the essence of humans. Naturally, the main reason for this lack of realistic high-cell-count motion in *anime* is mostly due to budgetary concerns. But the fact that the animator purposefully decides to focus his attention on other aspects like story and characterization goes to show his general lack of interest in a Western style depiction of reality.

Anime also uses culturally specific sound cues to illustrate and support certain actions and themes. Unlike Western uses of swelling orchestrations to stress dramatic moments, *anime* often calls upon Japanese instruments known to invoke feelings of tension and impact like the eerie samisen or the wooden clappers used in Kabuki theater. At the end of a *Vampire Princess Miyu* episode entitled "Banquet of the Marionettes," a childlike doll demon walks away with her latest prey. The sounds heard during the sequence are typical of Japanese Bunraku puppet theater. At the very end of the scene, a curtain falls to the ground. Although it may just seem like a stylistic way to say "THE END," this striped curtain is actually a type used in Bunraku theater (Levi 27). The symbolic significance of such sound and visual cues is amplified because the demon girl turns out to be a doll herself and has just turned her latest victim into a doll as well. Other such sounds are meant to alert the Japanese viewer to certain recognizable references. For example, the

distinct sound of the semi (similar to the cicada), an annoying beetle-like creature that never shuts up during the summer, is meant to alert the viewer that it's humid and hot. Such symbolic content is unique in its significance to the intended Japanese audience and is often grossly misinterpreted and misunderstood in translation.

Cyborgs and Zombies and Boobs, Oh My...or So You Think I'm a Pervert?!

One of the biggest misconceptions surrounding the world of Japanese animation is that it only features scantily clad, big-boobed femme fatales with extravagant firearms that gruesomely destroy and decapitate anything in sight. Well, okay, so this happens a lot. But in the spirit of cultural understanding, let's try to look at this phenomenon within its Japanese context. From a Western perspective, certainly one of the most shocking features of *anime* is this frequent depiction of sexual imagery and graphic violence. Yet, there is a reason for this. Artists use *anime*, 1) as a realm of fantasy in which pent up repression can be released in an exciting and justifiable arena, and 2) for a direct confrontation of those very issues that plague human society and consciousness.

Anime basically provides the viewer with a parallel world of fantasy in which dreams and desires can be played out, safely. It may seem startling to Americans that a country known for its stoicism, composure, and general all-around politeness, has a remarkably free fantasy life. They might also make the conclusion that Japan is a country filled with deviants and perverts. But the problem with this notion is that it ignores the indispensable need for all walks of people to release themselves and invert the social order once in a while; hence the existence of carnivals and Halloween-like events everywhere in the world. *Anime* is another form of escapism, a medium for those well-behaved Japanese to partake in unabashed bacchanalian excess through run away cleavage and in-your-face brutality. This would also explain the preoccupation with excessive drinking in Japan. *Anime*, like many other forms of entertainment in Japan, often represents an inversion of normal behavior as a result of having to adhere to demanding social laws of proper conduct. As Ian Baruma writes, "they are the violent fantasies of a people forced to be gentle" (225). It is not a direct reflection of modern Japanese society, but one filtered through their unconscious desires. Sci-fi adventures and dramas are so prevalent in *anime* because of their immense flexibility. In a future world, in another time and place, pretty much anything can happen. And the more carnage and cleavage, the better.

Actually, much of mainstream entertainment in Japan is escapist in form. Japanese magazine stands, television shows, advertisements and movies are all filled with violent and erotic images. One could almost make the case that having an outlet for violent and sexual release promotes a safer society. In America, with such strict, puritanical laws on morality, outlets for emotional release are strictly governed and screened by uptight regulatory committees who can zealously congregate for hours on the moral justifications of showing three seconds of butt crack. Outlets for pent up sexual frustrations and fight club wannabes enter forbidden and subcultural territories. People who flock to them constantly run the risk of being labeled immoral freaks, not to mention becoming the latest suspects to the FBI's Most Wanted Potential Perverts List. They are forced to hide their compulsions, reminded every minute by society that they should be ashamed of themselves. Yet despite such enforced standards of decency, America remains one of the more brutal societies in terms of violent and sexual crimes. By contrast, in Japan, as one American comic artist states,

> With all the crowds of people, it feels incredibly safe. I think a mother could send her daughter out naked with a ¥100,000 bill taped to her back and know she'd be okay. (Schodt 50-51)

Japan's almost factory-like educational system, strict orderly way of life, and close urban living quarters could naturally lead to some very unhappy campers if it were not for an external refuge of entertainment. That's where *anime* comes in. In fact, Frederik Schodt reveals that despite Japan's already low violent and sexual crime rate, both rates have gone down significantly in the periods when *manga* and *anime* were thriving in popularity (50). Plus, in Japan there is no universal idea of morality that everyone must adhere to. Native Japanese religion has no moral code contained within it. Issues of right and wrong are imbedded within social relation-

ships not universally upheld religious doctrines (Levi 99). Violent and erotic fantasies are not even considered immoral like they are in the West. There is no sense of universal moralistic judgement from higher powers of existence. This might explain much of the dichotomy in villain and hero characterization throughout many Japanese theatrical forms. The lines between what is defined as good and bad are often unclear. *Anime* villains tend to wrestle with their sympathetic sides. They are complex characters with desires, reasons, and principles. They are rarely pure evil for evil's sake like the ugly witches and stepmothers and all around bad guys in Disney animation. Likewise, heroes are often depicted as fallible characters that make mistakes and often fall to the dark side.

Japanese know full well that what they are watching and reading is not real. A healthy imagination is seldom the sign of an immanent psychotic breakdown. The main reason for this can be traced to the fact that Japan is a shame based culture rather than a guilt based one. Japanese rarely cross the line between fantasy and reality because of the shame their embarrassing or harmful actions would bring to their families. Although this is a rather sweeping generalization (and often an unfair stereotype), it does help to explain Japan's low crime rate. And besides, Japan has a long tradition of honest aesthetic appreciation of the unreal and of their widespread desire to break away from everyday reality through art.

This leads to another, almost contradictory reason for portraying violence in *anime*, one that chooses to directly confront those unpleasant subjects that disturb modern civilization. Because Japanese animation is not considered an inferior artistic medium for telling stories, it often tackles the same issues that are dealt with in novels and contemporary films. Along with its realistic portrayal of death, *anime* also depicts graphic brutality and sensuality. As animator and comic artist Kosuke Fujishima reveals, "It happens often enough in real life and besides, sex isn't evil. I think pretending sex and violence doesn't exist only breeds ignorance" (Ledoux 75). This is not to say that violent and erotic *anime* goes wholly uncriticized by the Japanese public. Many of the more conservative types are more than willing to voice their displeasure at the lurid and brutal content. Yet violence and erotica alone do not compose the majority of *anime* entertainment. In most cases, sex and violence make up only parts of the story. There are, of course, some very offensive and disturbing *anime* (like the *Overfiend* series, to which I wouldn't subject my worst enemy), but they compose only a slight percentage of the entire animation market. Unfortunately they are disproportionately popular in the Western world, which leads us into the next portion of this paper: What happens when the popularity of *anime* crosses over into other countries? How did it all begin, what happens to its "Japaneseness," and why on earth is it so popular?

Mickey Mouse Eats Sushi...or When Good Ninjas Go Bad and Other Misunderstood TV Shows

So how exactly did anime jump ship and find its way to an appreciative Western audience? For starters, anime has been appearing on major U.S. television networks since the 1960s with such series as *Speed Racer*, *Astro Boy*, and *Kimba, the White Lion*. But the true crossover boom came in the early 80's when a new generation of Americans began to acknowledge the artistry and entertainment value of *anime*. Japanese historian Antonia Levi found that these were often students who participated in the growing number of foreign exchange programs, created by a Reagan era curiosity of Japan's newfound wealth and prosperity (8). Japan's economic bubble in the 1980's, stimulated by a boom in real estate, banking, and the stock market, was certainly a curiosity to the American government. All of a sudden, exchange programs began popping up that encouraged eager American youths to learn the Japanese "secret of success." These students quickly acquired an interest in what they saw on Japanese television. Helped along with the advent of VCRs and a new market for videos, these kids brought back tapes upon tapes of *anime*. They showed and traded these tapes with their friends who intently watched them even if no one had the slightest clue what the characters were talking about. Military personnel stationed in Japan also brought these intriguingly different "cartoons" back with them to the states. This coincided with the newfound popularity of anime shows like *Star Blazers* on U.S. television. Videotapes also helped to expose fans all across America to non-edited *anime* with not-so-Disney-like content,

anime that could never hope to be shown on mainstream U.S. television.

This marked the beginning of a rather ambitious cultural exchange. American fans started to learn Japanese, or find some new Japanese friends who could translate the videos for them. *Anime* soon began to be shown on local television channels in cities with large populations of Japanese immigrants. These programs started to attract even non-Japanese speakers who belonged to an almost cult following of fans now utterly devoted to this "exotic" new art form from the East. Soon conventions began to spring up where *anime* and *manga* fanatics could trade videos and comics, meet some of their favorite artists and show off their spiffy handmade Captain Harlock costumes. In the 90s, movies like *Akira and Ghost in the Shell* had limited theatrical releases stateside, which won over even more fans who were previously unaware of this new genre-defying approach towards animation. (*Ghost in the Shell* later became the first *anime* feature film to hit number one on the U.S. video sales chart.) College campuses quickly jumped on the bandwagon, forming *anime* clubs which meet in anywhere from dirty, laundry-littered dorm rooms to 300-seat lecture halls. With the advent of the Internet, exposure to *anime* became even easier. Thousands of websites are currently devoted to anything from video distributor catalogs to cute short-lived anime characters who appeared for only five seconds in the forty-seventh episode of Urusei Yatsura. Computer technology also allows fans to subtitle previously untranslated (or really badly translated) versions of *anime*. Strangely enough, *anime* basically owes much of its popularity in the U.S. to "illegal" transactions such as bootlegging, pirating, and unauthorized to distribution.

Anime's relationship with American distribution companies has been erratic, to say the least. The first years of *anime* appropriation on American television may be fondly and nostalgically remembered by fans who grew up watching them. Yet, bring up such issues as editing and dubbing and stand back and watch the wincing ensue. The Japaneseness of these shows was fiercely camouflaged, along with any mature content in order to redirect the appeal to a strictly American, as well as a younger, audience. Many fans who grew up watching shows like *Astro Boy* later admitted to having no idea that it was from Japan. NBC producer Fred Ladd admitted that,

> the hardest part in the production was downplaying the violence of the action, explaining and justifying it in terms American kids could understand, and rationalizing cultural differences in general. (Schodt 247)

This might have been justified in the context of pure entertainment, but oh, horror! The butchery! The savage massacre of poor, defenseless cultural context! Nevertheless, analyzing the changes made to early *anime* is a free-for-all examination of American mores and artistic expectancies.

Shows were changed to an enclosed episodic format, rather than the continuous narrative feel that they had in their native Japan. All the character names were changed to easily recognizable non-ethnic counterparts. *Star Blazers* (*Space Cruiser Yamato* in Japan), which aired on U.S. television in the 80s, now sported characters with names such as Derek Wildstar and Nova, instead of Susumu Kodai and Yuki Mori. Potentially objectionable content was edited out, or translated in the most bizarre of ways. Alcoholics were now translated as drinking water instead of *sake* (Japanese rice wine) even if the bottle that they are drinking from is clearly labeled with the Japanese characters for *sake*. Any resulting drunkenness was cut out or explained as sudden onslaughts of sickness. In another 80s show, *Robotech*, the transvestite character Yellow Dancer was explained as being a secret agent who sometimes needed to dress up as a woman to go undercover, of all things (Levi 7). The American creation known as *Robotech* was actually a show created by fusing three completely different *anime* shows (*Genesis Climber Mospeada*, *Super-dimensional Calvary Southern Cross*, and *Macross*) into one. The script was totally rewritten, creating a collage-like series of *anime* images moving their mouths to an American storyline. Nevertheless, the ruthless dubbing and editing by American distributors gave *anime* a level of widespread exposure that would not have been available otherwise. Kids that grew up on such shows were fueled to find out more about these unique "cartoons" and later became the people most responsible for the recent growth and appreciation of *anime* in America. When American foreign exchange students and military personnel

returned from Japan, they exposed these fans to even more *anime*. The Japanese animation boom had officially begun.

This brings us to an interesting clash of the titans. How has Disney, the unchallenged behemoth that is Western animation, dealt with this imported animated fare from Japan? As stated earlier, Disney animation, while cherished throughout the world (including Japan) for its beauty and graceful fluidity, has always been inseparable from its function as children's entertainment. Happy endings prevail. Any such inclination towards realistic portrayals of human conflict is considerably toned down. A good example would be how the original tale of *The Little Mermaid* was changed when adapted to the screen. Instead of dying and turning into sea foam like she did in the original Hans Christian Anderson story, the little mermaid lives happily ever after with her handsome prince. On a side note, Japanese *anime* also has a mermaid series, but in this one the main characters hunt down mermaids to eat their flesh in order to attain immortality.

Perhaps the most controversial meeting of Disney and *anime* came about in 1994 at the release of the Disney film *The Lion King*. *Anime* fans and creators were shocked at the seemingly endless comparisons to Osamu Tezuka's influential series *Kimba, the White Lion*, which aired on NBC television from 1966 up until the late 70s. Both tales are about orphaned African lions (named Kimba in Japan and Simba in America) who return from exile to retake their thrones from evil lions who have scars over their left eyes and are aided by annoying hyenas. The lions are accompanied with birds that provide comic relief and are helped along the way by wise old baboons. Both even feature numerous scenes in which lions look up into the sky and see shapes of their dead parents in the clouds. Naturally, Disney responded that none of the animators were even aware of the Japanese import—which is funny, since Kimba aired on national U.S. television for a period of around ten years. It's hard to believe that someone in the specific field of animation (or any of the hundred or so animators and writers who worked on *The Lion King*) wouldn't know of Kimba's existence. Suffice it to say, fury ensued. T-shirts were distributed at conventions with the phrase "The Lyin' King—Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who created me after all?" accompanied with an image of Kimba looking into a mirror and seeing a reflection of Simba from *The Lion King* (Schodt 274). Soon after, 200 prominent *manga* and *anime* artists wrote a letter to the already dead Walt Disney articulating their sorrow at the lack of credit given to the late and great Osamu Tezuka. The courteous letter was abruptly responded to by Disney's lawyers (Levi 7). The general consensus was, however, that Tezuka would probably have considered the Disney reference to his work a compliment. After all, Tezuka got into the animation business because of his love of Disney films.

Another controversial event in the cross-cultural meeting between Disney and *anime* is the recent Disney deal to acquire the rights to the entire stock of Studio Ghibli films which are headed by the famous animator Hayao Miyazaki. This gives Disney and any of its subsidiaries like Buena Vista and Miramax the exclusive rights to distribute any of Ghibli's films under the Disney name brand. Reaction among the fans remains split. Many of them feel that this deal will give *anime* the kind of exposure and audience that it deserves, handled by the marketing powerhouse that is Disney. Others feel resentment in the fact that it has taken an endorsed approval from the Disney corporation to somehow validate the artistic merit of Japanese animation. Some also see it as another form of cultural appropriation, taking the product of yet another Eastern country and bringing it back to the Western world in order to make a profit. Unfortu-nately, now whenever Westerners write about Miyazaki they call him the "Walt Disney of Japan" when Japanese *anime* fans and scholars have long preferred to call him the "[Akira] Kurasawa of animation" (McCarthy, Miyazaki 10).

Film critics and various other non-fans have had an interesting opinion of *anime* throughout the years. When *anime* was first being stocked in U.S. video rental stores, many of them ended up in the children's section despite being quite mature and/or graphic in nature. A vast majority of the American public still stereotypes *anime* as being either infantile cartoons of the *Pokemon* variety, or perversely violent films for nut cases. Critics and journalists who were only recently becoming acquainted with the *anime* explosion were often not cognizant of its wide variety of subject matter and historical evolution. What they saw as "low

grade" animation was actually older material that was just beginning to be released in the West (McCarthy 214).

Other film critics also tend to misunderstand the Japanese cultural perspective of *anime*. Despite the almost unanimous praise for the recently released *Princess Mononoke* (many critics, including Roger Ebert, placed it on their top ten lists last year) some critics complained about Miyazaki's inability to master the art of facial expressions and fluid movement as well as Disney films could. These critics were filtering their artistic evaluation of the film through their own culturally accepted ideas of what animation should be. Not only did they not understand the historical and artistic development behind *anime*'s purposeful use of a low cel count, but they also overlooked the reason behind the lack of variety in facial expression. Japanese are not as openly willing to wear their hearts on their sleeves as Americans are. Emotions tend to be withheld and are not readily revealed to the everyday passerby. Therefore, *anime* characters tend not to come equipped with the symphony of facial expressions that are so prevalent in American animation. Deep resounding emotion is found instead in a slight twinkle of a character's eye or in an intensely furrowed brow. After all, symbolic resonance is more important than stoic realism in Japanese artistic traditions.

Over the years, the perception of Japanese *anime* as a peculiar subcultural force from a far away land has been surpassed by its new status as a cross-cultural phenomenon which new generations of fans are just learning to appreciate. But what exactly are they watching? What changes are made to *anime* once it is imported and newly controlled and translated by American distribution companies? And what becomes of those culturally specific contextual references once they are exposed to an audience that is no longer Japanese?

Is that Samurai Eating...a Doughnut?

Distributors have different methods of translating *anime*. Generally speaking, dubbing is a method that sacrifices cultural context in favor of colloquial renditions that fit the movements of a character's mouth. Subtitling is mainly used in an effort to convey an accurate Japanese translation. The general consensus among hardcore fans is overwhelmingly in favor of subtitled or fan-subtitled *anime*. Fan subs are especially appreciated because they are made by fans who are fluent in Japanese and who try to translate the exact feeling of the words, not just the content. They also tend to translate the language into a more street friendly lingo, adding vernacular swear words that distribution companies shy away from in order to pass ratings standards. (They also tend to have an overwhelming amount of spelling and grammatical errors.) Fans tend to dislike dubbing, partially because of the Japanese context that is lost, and partially because American voice actors do not take their jobs very seriously. "Annoying" is the term most used to describe the translated effects of these voice actors. This tendency could also be interpreted as another example of how Westerners view animation as an inferior art form. You can almost hear these actors thinking, "Christ, I went to Juilliard and now I'm doing voice-overs for some stupid cartoon!" There is, however, a rather small community of hardcore *anime* fans who prefer dubbing. After all, dubbed *anime* allows viewers to fully appreciate the beauty of the images. These fans tend to be more interested in *anime* as an art form and less interested in its ability to communicate about Japanese culture.

Despite such fan preference, video rentals and sales charts tend to indicate otherwise (Levi 6). The casual *anime* viewer tends to prefer the dubbed approach. Dubbed videos are also much cheaper than subtitled ones because of their greater demand. Subbed *anime* ends up being more expensive than dubs even if they are cheaper to produce. This creates a sort of vicious "chicken or egg" cycle. Did fans begin to buy or rent dubbed videos because they were cheaper, or because they preferred them, therefore causing them to be cheaper? Such sales chart statistics could also be explained as a result of the popularity of fan subbing, which is done outside official distribution circles by the fans and for the fans. True fans, called *otaku*, tend to get their videos from sources other than the mainstream market, therefore vacating the space intended for their representation.

Surface Japaneseness in *anime* is often edited out or covered up by a poor translation. Everyday Japanese cultural references such as food tend to suffer the worst. For example, in dubbed *anime*, whenever a character is eating *omochi*, *onigiri*,

dango, or anything remotely round in shape, it is usually translated as a doughnut. Similarly, anything flat in shape is described as being a pancake or pizza. In the 13th episode of *Star Blazers*, two characters are eating what unequivocally looks like sushi but it is actually dubbed as being chocolate cake! Such familiarizing of foreign content may have been somewhat excusable in the past, as companies sought to sell this new form of animation to American customers who were unaware at the time that these shows were Japanese. But nowadays, with *anime* running constantly on mainstream television, the Cartoon Network, the Sci-Fi Channel, MTV, and with mentions in copious amounts of articles and books, most people are aware that *anime* is from Japan. So why do distribution companies still insist on translating what obviously doesn't look like a doughnut as, well, a doughnut, even when the character is eating it with a pair of chopsticks?!

It could be said that distribution companies are still trying to cater to the lowest common denominator of American consumption. These translations could be seen as an attempt to whitewash the product, erasing any traces of "ethnic" character in order to sell the product to mainstream middle America. But distributors like these often ignore something crucial. Many fans of *anime* embrace the fact that it is from another country and cherish its Japanese context as being integral to the viewing experience. In a sense, American distributors often underestimate the intelligence and open-mindedness of the *otaku* crowd, categorizing them as dim-witted, ethnocentric geeks who would rather watch a dumbed-down alternative to a more complicated version that they actually have to work to understand. This would also explain the types of *anime* films and series that make it over to the U.S. *Sazae-san*, the simple, everyday-depicting Japanese show mentioned earlier, has yet to become available in America, most likely because there would be no conceivable way to disguise the Japaneseness of the show.

Other such conflicts surround the translation of puns and simple plays on words that abound in Japanese *anime*. How exactly do distributors translate such word play into English? In the episode entitled "Bewildered Heartbeat" of the series Fushigi Yugi, there is a scene where a character relays that she found a great stick earlier in the day. It is a consciously infantile pun on the word *suteki*, which can mean both "great" and "stick." In the fan-subbed version, this is subtitled as, "I found a great stick today, CANE you believe it?" Sure it's not particularly funny, but the translation here keeps the intended feeling of the original pun. In the dubbed version however, the character says, "What do you call a sumo wrestler who comes out of the closet?—A power outage." Huh? The translators replaced a clever (if not very funny) play on the Japanese language with an even less amusing joke that has no particular reference to the context of the scene.

Changes made to transplanted *anime* series are not the only signs of cultural mistranslation stemming from bad dubbing. All those allusions to ancient Japanese Shinto myths and legends and the imbedded references to historical or religious life just plain disappear. Referrals to common, culturally ingrained stories just sink into the background, never to be uncovered for the average Westerner to appreciate. But these foreign elements may be the very reason behind how American distributors choose what kinds of *anime* to release in the states. Animator Haruka Takachiho ventures to guess that stories are chosen for their mystic qualities by Orientalist Westerners who purposefully look for strange and exotic things to import (Ledoux 96). The fact that many of these Shinto stories are only appreciated for their exotic undertones and not for their specific Japanese relevance is reminiscent of the worst forms of cultural appropriation.

The symbolic and thematic undertones in *anime* are also ignored and covered up in many dubbed translations. The best example is what happened to *Space Cruiser Yamato* when it came to U.S. shores. Even the simple act of changing the title caused an important subtextual allusion to be lost. The show was about the futuristic war between a battle-worn earth and their alien invaders. The earth unites to rebuild an old battleship to help fend off the enemies. This battleship, the *Yamato*, was actually a Japanese warship that sunk during the Second World War. The ship gets its power from its undying spirit and unwillingness to be destroyed. Of course, in actuality the main purpose of the *Yamato* was to fight Americans so it should come as no surprise that this subtext was never alluded to in the version that eventually

ended up on U.S. television (Levi 7). Furthermore, the word Yamato, in ancient times, was actually the official name of Japan itself. By changing the name of the show to *Star Blazers*, the symbolic reference of the ship was lost. The show's original theme of nationalism was misdirected into oblivion in the American version, thus erasing the very spirit of the ship and its crew in their war against the aliens. The series became just another good versus evil cartoon on at seven in the morning (although still pretty fun to watch).

Another horrific translation incident was what happened to Miyazaki's *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*. The New World Video dubbing/massacre in 1985 so upset Hayao Miyazaki that he vowed never again to let any of his movies be butchered by American companies. The name change was symbolic of the damage done in the editing room. Turned into *Warriors of the Wind*, the new emphasis was on action and not the contemplative struggle between human spirit and natural evolution. Nearly thirty minutes of exposition and character development were cut in order to simplify the story and turn it into a stock good guys versus bad guys skirmish. Even the beautiful compositional score was cut. Toren Smith, a Japanese *manga* distributor in the U.S. went so far as to say, "I was disgusted when I learned this masterpiece had been destroyed by a Hollywood company without a shred of sensitivity" (Schodt 281). "It's absolutely horrible!" said Miyazaki's friend and fellow Studio Ghibli animator Isao Takahata.

> We haven't given the broadcast rights to foreign countries since and we'll never again give such rights without careful examination of the conditions beforehand... Censoring them is worse than betraying them. (McCarthy, Miyazaki 78-79)

Interesting enough, the new Disney/Studio Ghibli deal is marked by the specific contractual condition that no editing whatsoever may be applied to any of the films.

Nausicaa's score was not the only sound change made to translated *anime*. It is actually quite common for certain sound cues and musical effects to be completely covered up by a new soundtrack. Western style background music is often substituted for the very Japanese sound of the *samisen* or the *biwa*. Those symbolic uses of Kabuki wooden clappers to signify tension or sudden impact are often replaced by the Western style anvil-crashing gong, reminiscent of those old RoadRunner cartoons. Sometimes full orchestral scores in *anime* are substituted for different approaches to music. In *Street Fighter 2: The Animated Movie*, popular American songs by U2 and Korn take the place of the original score. Such changes are hardly as offensive as other more damaging examples of cultural restructuring, but they still reek of unnecessary tampering at the expense of original artistic integrity.

Anime isn't the only art form that suffers indignation through translation. *Manga* is equally manipulated to appeal to the lowest common denominator of American audiences. *Manga* popularity in the states also rivals that of *anime*. The market for them is still considerably lower, however, since comic books remain a secondary storytelling format that are usually only found in specialty stores. Fans also treat *manga* distribution in similar ways to *anime*. Many fans translate their own copies and distribute them amongst their friends informally. The biggest problem in *manga* translation grows out of the fact that Japanese read books from right to left. When these comic books are printed in America, distributors simply flop the images to read from left to right. Artist Kosuke Fujishima refers to such flopping as being "painful" because of the balance that is lost within the various panels (Ledoux 74). Not only do *manga* artists feel newly self-conscious about their work as it forces them to be newly appreciated from a different point of view, but certain cultural references are also lost or misunderstood. Perhaps the funniest of them all is what happens to characters who wear kimonos. Tradition dictates that Japanese should always wear the left side of the kimono over the right side. The only time people ever wear the right over the left is when they are dead and ready to be buried. So in effect, flopped *manga* constantly features images of corpses walking around its pages.

So what do the actual artists think about their work being seen all over the world? Do they rant and rave as incessantly as I have over the contex-

tual bloodbath that occurs in translation? Well, much to my pride, no. Most animators are excited at the newfound popularity of their creations although they can't help but express some confusion. All artists regularly admit that their works are a reflection of their unique Japanese perspective and often can't comprehend how they can possibly be understood in America. Rumiko Takahashi, whose work tends to be the most popular in the U.S., offers this conclusion: "Maybe they just like [them] because they're exotic" (Ledoux 18). Most animators share her take on the whole cross-cultural phenomenon that they have created. And strangely enough, they mostly don't seem to mind what happens to the works once they are exported out into the world. Perhaps Hayao Miyazaki says it best:

> For years now people in Japan have been seeing things and reading things about England, probably by people who have never been to England and don't even speak English, but they've still enjoyed what's been written.... As far as I'm concerned, if it's translated properly and done well, that's great. (McCarthy, Miyazaki 190-91)

So where does that leave *anime*'s purpose as sheer entertainment value? Is it more important that *anime* be enjoyable or be a vehicle for cross-cultural communication? Are Americans enjoying what they are seeing from Japan, even if they've never been to Japan and don't even speak Japanese?

Stranger in a Strange Land

Quite possibly the weirdest thing about *anime*, weirder than all guts, guns, and green haired sexy aliens combined, is the fact that it is so popular in the West. What is it that inspires thousands of foreigners to glue themselves with zealous abnormality to marathon *anime* showings on those TV sets of theirs? The fact is, people all over the globe like *anime*. France and Italy, strangely enough, have huge populations of *otaku*. But why do they metaphorically travel to the other end of the earth to find an art form that they can lovingly appreciate? What does it say about their own artistic traditions that they choose to go as far as Japan to find their entertainment? In some countries, *anime* and *manga* are so popular that they cause considerable backlash. In nations that were once former colonies of Japan (like Korea, for example) many conservatives even view *anime* as another attempt at cultural takeover (Schodt 307). *Anime* there is strictly edited and, in some cases, utterly banned. But not all *anime* series and movies make it out to the rest of the world. And when they do, not all of them find a home. What's popular in America does not necessarily mirror what's popular in Japan. There is a reason why *anime* is often stereotyped as being gruesomely vile and pornographic. This type of *anime* is disproportionately popular in America, whereas in Japan, it constitutes just another tiny segment of the various genres of Japanese animation. There are a variety of reasons why American *otaku* love *anime*: It allows the viewer to be able to see the world through a stranger's eyes, entitles them to find a voice within an exciting realm of fantasy, and lets them relate to real life human emotions.

The uniquely odd world of Japanese animation may be the very reason why it appeals to so many outsiders. The way *anime* uses its medium of animation is so fundamentally different from the artistic tradition of Walt Disney, that it creates a freshly intriguing aroma that lures foreigners into its mist. The unfamiliarity of all those cultural references can be an attractive selling point. The fact that death can strike at any time to any character may indeed be a culturally significant characteristic, but it also makes for one hell of a plot twist. There's an element of vicarious pleasure in looking out at the world from another person's perspective. This gives *anime* a rather exotic charm. From an Orientalist perspective, Japanese animation provides the foreigner with a sensuous gaze into an alien Eastern land. The fact that sci-fi/fantasy worlds make up such a large percentage of *anime* just makes the thrill even better. So in a sense, Americans are seeing an inventive worldview filtered through a Japanese perspective. This creates a realm that is doubly removed from Western reality, and therefore, doubly mysterious and enticing. As several students in the *anime* club of the University of California, Los Angeles state, "Anime expands my imagination." "It's like an escape from the mundane." "Our imagination runs wild and free."

Another reason why American fans find *anime* so attractive is that it provides them with appealing alter ego-like characters to relate to. For the men, *anime* provides what Antonia Levi calls "nerd heroes," archetypal characters who can be

extraordinarily, well, ordinary, and yet surrounded by beautiful and adoring women (130). Two extremely popular shows, *Oh, My Goddess!* and *Urusei Yatsura*, are both about ordinary and passive schoolboys who become the cherished love objects of a Scandinavian goddess and a cute alien demon, respectively. Also popular among male *otaku* are the superhero types of *anime* where ordinary males are given superhuman powers. Stereotypically (this is an enormous generalization), male *anime* fans tend to be somewhat dorkier than their beer-guzzling, football-playing frat boy counterparts. But I mean this with the deepest admiration. *Anime* fans have resources of imagination and creative impulses that more socially integrated people tend to underutilize because their worlds are so...acceptable. The same goes for those constantly maligned sci-fi convention-attending "freaks" out there. You may laugh at those Spock ears, but their wearers have more spectacular fantasy lives than you could ever imagine. *Anime* provides characters who are mirror images of the audience, and yet, who are dearly adored or unexpectedly powerful. This gives those spectating males in the audience a sense of visceral, empathetical power to the otherwise passive act of sitting in the dark watching images go by.

Female *otaku* also enjoy a sense of role-play when watching *anime*. Tough, sexy femme fatales abound. In this case, the attraction to strong heroines can be seen as a reflection of the lack of such characters in American entertainment. Traditional Holly-wood films have always been dominated by warrior men and their eye candy serving, scantily clad female sidekick love interests. When they do include heroic woman it's seen as almost revolutionary (think Sigourney Weaver in *Alien*). Anime provides the female audience with sexy characters who have the extraordinary talent...to kick ass. And who wouldn't want to relate to that?

But perhaps the most intriguing aspect of Japanese animation to American viewers is its realistic approach to mature, relatable topics and its sincere depiction of human emotion. Fans often comment on how *anime*'s creative storylines are treated with genuine, non-glossed over honesty. Characters don't live happily ever after, bad things happen to good people, and villains go unpunished. The Japanese aesthetic tradition of morbidity through art just so happens to mirror real life situations. The emotions that arise from such storylines—sorrow, regret, shame, anger, love—are easy to relate to no matter what nationality you are. And Americans appreciate this. But why do they like these stories to be portrayed in such a colorful entertaining medium? The fact that *anime* is such a visually striking creative arena just makes this appreciation more profound. Animators are telling such stories through their art. Western animation has never really chosen to tackle serious and mature themes. One diehard *anime* fan once said to me, "I am interested in the telling of stories. *Anime* is the most beautiful way to do so." Perhaps the global appeal of Japanese animation is indeed based on these understandable themes and emotions. But can *anime* really be universal?

Why Nobody Likes Kabuki, and Other Tales of Artistic Favoritism

What is it about *anime* that makes it quite possibly the most popular export from Japan since the Walkman? And why are there not any Noh and Kabuki college fan clubs where kids can partake in marathon viewing sessions of their favorite plays by Chikamatsu Monzaemon? Besides all the reasons previously stated, there is one more theory left. One *anime* fan told me that he liked the "Western" look of the characters. The people in *anime* could be any race, any kind of human, or alien being, for that matter. The places depicted in *anime* could be anywhere. All those culturally specific artistic choices made by the animators have somehow miraculously developed their own subtext. The wide range in hair color to differentiate between characters, the big eyes to show emotion, the foreign lands to promote fantasy—these can all be interpreted as being independent of the Japanese perspective. In essence, these characteristics give a Western sense of appeal to the animation. What were once stylistic choices made by the animators, are now interpreted as a means for universal relativity. When asked about the capability of *anime* to serve as a universal art form, one fan remarked that it was possible, but "only if the setting and language do not refer to Japanese culture." What does this say about the importance of contextual realization in

art appreciation? Or is Japanese animation just unadulterated entertainment and not a potential learning experience?

To be perfectly honest, there are a lot of *anime* fans who could care less about Japan. *Anime* might as well be from Siberia, Timbuktu, or from another planet for that matter. In fact, a lot of fans begin their appreciation of Japanese animation with just this type of attitude. After all, they're just cool cartoons, right? But soon enough for most fans, *anime* begins to take on new meaning. It begins to have a strange effect on their identities as passive viewers from another country. They no longer love *anime* only for its abso-luteness, its independence from cultural reality and its function as pure entertainment. Sooner or later, fans actually begin to like the cultural baggage that comes naturally ingrained within *anime*. True *otaku* proudly relish in the ambitious cultural exchange that is involved in its appreciation. Sooner or later, fans become fluent in Japanese from watching so much anime and taking language classes to better understand what they're watching. An overwhelming majority of the fans read the inserts and watch the extra video segments that explain cultural references. Furthermore, most American fans are adamant that the true appreciation of *anime* lies in its challenging nature. Real *otaku* rise to accept this task.

Japanese animation is basically, as Antonia Levi puts it, "escapism raised to a high art" (30). When fans lose themselves to the visual and impressionable feast of *anime*, they are unconsciously learning about new modes of aesthetic creation that are inherently different from their own. One of the most exciting aspects about art is that it allows for constant interpretation and insight beyond its initial time and space of creation. All forms of appreciation then, from casual enjoyment to in-depth introspective cultural understanding, should be validated. Japanese animation is a vast communicative vehicle that has been transcending language barriers and national boundaries for years. This may be one of the subliminal intentions behind *anime*'s creation, even if it is purposefully steeped in Japanese tradition. As Hayao Miyazaki says,

> The most important thing that Japanese animation should not do is to categorize the fans as a certain kind of people and then make movies only for them.... We need to get nearer to that universal appeal of animation when making a movie, or all our efforts will have been for nothing. (Ledoux 26)

Those who love to watch *anime*, whether they know it or not, are participating in a widespread global exchange that may just have greater implications than they could ever have thought.

We Come in Peace

The answer concerning whether or not anime can have a universal audience is open to interpretation. Some fans say it can because of its pure entertainment value. Some say it cannot because of those deeply imbedded references that are impossible for uninformed foreigners to decipher. But the fact that *anime* is being zealously watched, hoarded, traded, and discussed in hundreds of areas all over the world already classifies it as a globe-trotting art form. The world is steadily shrinking. Anthropologists have exhausted their descriptive catalogues of far away cultures. Explorers have hunted down every nook and cranny of the earth's surface. Scientists and inventors have created universally available tools, machines, and medicines. The Internet lets people from all over the world share their information in a matter of seconds. Frederik Schodt describes this environment as a "postwar mind-meld" between industrialized societies that share such common levels of experience and emotion that it makes it easier than ever to truly understand one another (339). *Anime*'s popularity across barriers of language and nationality is an extension of such unity in diversity. Many animators feel the same way. Leiji Matsumoto says to his American fans, "I'll be very happy if doing this will help to reduce the distance between you and I, little by little" (Ledoux 157). *Anime*, for all its weirdness, eccentricity, poignancy, hilarity, and Japaneseness, is a learning experience no matter how you value it. Hayao Miyazaki hopes that Western fans can view *anime* and say, "There's something other than the place where I live, things that I'm familiar with, there is something else out there that has value to it" (McCarthy, Miyazaki 191).

So if you have a neighbor, a roommate, a student, a father, or a best friend who sits religiously in front of their TVs watching marathon sessions of those bizarre cartoons from Japan, don't call

them couch potatoes. Call them diligent intercultural diplomats who are bridging the gaps between East and West, all for the sake of entertainment.

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