

The cultural construction of anime media essay



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Japanese culture is more globally available today than ever before.

Traditionally Japan has great pride in national autonomy stemming from approximately 200 years isolation. After World War II, Japan emerged a wealthy globalized superpower. Known for their ingenuity and technical prowess, Japan's products are consumed worldwide. Japan's success as a world power coincides with the rise of Japanese digital media. The prowess of Japan's digital media has caused the primary expression of Japan's culture to be through the visual mediums of television and film.

To begin an analysis of anime and the Otaku, both need to be defined to see how the Otaku subculture has been socialized and pragmatized. Exploration of Otaku culture reveals many definitions of anime and descriptions of its Japanese heritage. There are also many historic and power relations that have shaped the anime genre. Anime contains many ideologies and identities that connect anime to Japanese culture. To further deconstruct the Otaku culture, comparisons can be drawn with examples from the very popular anime and manga, Neon Genesis: Evangelion. The summation of this study will show anime, manga and the Otaku to be of great importance to Japanese culture and a new generation of cultural producers and consumers.

The movement of Japan as a nation from a state of Total War, to rapid industrialization, to technological innovators can be studied through news media, documented histories and examination of national policies. To understand Japan as a people requires study of their culture; this study will focus on animation and to a small extent Japanese manga. Cultural objects such as paintings, sculpture and architecture are becoming secondary as the focus of cultural studies. They are limited in the ways in which they can communicate culture. Animation is technologically superior, highly mutable, and able to be consumed and transmitted easily and cheaply. Animation can communicate any ideology and relate it to contemporary society. Animation is a process that allows artists to create a film, which coincides with McLuhan's idea that "The method of our time is to use not a single but multiple models for exploration – the technique of the suspended judgment is the discovery of the twentieth century as the technique of invention was the discovery of the nineteenth" (McLuhan 69). Anime and its cultural identities need to be approached in the same fashion because of historical, socio-economic and political factors. Animation and digital communication are the current way impressions and perspectives are created. The Japanese are aware and watch how Japanese cultural objects are produced to reflect their ideologies.

Anime has become integral to Japanese society because of its financial and intercultural success, its basis in manga and its connection to Japan's youth. In addition, the success of anime as a cultural export is another reflection of anime's power and influence. To discuss the importance of anime I will take an etymological approach.

Japanimation

When Japanese animation became recognizable to the world it was referred to as Japanimation. This is important as this word makes a clear association of the visual medium to Japan and its culture. The cultural product being consumed is inherently Japanese, which came to be known internationally by the compounding of the words Japan and Animation (Oxforddictionaries Japanimation). In the late 1980's the word was replaced by its current label anime. Various definitions can be found online at urbandictionary. com, an online dictionary of many slang terms contributed by the websites visitors. Despite being North American and a public internet source, it does offer distinction between varying uses and meaning of the terms that form anime and the Otaku. Urbandictionary. com can be credited to being a source of perspectives on popular culture, including stereotypes. Anime is available all over the world and is subject to the perspectives of the populations it is available to. Some of the definitions have an acute understanding of anime's history and meaning and every definition has been voted on by many users.

2. Japanimation

Term that describes Japanese animated cartoons made in the 1980s or earlier, usually television series made on small budgets resulting in Bullwinkle-style art and as much story as possible crammed into a half hour. This term has been generally replaced with the word anime since the 1990s.

Kyojin no Hoshi, Heidi of the Swiss Alps, and The Flanders' Dog are the most well-known japanimation titles within Japan.

Source: The 2-Belo, Jan 7, 2004 (Urbandictionary. com)

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While international exposure may have caused the creation of the new term, this post also points out observations about early Japanese animation. The budgets were small, animation technology was less advanced and the subject matter was not as controversial. The technique, style and content did not stand out enough to garner any recognition. While under the name of Japanimation, the genre did not gain the same attention that the newer moniker anime did. The change in name coincides with an explosion of animated series, major theatre releases, the introduction of internet video and entrance into the international animation market. The term Japanimation no longer appropriately fit the varied nature of the genre.

The term Japanimation recently has been revisited with a meaning that distinguishes it from anime leaning more toward describing Japanese cultural production. In Japan the term is more commonly used to refer to domestic animation. The word has reemerged symbolize a purer form of the genre for the Japanese. Anime still can be used as an all-encompassing general term of the genre but has come to equate to Japanese influenced animation consumed outside of Japan. This re-establishes the cultural division for Japanese animation. The following post from Urbandictionary comically points out the imaginary line around consumption and reception of Japanese animation:

5. Japanimation

Animation made in Japan. The only way Japan can express their hatred towards America without George Bush getting medieval on their buttox.

Reporter: Master Japanimator Mr. Miyazaki, what is your opinion on American Japanimation?

Miyazaki: Amedica hazu veddy BAD infruencu 1 chidren. It always “daddy I wann f-k,” or “will Joe get chiku,” or same such unoriginal thing in Amedican Japanimation. So I base all my Japanimation antagonist on Amedican pigs.

Reporter: Really?

Miyazaki: Yes. In my view, my Japanimation “Spirited Away” is about young Amedican chiku trapped in Japan for some days. But in end triumphs by learning Japanese way.

Reporter: It seems so. I also feel a sense of American antagonism in your Japanimation “Nausicaa.”

Miyazaki: Ho! Ho! My Japanimation/Japanimanga “Nausicaa of Valley of Wind” Amedican antagonism exist to. Torumekia/The 3rd Army wish to defeat the wasteland by destroying EVERYTHING. Hai-domo, VEDDY AMEDICAN. On other hand, the valley people have learned to live in harmony with nature. THAT IS JAPANESE WAY.

Reporter: So the same thing seems to be going on in your Japanimation “Mononoke” too?

Miyazaki: In “Princess Mononoke”, Eboshi and iron maker veddy Amedican! They kill whatever in way and hog resources because they are pigs. Ashitaka and his village are Japanese way! They keep to themselves. But demon boar

try to change village to Amedican, and Ashitaka is cursed and tempted by Amedican way. But in end Ashitaka triumphs by using Japanese way!

Reporter: Any final comments?

Miyazaki: We Japanese learn much during seconds world war. But Amedican really lose in the end, because they become even more pigs.

Source: LOLz@Janimation, Dec 30, 2004 (Urbandictionary. com)

This parody of the Miyazaki interview identifies underlying ideologies in cultural production. The joke explores the misunderstandings in conveying meaning between cultures and enforces a Westernized view of anime. A history of diplomatic relations as well as stereotypes are revealed as the parodied Miyazaki resists the influence of the West. The post also signifies Japanese culture and the ill viewed behavior of this generation's youth. Another Urbandictionary post presents another perception of Japanese animation:

Janimation

Less common term for anime which an anime geek(otaku) will shun you for using; not to be confused with hentai.

Not all anime is porn.

Source: Geek-O-Man, Feb 28, 2005 (Urbandictionary. com)

This post associates Japanese culture and the decay of moral codes. The word animation is not commonly used in the West; the term cartoon is used

instead and is made for consumption by children. It is a misconception that anime always contains explicit content. It's also incorrect to measure Japanese standards by non-Japanese standards. It is fear of this content and its ready availability that is part of a moral panic that has been caused by the creation of explicit anime and its perception and consumption.

Anime

Anime replaced the term Japanimation sometime in the late 1980's. The term Anime comes from the Japanese transliteration of the English word animation and is now the go-to term for any cartoon made in Japan. The term has become symbolic of Japanese culture as an exotic imported media to the west and a representation of the social transgression of youth in Japan. This definition hardly begins to capture the scope of anime. The series Neon Genesis: Evangelion, which is arguably adult oriented, has children as its main characters, aliens, violence, pornography, and elements of drama, soap opera, fantasy and science fiction. The show defies categorization by its own nature; an example of "two or more heritages combining to form a new third form is what [we] shall call transculture, following Fernando Ortiz. The 'culture' in visual culture will seek to be this constantly changing dynamic of transculture, rather than the static edifice of anthropological culture" (Mirzoeff 26). It is this idea of transculture that defines the interplay of Japanese subculture, Japanese mainstream culture, and Western culture.

If we examine video on demand services, from an international view, anime has its own category which includes anything with Japanese animated style content and/or production value. Compared against the foreign film category, which contains anything non-western, anime is very much unique

to Japaneseness than any other medium. Bourdieu states that, “ the meaning of a work (artistic, literary, philosophical, ect. . .) changes automatically with each change in the field within which it is situated for the spectator or reader” (Bourdieu 30-31).

Anime is highly mutable in its definition, but it does have several attributes that it consistently displays. Earlier, with the example of Neon Genesis: Evangelion, many anime exhibit elements of multiple themes and cross genres. In addition anime holds on to the traditional production techniques in spite of the advent of digital technology. This is partially a result of the economic and production conditions that the early animators had to deal with:

The emergence of an anime aesthetic is typically traced back to the technical limitations placed on anime production during the global economic crisis of animation in the 1960s. Financial constraints were such that studios could not afford to produce “ full animation” . . . Constrained to work with drawings that could be sustained for five or six frames, animators adopted different strategies for composing and conveying movement, other than drawing it frame to frame. The result was limited animation, which had profound aesthetic consequences.

(Lamarre 335).

These production techniques are continued by current anime despite better economic conditions. Exceptions would be the bigger budgeted productions of Hayao Miyazaki’s Studio Ghibli. Miyazaki’s Spirited Away was the first anime to win an Academy Award and is the one of the highest grossing films

in Japanese history at over 270 million dollars, making it one of the highest grossing films in Japanese history. Despite having much greater resources at their disposal, Miyazaki's Studio Ghibli isn't rushing towards incorporating newer digital techniques. Series such as Cowboy Bebop and Soul Eater have higher production values production value in relation to many other Japanese animated series.

Even with greater technology and finances, there seems to be no pressing need to incorporate newer techniques. In the brochure for the Studio Ghibli museum, "Miyazaki writes in the museum's catalogue, that 'imagination and premonition' and 'sketches and partial images' can become the core of a film"(Talbot 66). The tremendous success of Miyazaki's films has instilled audiences that the production values are different from surrounding anime. Miyazaki, "draws characters and storyboards for the films he directs' he also writes the rich, strange screenplays, which blend Japanese mythology with modern realism"(Talbot 64). The final product can equally be attributed to his obsession to detail as well as the traditional methods he uses to produces his films. An even more important relation can be made in the relationship between anime and manga to the culture of Japan.

Manga

A basic definition of manga equates to Japanese comic books. In actuality it is more than just a comic; manga is the predecessor to anime and the source of anime's ideologies. Many manga have been adapted into movies and television series carrying the same subcultural material putting it at the forefront of media in Japan:

The simplest explanation for this reversal of fortune between animation and live-action is that the former has ridden to success on the coattails of its older cousin, Japanese comics, or manga, a medium that emerged as a main focus of Japanese popular culture after World War II, and has grown particularly pervasive since the 1970s. It is true that many successful anime were based on popular manga and anime have been heavily influenced by manga's pictorial conventions. Another important factor is cost. Hollywood has made successful live-action films based on such popular comics as Superman and Batman, but the need for expensive sets and special effects to create the necessary visual realism has resulted in extremely high production costs. Japan's film industry, with its much smaller market, cannot afford such high-budget pictures. To put it another way, animation offers a means of producing slick, stylish films without spending much money (Kenji 2).

This smaller market has enabled many independent artists and companies to produce cultural product for the public. In Japan, manga is widespread enough that it is impossible to separate it from contemporary literature. Again I will reference Urbandictionary for a community definition of manga:

Contrary to what most people in the West think, manga (both the singular and plural form are the same) have NOTHING to do with pornography. Some manga are pornographic, but that's just a small percentage of manga.

Manga, in Japanese, means "flowing words" or "Undisciplined words". It is an ancient art that has been used for centuries as a form of entertainment.

It's basicall[y] Japanese comic books, which can be easily translated to English. However, just saying manga are comics from Japan is wrong.

First of all, in the US and in Europe, most comics are addressed to young children between the ages of 9 and 13. That is not the case with manga. There are 6-7 major types of manga, each having its own audience. Kodomo manga is for children. Shonen manga is for boys 12-18, Shoujo manga is for girls age 12-18. Josei manga is for adult ladies above the age of 20, mainly working women. Seinen manga is for young men between the ages of 18-30, and Hentai manga is pornographic, adult manga.

As you can see, saying “ comics from Japan” is wrong. Another difference between manga and Western comics is that each comic's volume has its own plot, while manga volumes all follow the same plot. The artwork is VERY different. Manga has its own particular artwork, especially when it comes to human faces, particularly the eyes, chin, nose, mouth, forehead... Manga is also read from RIGHT to LEFT. (Yes, even the English ones).

In Japan, 40% of all book & magazine sales are manga. That's a huge number, considering the Japanese read A LOT. In 1998, about 3 billion manga volumes were printed in Japan, I'm sure that number is higher now.

Source: Simon B. Oct 2, 2003(Urbandictionary. com)

Knowledge of manga is prevalent enough that it cannot be ignored. The multitude of representations, fantasies and stories has caused mainstream media to equate amateur manga with a degenerate Japanese youth. This is actually a response to the formation of large groups of youth, namely the

Otaku, whose interests are seemingly in conflict with the dominant culture of Japanese society. The amateur manga movement developed out of this generations need for original and new forms of expression which were facilitated by unregulated underground production and distribution:

The amateur manga movement is remarkable in that it has been organized almost entirely by and for teenagers and twenty-somethings. Amateur manga is not sent to publishers to be edited and distributed. It is, instead, printed at the expense of the young artists themselves and distributed within manga clubs, at manga conventions and through small adverts placed in specialist information magazines serving the amateur manga world. Through the 1980s it grew to gigantic proportions without apparently attracting the notice of academia, the mass media, the police, the PTA, or government agencies such as the Youth Policy Unit (Seishonen Taisaku onbu), – which were established precisely to monitor the recurring tendency of youth to take fantastical departures from the ideals of Japanese Culture. (Kinsella 290).

Japans reaction to this subculture was resentment to manga, and anime by association, as a visual media that are degenerate to Japanese society. Considering these media as degenerate society ignores the importance of producing media free from censorship or the limiting ideologies of the ruling class. Amateur manga is free from these confines due to the removal of potential censorship, required production values and authorized publication placing production and consumption more so upon the audience than mainstream media.

The Otaku are a subculture within Japanese society that are known for their interest in visual media, technology and seemingly antisocial behavior. An Otaku is what an American might refer to as a nerd or geek. In Japan this has the negative connotation as it invokes thoughts of being disconnected and not contributing to society. Again we can turn to Urbandictionary for a definition of the term:

Otaku

Otaku is the honorific word of Taku (home).

Otaku is extremely negative in meaning as it is used to refer to someone who stays at home all the time and doesn't have a life (no social life, no love life, ect)

Usually an otaku person has nothing better to do with their life so they pass the time by watching anime, playing videogames, surfing the internet (otaku is also used to refer to a nerd/hacker/programmer).

In the Western culture, people confuse otaku to be something positive like "Guru". If you think about it, it's not really good to be called a guru if it means you are a total loser who can't socialize with other people except through the internet.

Other Japanese words which have been confused by Westerners also include, but are not limited to: Anime, Manga, ect.

Otaku no jinsei ha yabai na! (it sucks to live the life of an otaku!)

Source: death to all, Apr 7, 2003 (Urbandictionary. com)

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Even though this is a definition from a western perspective, the negative stereotypes are shared between American and Japanese culture. The Otaku are only labeled so-called “losers” because their fandom is associated with a degenerative behavior. These claims are ultimately false as there is no verifiable relationship between behavior and overconsumption of a visual medium. Despite this, Otaku identity is defined by their obsession with the cultural products that they consume and produce. In another definition from Urbandictionary:

5. Otaku

Otaku has multiple meanings. Casual anime fans use this word in the context of being a well established fan who knows much about anime and manga. Japanese see this term as derogatory which represents a person who is a lifeless nerd. Wapanese[1]see this as derogatory given their strong belief that because they have watched some anime that all the sudden they are Japanese. This is a high-context word, in the American dialect, given the type of people using the word and the context of the discussion this OTAKU could mean expert or geek, complementary or derogatory.

Larry has a wealth of knowledge about anime, he is a real otaku.

Source: Tabenokoshi, Dec 28, 2003 (Urbandictionary. com).

The multiple meanings of Otaku and its different uses around the world show how the term is misconstrued to mean degenerate instead of interest.

Obsession is acceptably viewed when it is for interest of the majority, but not when it is focused in fantasy. This is an antiquated view as technology has

allowed many people interact and work out of their rooms. Ironically, the same traits used to define Otaku are praised highly when applied to the production that reveres traditional Japanese ideology, like Miyazaki does; yet is considered degenerate when embodied by this large portion of Japanese youth.

Anime has become a generational battlefield; older generations' values are in contention with the younger generation. McLuhan states " Youth instinctively understands the present environment-the electric drama. It lives mythically and in depth. This is the reason for the great alienation between generations. Wars, revolutions, civil uprisings are interfaces within the new environments created by electric informational media" (McLuhan 9). Anime is just an example of this digital revolution, where the meaning of the genre and its representation is restricted by the ideologies of the older majority. McLuhan observed " Our time is a time for crossing barriers, for erasing old categories-for probing around. When two seemingly disparate elements are imaginatively poised, put in apposition in new and unique ways, startling discoveries often result" (McLuhan 10). The Otaku are a media educated social group, whose methods of communication and interaction with society are increasingly digital.

The Otaku can be compared to the West's punk movement. British youth focused their angst with a brash loud style of music. Their visual style and attitudes only strengthened their influence as a subculture. Punk became a driving political force that was eventually imitated, popularized, commercialized and unfortunately diluted; but essentially commoditized and brought into the dominant culture. Ironically anime, like punk music, has

given birth to an underground movement but its counter cultural roots have not been embraced. The Sex Pistols are considered the epitome of punk, yet there are no such claims for the ground-breaking anime Neon Genesis: Evangelion.

The Otaku, and by association anime and manga, have been credited to the erosion of values in Japan. In actuality they are very much vested in Japan. They represent a collection of artistic knowledge as well electronic and media expertise that is unrivaled. This fact has not gone completely unnoticed as “ Over the past few years. . . the otaku have come to be recognized as veritable subcultural heroes, ones, moreover, who are unique to Japan. Okada has been a central figure in the celebration of the otaku, asserting that the otaku not only represent a new type of media-savvy human endowed with the superior sensory faculties, but are also the true inheritors and propagators of traditional Japanese culture”(Steinberg 453). Okada’s value of the otaku is extreme, but his positive perspective is a counter to the conservative opinions of the subculture. Okada is placing the future of traditional Japanese culture on the shoulders of the degenerate recluse youth Otaku. I believe Okada is trying to emphasize that the Otaku’s attunement to modern digital media has important implications for the group as well as their role domestically and abroad.