

Astro boy: marketing japanese anime to the world

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After World War II, Japan was a nation that was broken almost beyond repair. There were only a few outside Japan who would have given this country a chance. Yet, a few decades after the war, the Japanese people surprised many in a spectacular display of grim determination, a passion to innovate and a commitment to transform itself to become one of the most highly developed nations a few decades after the war.

One of the amazing things that came out of Japan - that subsequently impacted the world - is the Japanese brand of animation that is more popularly known as Japanese Anime. One of the more successful anime characters that paved the way for others is Astro Boy created by Osamu Tezuka. In the 21st century the beloved character is making a major comeback, thanks to the ever growing anime obsession and the marketing prowess of Sony Corporation.

This paper will take a closer look at Japanese Anime in general and the commercial success of Astro Boy in particular. This can be done by answering the following questions:

Is the success of Japanese anime in countries such as the United States indicative of the emergence of a global youthculture?

What social and technological forces are making it possible for Japanese anime to transcend national borders?

How does the development of the new series of Astro Boy cartoons differ from the way Japanese anime has traditionally been developed? Why is this change being made?

Will the new Astro Boy be successful? Why? Why not?

Japanese Anime

Before going any further it is imperative to first establish the nature of a Japanese anime. It may look like that one is only dealing here with the same issue like the cartoons produced by the Walt Disney company. It has to be made clear that although Japanese animation is similar in theory to that of its Western counterpart it is a totally different way of doing anime. It is not simply cartoon characters that are now able to walk and talk it is more about the story behind the creation of the animated character and an altogether new way of telling a story.

Matisonn was able to capture the essence of the first wave of Japanese anime that hit America like a rampaging Tsunami. He said the following, “When huge alien spiders or giant ocean-dwelling mutant dinosaurs visit Earth hell-bent on destruction, they seem always to stop in Japan first” (Matisonn, 2002). Here one can see a basic understanding of what is Japanese anime. If the Western world is agog over the romanticized depiction of fairy tales and other cuddly and lovable characters like Mickey Mouse, the Seven Dwarves, Bugs Bunny etc. Japanese animators on the other hand were showing about battle scenes fought by monsters and their wide-eyed heroes.

Again, Matisonn was very perceptive when he began to trace the beginning of its development that goes as far back as the post-World War II period and he wrote:

In 1954, the Toho movie studio's feature Godzilla struck a nerve in the collective

consciousness of postwar Japan. Japan is the only country to ever have been attacked with nuclear weapons. The concept of a huge, random yet unstoppable terror - an ironic product of human folly - gripped the country's imagination ... it is a concept that just won't let go (2002).

The longer that a person spends time on analyzing this issue, the more he is convinced that Matisonn was right in his assessment. The fact that parts of Japan were transformed through the dropping of two nuclear bombs would forever haunt the imagination of the people. When a new breed of animators came along to exploit this fear of mutated organisms the whole nation was ready to embrace a new breed of superheroes that they desperately need for protection.

Global Youth Culture

In answering the question concerning the emergence of a global youth culture in support to the spectacular success of the anime across the globe is both an easy and difficult task. It is difficult to conclude that there is indeed such a thing as a global youth culture without having the numbers and the supporting research to back up the claim. On the other hand it is easy to make this conclusion because the ingredients and the necessary tools needed to create a global culture is in plain sight - it would be very hard to miss.

A global youth culture is very much possible because of the invention of the television and the internet. Before going any further it must be understood that the major deterrent for the creation of that said global sharing of values is the language barrier. This is where TV comes in followed closely by the

internet in breaking the walls separating two nations. By breaking the language barrier, two different cultures can experience a deeper level of sharing as seen in the enjoyment of Japanese anime by the people from the West.

Television is able to break the language barrier by the use of dubbing technology. And even with some discrepancy in the translation, the kids watching the Japanese cartoons are smart enough to figure it out even with the awkward voice over where the audio is not synchronized with the lip movement of the character. The TV set acted as something like a communication tool between two cultures - the East and the West. It is interesting to note that in the case of the anime it was the Japanese who first sent the message across the Atlantic, through an animated series called the Astro Boy.

In later decades the TV set is not the only means of communication for two cultures. In the decade of the 1990s a new and radical way of sending ideas back and forth was established in highly industrialized nations like Japan and the United States; it was simply called the internet. This global networking of computers enabled the speedy transfer of knowledge from one country to another. This enabled the remarkable growth of Japanese anime.

World Wide Appeal

With regards to the question concerning the explanation as to the popularity of Japanese anime that literally transcends national boundaries can be explained in terms of sociology and technological breakthroughs in the multimedia aspect of the animation industry.

The Japanese type of animation ventured beyond the bounds of conventional ways of doing things - of telling a story. Japanese anime contains more mature content that oftentimes deal with protecting the planet from alien invasion, losing a loved one in battle, love triangles etc. By venturing outside commonly accepted boundaries endeared Japanese anime to all the teenagers around the world who are contending with some issues and needs that are partially being satisfied by Japanese anime.

According to a survey conducted by Saatchi and Saatchi advertising agency, there are four themes of conflict common to teenagers around the world (Solomon, 2003). According to Solomon businesses are well aware of the following issues in the life of teenagers and one can be assured that makers of Japanese anime are creating stories and images to touch a nerve among teens especially in the following areas of conflicts:

1. **Autonomy vs. Belonging** - Teens crave for that independence away from parents, to experience freedom and yet still belonging to a small community of peers where they can get support in times of need. In Japanese anime this desire is satisfied by projecting themselves into the anime characters such as the samurai that roams the country like a lone wolf yet still finds friends along the way who will aid him in his quest.
2. **Rebellion vs. Conformity** - The whole Japanese anime genre is a rebellion against the status quo and daring to go against conventions. So it is not difficult to understand why teenagers would use it as an excuse to dye their hair bright purple just so to display non-conformity.

3. Idealism vs. Pragmatism – Teenagers desire to achieve the ideal which is a common theme in Japanese anime, the struggle to be truthful in spite of the odds.

4. Narcissism vs. Intimacy – Teenagers uses the image found in Japanese anime to change the way they look. As mentioned earlier serious fans would dye their hair and will not hesitate to dress like their favorite character. On the other hand Japanese anime is heavy on emotions and building relationships so it is not only about looks but also the heart. These anime characters are great attraction for teenagers who struggle to express the conflicts they are feeling inside.

This study has gone to great lengths in trying to explain the amazing success and world wide appeal of Japanese anime by pointing to social factors. But it can also be argued that the reason for its success can be simply explained by the fact that both U. S. and Japan are similar in many ways. For example both are highly industrialized nations. In the words of Hill, “ The trans-Pacific appeal of anime has been attributed to several factors, including similar lifestyles, incomes, values, and behaviors among preteens in Japan and the United States – in both nations, significant time is spent watching TV and playing video games” (2006).

Another reason for the popularity of Japanese anime is the availability of technology that further increases its fan base. The internet is a very sophisticated means of transferring data from one place to another in just a few seconds. This allows for the rapid spread of Japanese anime throughout the world.

But even before the advent of the internet, constantly improving television technology added viewing pleasure that increases the craving for more Japanese animation. Another technological breakthrough that aided in the development of the Japanese animation industry is the development of the 80's videocassette recorder. According to Drazen the VCR was able to revive old favorites and, "... relived some studios from the burden of having to think in terms of shaping their animation for broadcast" and he added that, " The ability to create direct-to-viewer animation not only stretched the content envelope, but stretched the fan base literally around the world" (2003).

Astro Boy

The genius which is Japanese anime would have been forever confined to the islands of Japan if not for the innovative spirit and daring of Dr. Osamu Tezuka. Tezuka created the widely popular Astro Boy. It was originally called Tetsuwan Atom (Mighty Atom) and then when exported to the West was rechristened to Astro Boy (Shiraishi, 1997).

Drazen remarked that, " With spiky hair, eyes as big as fists, rockets in his feet, and machine-guns in his butt, Atomu was a new kind of robot for post-Occupation Japan" and became "... one of the most memorable characters of all time, on both sides of the Pacific" (2003).

Future Success

With regards to the query whether the new retooled Astro Boy will become a huge success in the United States, the proponent of this study is positive that the child robot will reinvade America - on the silver screen and on TV

sets. There can be two major sources of supporting data for this upbeat forecast as will be seen below.

The discussion above concerning the world wide appeal of Japanese anime partially answers this question. The Japanese brand of animation has now become a staple in many children's TV network in many countries around the globe. The characters taken out from the sketchbooks of many Japanese artists have become a part of American consciousness. From this perspective alone the investors to this new venture can be assured of a windfall.

On the other hand there Astro Boy will get a major boost from Sony Corporation. One would only need a basic background history of the company to know what it is capable of doing with the Astro Boy franchise. Not a long time ago, when a person mentions portable audio equipment and colour television, chances are the people around him will immediately think of Sony. This Japanese company has conquered the local market and then went on to capture a huge share of the electronics market of the Western world. At one point Sony was the undisputed leader in electronics and was considered as a savvy innovator with a knack for knowing what the people needed.

Nathan in his biography of the electronics giant described the driving principle behind the company's success was, "...foreseeing product application for new technologies and inspiring engineers to overreach themselves in achieving the goals she set for them" (1999, p. 25). It is almost one hundred percent sure that this endeavor will not only make money but will create a major stream of profit that will still be there long after the movies and the TV shows. The Sony organization will not merely endorse this

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project but would be behind it all the way with an enthusiasm that perhaps may not have been given to other movie projects before. This is because Astro Boy is a Japanese product and the executives at Sony would do their best to make it work. It may require an in-depth knowledge of Japanese culture to fully understand how Sony will fight to the death for the success of Astro Boy.

Moreover, Sony will only have to apply the tried and tested formula of merchandizing the whole Astro Boy franchise starting from toys to cereals and other products. With regards to the commercial aspect of Japanese animation, Matisonn was again correct in his evaluation that:

All of these Japanese movies, TV shows, and printed comics generated toys - lots of toys. As in the United States, toy manufacturers became parasitic partners with the content creators. In many cases, the toys, other merchandize, and promotional uses created more revenues than the actual TV shows (2002).

In addition, " Japanese cartoon characters have done particularly well in the United States. In 2002, broadcasting rights for Japanese anime in the United States were close to \$500 million, and toys featuring anime characters brought in a staggering \$4.7 billion" (Hill, 2006).

Conclusion

There are many reasons why the Japanese brand of animation gained world wide success in the decades following World War II. The visual aspect was a major factor as well as the plot of the story. The plot was never before seen or heard in the Western world of animation. Reiji Matsumoto, an avid

collector of American comics in the postwar Allied Occupation of Japan was quick to say that Western storytelling was, "... too simple. Each story's exposition-development-twist-conclusion were so short and lacked complexity" (as cited in Drazen, 2003). This can be contrasted with the more adventurous storylines of Japanese comics that found its way into animated works.

Aside from the non-conventional plot, Japanese animation went beyond the ordinary way of presenting the characters in usual comic strip fashion. Drazen's insight was very much helpful here. He pointed out that Dr. Tezuka - the pioneer in Japanese anime - successfully blended Disney animation and French new wave cinema that created a never before seen effect of which Drazen described as, "... use of panning shots, extreme close-ups, time-lapse, flashbacks, and other cinematic devices, Japanese comics literally exploded off of the paper they were printed on" (2003).

All these new things that were being experimented on in Japan by the great Dr. Tezuka among others would have been confined to the land of the rising sun if not for the successful Atlantic crossing of Astro Boy. It was the first Japanese anime exported to the U. S. and it became an instant hit.

In the 21st century a new Astro Boy is being retooled and geared up to once again blaze through American TV networks and cinemas. This time it will be a monster hit because Sony Corporation of Japan is behind this project. As mentioned earlier it will only take a basic understanding of Japanese culture to understand why Sony will dig deep into their technological and business arsenal to make this lovable figure come to life and get accepted by a new generation of American fans.

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The success of Astro Boy will not only be confined in the Box Office or even in the TV ratings. The future success of the turbo-charged child robot will also become evident in the merchandize tie up with Sony and other businesses that wants to take a piece of the profit from the selling of T-shirts to cereals and of course the toys, the replica of the child-robot that will surely become a hot item for millions of fans around the world.

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