

Why Anime?

By Susan J. Napier

LATE last summer, I went to Baltimore, Maryland, to attend something called *Otakon*. Otakon (subtitled as Convention of *Otaku* [mania] Generation) is the largest *anime* (animation) convention on the East Coast and possibly the largest one in America, at least that year. Perhaps as many as 17,000 American anime fans converged on this large old city, taking over the entire convention headquarters, an enormous building on historic Baltimore Harbor. On my way into the convention center the first day, my jaw dropped as I drew close to it; even though it was early in the morning an enormous line was snaking outside the convention hall. Not only did the line seem to go on forever but it was populated by an incredible variety of people. I say “people” but perhaps “beings” would be more accurate. Girls in long costumes dressed as *Belldandy* from *Oh My Goddess* stood next to black garbed versions of “No Face” from *Spirited Away*. Cute children in “Hamtaro” costumes peered with interest at scantily clad young women dressed in tiger skin bikinis in homage to Takahashi Rumiko’s “Lum” (in *Urusei Yatsura*).

For Japanese citizens familiar with the otaku/anime subculture and such events as “*komikketto*” (comics market) in Tokyo, such a sight might not seem so surprising. But the average citizen of Baltimore was clearly surprised and fascinated. When I went into a store while holding my Otakon program, for example, people would often ask me what was going on. Somewhat to my surprise, however, when I answered “anime convention,” many of them knew what I was talking about. In fact, the local newspaper, *The Baltimore Sun* even had a front page story commenting positively on the strangely garbed people thronging the city’s streets.

Inside the convention hall things were even more fascinating. The place was crowded with fans of all races and ages,

including many parent and child groups. In fact, I attended one panel specifically aimed at parents of anime fans in which questions such as “What is *hentai* (crazy) anime and is it dangerous?” were answered with thoughtful, detailed explanations by a panel of older anime fans who often had children themselves.

But perhaps the most interesting panel of all was one I attended late on a Saturday night. This was a panel commemorating Otakon’s 10th anniversary. The panelists were a group of older men, one of whom began the presentation with an interesting story. He described the genesis of Otakon back in 1993 when a group of students at Pennsylvania State University decided to hold a convention at State College Pennsylvania that would be free of commercialism and industry pressure, a convention simply for anime enthusiasts. He also talked about a period even earlier than that, when anime was only being shown as part of American science fiction conventions. Describing one such

event, he related how he had been part of the first group of Americans to bring the *Uchu Senkan Yamato* (Space Battleship Yamato) movies to a science fiction convention back in the early 1980s, over the protests of other fans who wanted to see a screening of the American film *The Right Stuff*. Noting that many diehard SF fans had scoffed at the interest in *Yamato* and predicted that this interest in Japanese animation would soon fade away, the speaker stopped a minute and looked around the room at us, “That was 20 years ago,” he said, “And we are still here!” Several people in the audience cheered. The speakers’ words of course are a quotation from the second film of the *Matrix* trilogy *Matrix Revolution* when Morpheus tells the citizens of Zion – the last human city in a world almost completely taken over by the machines, that, despite the formidable obstacles against human beings, “We are still here.”

Of course anime audiences are far from facing the obstacles that the

Photo: “Spirited Away” © 2001 Nibariki • TGNDDTM



“No Face” from *Spirited Away*

humans in the *Matrix* have to deal with, but the use of this quotation from the film does raise an interesting question: Why are American anime fans “still here?” In fact, not only are they still here, but they are growing in number while anime’s influence has become increasingly ubiquitous, not only in America but throughout the world. What is it about anime that has captured the imagination of so many young Americans?

I believe that this question can at least partially be answered by looking at the history of the reception of Japanese culture in America.

With the opening of Japan, around 150 years ago, Americans and other Westerners discovered another world. As Christopher Benfey recounts in his recent book *The Great Wave*, many influential American writers and intellectuals – from Herman Melville to Amy Lowell, found inspiration, stimulation and even sometimes a kind of home in Japanese culture. In the late 19th century James Whistler loved to paint Western women in kimono. At the turn of the century, the great Boston art collector, Isabella Stewart Gardner, staged a magnificent “Tea Ceremony” with the help of her friend and mentor Okakura Kakuzo, while early 20th century poets such as Ezra Pound embraced *haiku* as a source for a new kind of poetry. On the spiritual and martial side, Japanese Buddhism captivated another collector, the arts scholar Ernest Fenollosa, while President Theodore Roosevelt was intrigued by *ju-jitsu* (similar to judo). In the postwar period Zen Buddhism staged a comeback in the 1950s, affecting such “Beat” writers as Kerouac and Ginsberg, while in the 1960s I remember with pleasure buying beautifully printed books of haiku poetry and sharing them with my friends who were equally fascinated.

Up to that point Japanese culture was seen in terms of the exotic and the

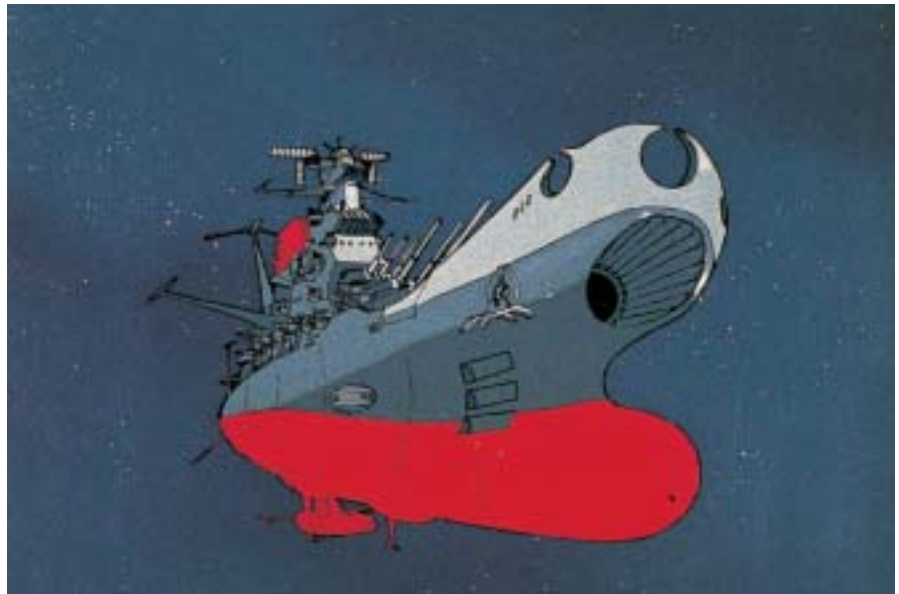


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Uchu Senkan Yamato (Space Battleship Yamato) is a famous Japanese SF anime which first appeared in 1974

exquisite, terms that we might now describe as “Orientalist,” an adjective that suggests a Western perspective on the non-West that tends towards condescension and stereotyping. But in the 1970s and 1980s, a new outlook on Japan began to arise in the West, one that sometimes saw Japan as a technological utopia where high-tech inventions created a futuristic society, but just as frequently saw Japan as a technodystopia, where worship of technology led to the destruction of the human soul. Cyberpunk novels, especially William Gibson’s works such *Neuromancer* and *Idoru* captured both sides of this vision, describing a Japan where a brilliantly realized virtual reality helped to camouflage the real world of a sick consumer capitalist society. The Japanese scholar Ueno Toshiya saw this new American vision as an updated form of what he calls “Techno-Orientalism,” but I would argue that this attitude is a more complicated one than simply a celebration of, or castigation of an exotic,

“hypermodern” Japan. Rather, for many young Americans, taking an interest in contemporary Japan was a way of taking interest in their own contemporary world and also in their own future, as events and innovations in Japan seemed to parallel or even forecast developments in America and other industrialized societies.

All these elements from the last century and a half of American-Japanese interaction, I believe, play a part in America’s attitude towards anime. Although it is over a 100 years since Isabella Gardner’s tea ceremony parties, there are still anime fans who look for the exotic and exquisite Japan, perhaps particularly in works by the great director Miyazaki Hayao whose *Tonari no Totoro* (My Neighbor Totoro), *Mononoke Hime* (Princess Mononoke), and *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi* (Spirited Away), have been embraced even by mainstream Americans. Conversely, despite the disappointment of the long economic recession in Japan,

there are still many American fans who find in anime by Oshii Mamoru or Anno Hideaki, blueprints for a possible high-tech future.

But are Americans only watching anime because it is Japanese? Or are there other reasons for anime's popularity? To put it within the historical context outlined above: is the current popularity of anime simply the most recent example of America's long standing interest in Japanese culture or is it something new, perhaps a product of the new global society in which, thanks to the ease of high-tech communication we can gain access to new cultural products in almost the twinkling of an eye? How important is the "Japanese" aspect of Japanese animation?

These are the questions I have been asking over the last 12 years when I first became interested in Japanese animation. In those 12 years much has changed. What was once a virtually unknown "niche" product, watched by American science fiction fans in small hotel rooms at sci-fi conventions, has become, especially with the winning of the academy award last spring by *Spirited Away*, almost a household word, at least among young Americans. Otakon is only one of the many examples of anime conventions around the country, some of which are far more specialized such as "*Yaoi-Con*"¹ or "*Shojo-Con*". My university, like many others has an "Anime Club" and there are weekly anime showings at one of our local downtown theaters. Furthermore, anime-related courses such as the one I teach ("The World of Japanese Animation") have started to spring up around the country.

By going to the conventions and talking to students in my course, (which I have now taught for three years), I have begun to get some answers to my questions. Although my research is still preliminary at this point, I am inclined to think that American interest in anime is based on a variety of factors. Certainly, the fact that it is from another country, and therefore serves as an alternative to American culture is a probably a major

factor. Just as the 19th century Boston Brahmins embraced the tea ceremony and Buddhism, seeing them as superior alternatives to the materialism of American society, many present day American fans tell me that they appreciate Japanese anime because it seems to offer a more sophisticated ethos than much of American culture. Some fans even envisage Japanese society as a better, culturally richer place than our own. But for other fans the Japanese origins are not nearly so important. For them, as I suggested above, anime serves as a vehicle to explore their own issues, not because it is "exotic" but because it is universal.

Clearly this is a complex question and one that needs to be addressed not only in terms of anime but also in terms of anime fandom. One of my biggest interests, therefore, has been not only "Why anime?" but also "What kind of person is interested in anime?" Or, more precisely, is there a "typical" American anime fan? In order to answer these questions, I have conducted extensive interviews and analyzed several hundred questionnaires. Although my research is not completed, I can at least suggest some possible answers.

First of all, somewhat to my surprise, there is definitely no typical American anime fan. For example, one of the things that I was keenly interested in was whether anime fans saw themselves as separate from mainstream American values. To be honest, my expectation was that they would see themselves as somehow different from "regular Americans." And, in fact, many of them did see themselves as different. One young woman described herself as "a typical American girl, as long as you think a typical American girl is one who talks to flowers and who believes in fairies." Other replies were more downbeat: One person said, "I consider myself to be well outside of American popular society and culture and most of my friends are the same. My friends span across goths, atheists, non-Conformists and the like (but I do have friends among the mainstream as well)."

These replies were more or less what I expected. What I did not expect, however, was how many people saw themselves as fitting into mainstream America. One respondent said simply, "I am a Republican. I feel strongly about abortion issues and about foreign policy." Another person seemed somewhat ambivalent, "I'm probably much more liberal than the majority of Americans but I have a fierce and abiding love for my country that some would see as incongruous with my liberalism."

The above replies both came from respondents in the Middle West, traditionally a more conservative part of the country. But even on the East Coast and the West Coast there were still fans who saw themselves as "pretty much mainstream." What does seem clear is that anime fans cannot be typecast either politically or socially.

Another question that I asked concerned what attracted people to anime: I had already asked this question while doing research for my previous book on anime (*Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke*) and the answers did not change much over the years. The most fundamental attraction was clearly that anime was "different." Many people compared anime to Disney and other American cartoons, usually unfavorably for Disney, pointing out that American cartoons were often too simplistic and child-oriented. More intriguingly, many respondents compared anime to Hollywood films in general. Ironically, many said that they felt that anime was more "realistic" than American films! They pointed out that anime often contain downbeat endings or plots where the main character dies, in comparison to the "relentlessly upbeat" tone of many Hollywood films. There were also people who specifically mentioned the graphic sexual content of some anime, appreciating its more "adult" focus, although these were definitely a minority. Overall, it seemed clear that fans were drawn to anime because it seemed to offer an interesting alternative to much of American mainstream cinema.

Note 1: Yaoi is a genre of *manga* (comics) and short stories, produced by female artists and writers for the enjoyment of female readers.

Although these answers were interesting, I was still unenlightened about how important the Japanese element was to American anime fans. I tried to measure that aspect through a mixture of questions ranging from subtle to blunt. One of the more “subtle” (at least in my opinion!) questions that I asked was “Do you identify with any anime character?” In general, many people did, although the characters with whom they identified varied widely. One thoughtful respondent wrote: “I think it is easy to identify with the youth and adolescent characters in anime like *Spirited Away* and *Neon Genesis Evangelion*: youth presents unique opportunities: as adolescents we are intensely aware of the conflicts and confusions of life.”

A more downbeat answer came from a young woman: “Alas, I identify most with Miyu of *Vampire Princess Miyu* ... a quiet, slightly sad loner, who is the opposite of “normal,” always on the outside looking in.”

But another young woman found a completely different kind of role model: “Yes, I identify with Utena of *Revolutionary Girl Utena*. Utena is someone who fights for people that she feels can't or won't fight for themselves. When I see an injustice committed, I feel the urge to protect and fight.”

What seems evident in these replies is that these young Americans do not see the protagonists of anime as strongly Japanese. Instead, they seem to identify with them as fellow humans. Even though they are animated Japanese characters, protagonists such as Miyu, Utena, Shinji or Chihiro clearly cut across universal borders.

The universal aspect of anime's appeal was also confirmed, in my opinion, by answers to another question I asked: “What is your favorite anime and why?” Many respondents wrote from the heart about how much a particular anime meant to them on a personal level, mentioning how anime set in high school, (such as *His and Her Circumstances*) struck a chord with their own high school experience, or, conversely, how fantasy anime such as *Escaflowne* served



Ikari Shinji (left) and Evangelion 01 TEST-TYPE (*Neon Genesis Evangelion*)



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to help them escape from their sometimes tedious lives. Most respondents did not answer in terms of Japanese versus American comparisons, although occasionally someone might refer to an element specific to Japanese animation. Thus, one respondent wrote in a very thoughtful passage, “My favorite anime is *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. This is the definitive anime. It has the themes of our painful transitions from youth to adulthood, our conflicts with the roles our parents play in our lives, as well as deeper eschatological themes and inquiry about the ultimate destination of our technological culture. That these themes are presented in a package of giant robots, monsters and ‘utterly puerile fan service’ components of adolescent sexuality and humor make it a truly unique experience.”

The above answer seems to me to embody the many attractions of anime. It is a “unique experience” one that includes certain conventions such as “fan service” and “giant robots” that are specifically “unique” to anime. There is no question that the package that anime comes in is different from any cultural product in the West. At the same time, however, the fan mentions such universal elements as the “painful transitions from youth to adulthood” or conflicts with parents, suggesting the truly universal aspect of anime.

To answer the question, “Why anime?” I believe that I can make at least a few suggestions. Anime helps to fill a basic human need for the different, but

it does this often by exploring universal themes within (to Americans) exotic contexts. The young fans who identify with the protagonists of *Evangelion*, for example are able to work through dramatic and sometimes traumatic problems of adolescence in a context that is on the one hand excitingly different (Neo Tokyo! Angels! Giant Robots!) and yet at heart, comfortably familiar (distant parents, sexual problems, conflicts with friends). The fact that anime is so wide-ranging also helps. Fans can enjoy the escapist fare of *Oh My Goddess* or they can probe deep into the promise and threat of computer technology in *Serial Experiments Lain*. Paradoxically, anime opens a world that sometimes seems more “real” than our own. In its intense narratives, memorable imagery and exciting drama, young Americans can discover their own identities. **JS**

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