

A n i m a n i a

Inside the world of Japanese Animation and Comic Art.

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Introduction to Japanese Comics and Animation -

One of the most phenomenal cross-cultural exchanges in recent years has been that of *manga* and *anime*, Japanese comics and animation. The American generation X has abandoned the dull, static world of U.S. comics and embraced a new world, another culture (Levi 1996). There are more and more *otaku*, Japanese animation fans, in the United States every day. American college students are leading the way with hundreds of *anime* clubs across the nation.

What is *anime*? The term *anime* refers to animated productions for television, film, or video made in Japan or in the Japanese style. These productions are usually based on successful titles of *manga*, the term for Japanese comics books. The main difference between the American and Japanese cartoon industries is that in Japan, cartoons are made and intended for all ages, not just children and teenagers. Comics and animation are as much a part of popular culture in Japan as the movie industry is in America. Films in America are made for many different ages, genders, and ethnic groups. In Japan, every group has their own comic genre from young to old. This mass appeal to many different groups is why Japanese animation has become increasingly popular in America with college students. Students who feel they have outgrown American comics have found *anime* and *manga* an interesting alternative.

Japanese *anime* & *manga* represent a highly developed art form which surpasses western comics in their quality of artistry, social comment and adaptability to people of races, genders, and social-economic groups. It is a transformative art form that builds on Japanese traditions and ethnicity, but is constantly adapting to the ever changing context of Japanese popular culture. *Anime* & *manga* is more comparable to American film and theatre than U.S. comics because of the difference in quality of artistic, social, and cultural content.

Artistry -

The artistry of Japanese *manga* and *anime* is truly a more refined art form than the American comic industry. The world of Japanese comics and animation is an ever growing dynamic art-industry. Thousands of titles are produced every month, in a diverse number of genres, by talented independent artists with creative freedom. The mainstream comic industry in the U.S. has become stagnant and dull because of its limited focus on works intended for children. The typical American comic artist has little creative freedom because of the major companies reluctance to accept new story lines and concepts. Readership and sales continue to drop. In late 1996 Marvel Comics, one of the three major publishers of American comics, filed for bankruptcy protection. In contrast, the Japanese manga and anime industry continues to grow with billions of dollars in sales each year (Schodt, 1996).

The success of Japanese comics comes from its innovative transformations of traditional artforms. American comics have become more of a traditional art form for kids than an aesthetic, transformative art form. Transformative or modern' art forms are those most endorsed and seen in the aesthetic context of the American art gallery and museum establishment (Stuhr, 1991). The popular view of art in America has influenced the way we view the art of comics. In fact comics in America may not be considered an art form or especially high art form.

Many traditional art forms made by different ethnic groups and other cultures may not fit into the American view of what Art is or should be. These cultures, ways of life of a group of people, include the American comic scene. The American 'realist' view of art (Best, 1986) has excluded the American comic culture as a true, high art form. This has influenced the people who practice this art, and many may not see themselves as true artists. This view of comic art is one of the reasons that U.S. comics are an underdeveloped art form as compared with comics in Japan. The limiting views of the American society about art inhibit creativity and refinement in this art form.

To understand Japanese comics as a true art form Americans must cast away the 'realist' view of art and embrace a more 'relativist' view. We can not judge Japanese comics by this American standard. The 'relativist' understands that " the art of each culture can be recognized only in its own terms, it cannot be externally criticized" (Best, 1986 p.40). To understand the artform of *anime* and *manga*, it is important to view it through the context of what the Japanese culture considers art. Japanese comics and Animation are just the latest version of a long art tradition.

The art of cartooning in Japan is a tradition which goes back over one thousand years. One of the first examples of this was a work by a Buddhist priest called " The Animal Scrolls" done in the 12th century. Later cartooning became a mass media of the people with the invention of wood block prints.

The primary artistic techniques of *anime* and *manga* were developed from traditional Japanese art forms like wood block prints calligraphy work. " In fact *anime* with its bright primary colors and ... special effects is really an extension of woodblock printing. Only now his traditional Japanese art form moves talks , and sings" (Levi, 1996 p.21). These artistic techniques form traditional art forms make *anime* and *manga* are different from those used by their American counterparts.

Japanese comics and animation require more interaction and audience participation

than the American comics do. "Unlike in the west, Japan's artistic and theatrical traditions have never been aimed at realism. Instead, both in art and drama, the Japanese have emphasized techniques that capture the essence of the subject in a way that assumes some participation by the audience" (Levi, 1996 p.21).

Pictures in Woodblock prints and *anime* seem to be more realistic than the actually are. This illusion of realism is done by only placing detail in the areas of the picture where the eye is likely to focus, such as around the main character (Levi, 1996). This is more to the way the human eye really works. A person can only focus on one subject at a time. American artists will realistically detail the entire scene, including the background and elements unimportant to the story. This makes it hard for the reader to see the main focus of the picture. *Anime* allows the viewer to fill in the details with their imagination. This makes *anime* and *manga* a more refined and important art form than American comic art, because these techniques help stimulate the reader/viewers mind and imagination. American comics, with their tired superhero story lines and over realistic drawings, do little to stimulate the readers mind.

Social Comment -

The social comment or reflections of society seen in Japanese Manga and Anime far surpasses their Americana counterparts. Manga and Anime more accurately reflect Japanese Culture than do U.S. comics reflect the American culture. Japanese comics portray all aspects of life and ethnicity. Cultural elements of religion, myth, folklore, and art are seen in Manga and Anime as well as everyday subjects about work, school and social life. The majority of American comics focus on a standard superhero plot which shows little of the diverse American culture. American college students have rejected U.S. comics and adopted *anime* and *manga* as part of their cultural identity.

One of the major things that *anime* tells us about the Japanese culture is that the need to relax and relieve stress, brought on by the daily work life, is an important social need. Comics and animation are an art form that provide an escape from reality which so many people in Japan need. People of all ages are under a great deal of stress and pressure in Japan from both work and school. "Japanese children live in an unbalanced environment, going from classrooms to after school study sessions with special tutors, then returning home to cram for tests" (Schodt, 1983 p.152). Keizo Inoue, an editor of a major comics magazine commented in 1980 that "Children today are immersed in the examination

system and isolated. Since they have little real opportunity to interact with other people, they seek friends in the pages of comics" (Schodt, 1983 p.152).

The same is true with adults. The traditional behavioral customs of Japanese society stress discipline and working as a team. Expressions of individuality are discouraged and may not be possible in the workplace or in the home. Japanese men and women look for adventure, excitement and individuality in the stories *anime* and *manga*. Heroes in *anime* are more likely to be ordinary people who do extraordinary things than the unrealistic superheroes of American comics. The heroes of *anime* reflect the need of the Japanese society to express individuality while at the same time still highly regarding conformity to the group.

The average Japanese man is under a great deal of stress from work or school and needs a means of relaxing. Business men in Japan have their own comic genre called work comics or salary-man comics. Many of these are humorous and make jokes about the workplace as in the American comic "Dilbert". Other mens comics are similar to the American 'western' movie genre only they replace the Cowboy with the Samurai.

If it wasn't for comics, the Japanese business world and society at large would probably be much less efficient and well off. Workers would become overstressed, burn-out, and might find more harmful ways of escaping reality, such as drugs and alcohol. Comics are a more healthy, therapeutic means of fantasy for both men and women.

"...*anime* is escapism raised to a high art. Created for a society where personal behavior is severely limited both by physical crowding and strict social conventions, *anime* is designed to provide a wide range of fantasy worlds where audiences can live out dreams ... that will never otherwise find expression" (Levi, 1996 p.30).

Another major reflection in *anime* and *manga* of the true ethnicity of the Japanese culture is the use of tradition, folklore, religion, and mythology. American comics rarely focus on religious subjects because of the fear of offending someone. One good example of this use of religious myths in Japanese *comics* and *anime* is *Tenchi Muro!* It is the story of a high school boy named Tenchi who accidentally releases a demon named Ryoko, held captive in his family's Shinto shrine for 700 years. The artist expands on this legend by revealing that Ryoko is not a demon at all but rather an intergalactic space traveller. "What Masaki Kajishima has done with shinto myth in *Tenchi Muro!* is similar to what many American science fiction writers do with Western traditions when they suggest that angels

or Greek gods may have been visitors from space" (Levi 1996 p.44).

" The power of old legend combined with the skill and humor of contemporary *anime* produces a new form difficult to define as either serious drama or comedy, science fiction or fantasy" (Levi 1996 p.44) . Modern mythological stories like *Tenchi Muro!* make Japanese comics and animation truly a modern transformative art form, superior to the stagnant world of American comics. *Anime* and *manga* titles are not afraid to express ideas of about all aspects of their society, including religion, mythology, and social trends.

" The birth of the American *otaku*" (Levi, 1996 p.1), the anime fan in America, has become one of the most phenomenal cross-cultural exchanges in recent years. American *otaku* have incorporated *anime* and *manga* into their own sense of ethnicity, the sense of community and people-hood. Almost every college campus in America has at least a small anime club and over 400 *otaku* maintain websites on the World Wide Web (Levi, 1996). Anime has become the key element in the new Generation X *Otaku* subculture.

As this 20 something generation gets older and has families, the popularity of *anime* and *manga* is likely to continue to grow. Soon a cultural phenomenon similar to the rise of *anime* in Japan in the 50s and 60s may occur again in the United States. After 1950 in Japan people began to read *manga* even as adults and *anime* was no longer considered kid's stuff (Levi, 1996). Anime has already begun to move into the mainstream American culture with national video chains such as Blockbuster Video devoting entire sections on *anime* even in small rural towns (Levi, 1996).

Anime has a unique quality of flexibility which allows it to be readily adopted by many different cultures. In a conversation with Will Ray, the coordinator of *Animate: Ohio State*, he noted that one of the reasons *anime* is popular with college students is that it gives them a sense of community, a sense of belonging to a group with common beliefs and interests (Ray, 1997). *Animate: Ohio State* is the Japanese Animation Club at the Ohio State University and is one of the most popular student organizations on the campus. Every Friday night during the Autumn, Winter, and Spring quarters nearly one hundred student *otaku* meet in a lecture hall to see anime on the big screen, something that previously one could only experience in Japan. This experience has become a social event, an important part of the *otaku* culture.

American college students turn to Japanese *anime* and *manga* because there is no U.S. produced equivalent. Comics and animation in America aren't mature enough to interest Generation X so Japanese animation has filled the void. In my talk with Will Ray he

noted that even though the dialog is in Japanese the complex emotions and human relationships in *anime* are universal to all types of people (Ray, 1997). This is what makes anime so popular with American students . Even though the characters in *anime* productions are for a different culture, they remind us of our own lives, they have similar problems, needs, and desires.

Adaptability -

One of the most incredible qualities of the Art of Anime and Manga is its adaptability, the ability to change. The Japanese comic industry has been able to adapt to many people of different races, genders and social-economic groups over the years. *Anime* and *Manga* have branched out into many different genres for all ages, similar to the American movie industry with stories geared for many different groups.

Comics for kids only make up a small part of the Industry. Adults have sophisticated dramatic comics and animated movies which can be on topics of all areas as in the American movie scene. Corporate businessmen, who in America would never dream of picking up a comic book have their own 'work' comic genre in Japan.

" Anime has changed significantly in the past ten or fifteen years, and for the most part it's changed for the better" (Levi, 1996 p.9). One of the major changes in recent years has been the blurring of comic titles as categorized by gender lines. Starting in the 1960s *anime* and *manga* developed into the major genres divided between men and women, boys and girls. Girls comics, *Shojo manga*, became a genre created by women artists for women. *Shojo manga* focused on emotions and personal relationships rather than action and violence of boy's comics (Levi, 1996). The new influence of female artists would later help to change and refine the entire industry. By the late 70s and early 80s the gap between male and female *manga* began to close. Men began to read *Shojo manga* and identify with female characters. " This trend directly contradicts claims made by American network executives that they cannot produce children's shows with strong female leads because although girls identify with male heroes, boys refuse to watch a show with a female star" (Levi, 1996 p. 15). American comics and cartoons have been traditionally made for young boys and are slow to change their format. Japanese *manga* on the other hand have had separate genres for both sexes for years, and has recently begun making comics that are truly for males and females. By the mid 80s many comics could not be categorized for men or for women.

The ability to change with current trends and philosophies in society, such as gender equality is one of the notable strengths of *anime* and *manga* over male dominated American comics. American comics artists are mostly male, drawing for a young male audience. Girls seem to have been largely unrepresented in the American comic market. Mainstream comics in America are mostly limited to what teenage boys want to see, action and violence. The modern Japanese comic has evolved to include stories of human emotions and personal relationships which has given *anime* and *manga* a universal appeal to all genders, ages and groups of people.

This unique ability to adapt to all kinds of people makes *anime* and *manga* a universal art form, accessible to people of many culture and life experiences. This is one of the many reasons that *anime* has become so popular in the United States in the 1990s. "America is more of a salad bowl than a melting pot, and so is *anime*" (Levi, 1996 p.65) The ability of *anime* to change and accommodate works just as well for American cultures and ethnic groups as it does in Japan.

The American comics Industry is changing to meet the interests of the 20 to 30 age group, generation X. Independent, once called underground, comic, have phenomenally increased in popularity since the late 80s because of their new, fresh stories and more intellectually content intended for more mature readers. Many fans feel that the recent changes in the U.S, comics industry are direct result of the influence of *manga* and *anime* and indeed many of the new independent American comics are drawn and written in a manga style (Levi 1996).

Anime and *manga* are an incredible and unique artform which is clearly more evolved and refined than it's American counterparts. Japanese comics and animation, *Anime & Manga*, represent a highly developed art form which surpasses western comics in their quality of artistry, social comment and adaptability to people of races, genders, and social-economic groups. The American comics industry should take a lesson from *Anime* and learn accommodate more groups of people than just children. Comics in Japan have become a mature art form and should be held in as high regard as any other.

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Will Ray (Animate: Ohio State coordinator), Personal Communication, April 18,1997.

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Internet Resources:

Animate! Ohio State - the Ohio State Japanese animation fan club.

<http://soyokaze.biosci.ohio-state.edu/~animate/>

The Anime Web Turnpike - the most comprehensive topical guide to Internet resources on anime and manga. Links to anime companies, fan clubs, specific series, and on-line reference databases.

<http://soyokaze.biosci.ohio-state.edu/~jei/anipike/>