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THE GLOBAL APPEAL OF JAPANESE POPULAR CULTURE

Addressing the issue of reception—how media and entertainment consumers understand the products they watch or read or experience—is a fundamental challenge in the study of popular culture. Making sense out of reception is particularly complicated on a global scale, when considering the circulation of pop properties across national boundaries, cultures, and languages. This chapter deals with some very basic questions regarding the international response to contemporary Japanese popular culture. Why have audiences worldwide embraced Japanese pop? Is there something about Japanese popular culture forms—their distinctive styles, sensibilities, and themes—that has made them international favorites? Or can their appeal be traced to specific historical factors that have shaped global pop tastes since World War II? Or might the success of Japanese forms such as anime and manga be rooted in economic phenomena, marketing savvy, and the power of the global media industry to shape popular fashions? In short, how do we understand the passion that global consumers bring to *Godzilla* and *Sailor Moon*, Super Mario and sushi?

QUALITY, CONTENT, AND DIFFERENCE

When seeking an explanation for the global popularity of forms such as Japanese animation and Nintendo video games, most observers, whether fans or academic researchers, have tended to start with the pop products themselves. There does seem to be something intrinsic to Japanese mass entertainments—their style, their content, their message—that is distinctive and broadly appealing, especially in contrast to the familiar fare of Hollywood blockbusters, American prime-time television, and the *Billboard* Top 40 music charts. Japanese pop has become a global success story not just because it is as polished and sophisticated as the best of what America and Europe have

to offer but also because it is insistently and unapologetically different from the familiar and often predictable products of the Magic Kingdom, Marvel Comics, and the top Paris fashion houses.

A concise list of the characteristics of Japanese popular culture that have earned it fans worldwide was provided in 2000 by Timothy Craig, who edited one of the first scholarly collections on the globalization of Japanese entertainment products, *Japan Pop!* At the very top of this listing was the reputation of Japanese forms such as anime and manga for being high quality, innovative, and stylish. Craig was the first to admit that not all Japanese pop culture rose to such high standards (one need only watch Japanese television talk shows to realize how dreary and derivative even Cool Japan can be), but the engaging visuals, high production values, and obvious creativity of many of Japan's cultural exports certainly have been important draws for international audiences. Perhaps above all, the sophisticated graphic qualities of Japanese pop, which many observers argue may elevate Japanese animation, comic books, and video games to the status of art forms, have excited and enchanted global consumers; the ability of Japan's colorful, kinetic, and varied graphic styles to capture post-apocalyptic wastelands, fast-paced action stories, and the playful fantasy worlds of childhood has set them apart in a crowded international marketplace.

Next on Craig's checklist was a series of observations about the content of Japanese pop: that it "embraces life in all its dimensions" (in other words, that it does not avoid the unpleasant aspects of human existence or bow to political correctness); that it has a strong strain of idealism, innocence, and romance; that it is accessible, "close to the ordinary, everyday lives of its audience"; and that it emphasizes human relationships (harmony, cooperation, the group), as well as spiritual development and growth. Some might question how commonplace it would be for anyone to strap into a hulking armored mecha or encounter a giant radioactive lizard devastating a city, or whether one can find the innocence of Hello Kitty, the idealism of *Star Blazers*, or the familial warmth of a manga such as *Sazae-san* in the blasted dystopian cityscape of *Akira*. Nevertheless, forms such as anime and video games do seem to be welcoming gateways to fantasy for global audiences regardless of culture, ethnicity, language, or sex, offering imagined worlds that are realistically complicated but refreshingly uncynical in their treatment of heroism, love, and loss.

Finally, Craig (like many other observers) argues that international audiences, and especially those in the West, have come to embrace manga, character goods, television serials, and movies from Japan simply because they

are so inescapably and appealingly different.

To the extent that elements that are abundant in Japanese pop culture—complex story and character development; frank portrayals of human nature; dreams and romantic optimism; kids' perspectives; a focus on human relations, work, and mental strength—are scarcer in Western pop culture, Western consumers find that Japan pop enriches their pop culture diet, giving them a fuller range of forms, themes, and viewpoints to enjoy, and perhaps to be influenced by.¹

In short, Japanese pop is not only different from Western pop culture, but it can also be far more complex and satisfying than much of the mass entertainment churned out by Hollywood, the major television networks, and the American publishing industry. Although some scholars are dubious that Japanese imports can claim any substantive superiority to American pop products, one need only compare a Miyazaki Hayao film to a Disney feature, a Japanese manga magazine to a *Green Lantern* comic book, or the original *Gojira* to its 1998 American remake to be convinced of the ingenious, stimulating distinctiveness of contemporary Japanese popular culture.

Susan Napier, in her now classic 2001 book *Anime: From Akira to Princess Mononoke*, developed and extended such ideas. Difference and sophistication, Napier suggested, account for much of the global appeal of Japanese animation.

One salient aspect of anime . . . is its insistent difference from dominant American popular culture. . . . What is perhaps most striking about anime, compared to other imported media that have been modified for the American market, is the lack of compromise in making these narratives palatable. . . . The medium is both different in a way that is appealing to a Western audience satiated on the predictabilities of American popular culture and also remarkably approachable in its universal themes and images.²

But Napier goes even further, arguing that certain features of Japanese animation allow it to “speak” to twenty-first-century Western audiences with unusual immediacy and impact. One of these characteristics of anime, Napier notes, is a fascination with metamorphosis and transformation.

Indeed, anime may be the perfect medium to capture what is perhaps the overriding issue of our day, the shifting nature of identity in a constantly changing society. With its rapid shifts of narrative pace and its constantly transforming imagery, the animated medium is superbly positioned to illustrate the

atmosphere of change permeating not only Japanese society but also all industrialized or industrializing societies. Moving at rapid—sometimes breakneck—pace and predicated upon the instability of form, animation is both a symptom and a metaphor for a society obsessed with change and spectacle. In particular, animation's emphasis on metamorphosis can be seen as the ideal artistic vehicle for expressing the postmodern obsession with fluctuating identity.³

Napier also concludes that a substantial part of anime's appeal is its subversive edge, its tenacious unwillingness to embrace the Hollywood happy ending that reassures audiences that all is well with the world. Indeed, anime—as well as manga, sci-fi cinema, and much popular fiction—often leaves viewers with the abiding impression that the world is profoundly, perhaps even irreparably, corrupt and dysfunctional. Countless Japanese pop narratives end with the hero dead, Tokyo in smoldering ruins, and fears of apocalypse only briefly alleviated. The dark imagination of Japanese mass culture has revealed itself not just in the animated Armageddons of *Akira*, *Evangelion*, and the manga series *Trigun* but also in cult films such as *Battle Royale* (2000), in which a homeroom of Japanese junior high school students engage in the ultimate episode of *Survivor*, tracking and killing each other as part of a government-sponsored TV game show. To many jaded entertainment consumers in a global entertainment market weaned on the sunny monotony of Hollywood summer movies, Saturday morning television, and Hannah Montana, the bleakness, lack of sentimentality, and unpredictability of much Japanese pop can come as a welcome breath of fresh air.

FAMILIARITY AND THE MEDIA MARKETPLACE

Another approach to understanding the allure of Japanese pop, at least in the United States, is an historical one. Some scholars of Japanese popular culture's global spread have stressed that a long postwar heritage of cultural interactions between the United States and Japan set the stage for the more recent rise of Japanese pop forms in America. Thus, starting with the release of *Godzilla*, *King of the Monsters* in U.S. theaters in 1956, a steady stream of entertainment products imported from Japan conditioned American audiences to the look and feel of Japanese popular culture. So, some scholars argue, understanding the contemporary appeal of manga, Hello Kitty, *Iron Chef*, and *Ichirō* requires looking back historically and tracing how *Godzilla* first captured American audiences in the 1950s, followed by the animated *Astro Boy* in the 1960s and then *Speed Racer*, *Kikaida*, *Ultraman*, the *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*, and the other Japanese television serials that made their way across the Pacific and

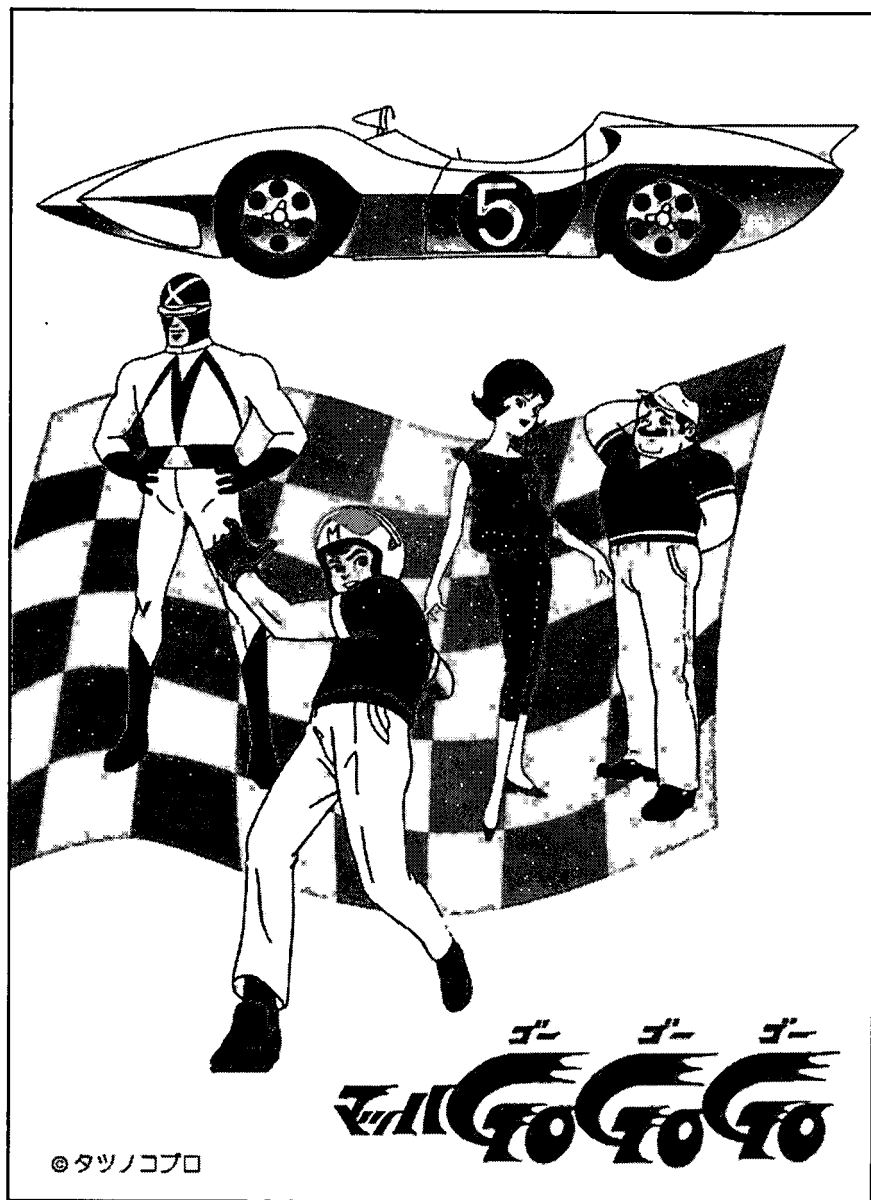


Figure 3.1. The animated series *Speed Racer*, which originally aired in Japan as *Mach GoGoGo*, was one of many Japanese pop culture products to gain worldwide exposure in the 1960s and 1970s. (© Tatsunoko Production.)

into American households in the subsequent decades. Japan became a part of the American pop culture landscape after World War II almost without anyone noticing it, and the familiarity of these imported animated and cinematic

styles prepared American audiences, even if only subconsciously, for the waves of Japanese entertainment products that would arrive from the 1980s on. Consuming a regular diet of big-eyed cartoon characters, giant monsters on movie screens, bright colors, stylized violence, and plenty of robots, cyborgs, and androids, generations of Americans developed a taste for Japanese pop.⁴

Discovering why Japanese popular culture icons were such a long-term presence in postwar America requires looking beyond issues of style and content, although this is where scholars of Japanese pop have tended to focus. Specifically, understanding the historical ubiquity of Japanese products in the American entertainment market requires an appreciation of the economics of the U.S. television and film industries in the decades after World War II. In the heyday of the "American century," as the postwar middle class enjoyed unprecedented affluence and ever-increasing leisure time, the public demand for entertainment products—as well as the means for delivering them—grew rapidly. The American media industry was consequently in need of cheap products of reasonably high quality to fill television airtime and movie theater marquees. And for decades Japanese feature films and TV programs, live action and animated, easily seemed to fit that bill.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Godzilla and other Japanese creature features satisfied the needs of the American marketplace; U.S. movie theaters needed a constant stream of new films, a demand that even Hollywood could not supply at the time. The celluloid adventures of Godzilla, Mothra, and the other fantastical beasts created on Japanese back lots were part of a familiar genre (giant monsters on the loose on the model of *King Kong*), were very inexpensive to purchase from Japanese studios eager for American dollars, and could be easily transformed into a palatable American entertainment experience with only a small monetary investment in editing and dubbing. Thus Japanese science fiction features became a staple of down-market American theaters—drive-ins, small-town Saturday afternoon double bills—and then later were standard fare for late night television and undesirable weekend time slots when the "Creature Double Feature" became an institution on many VHF channels around the country.⁵

Japanese animation tracked a similar trajectory in the American television market. From the 1960s on, anime imports were readily embraced by TV programmers who needed cheap but appealing material to fill the early morning, after school, and Saturday time slots that catered to young viewers. At the same time, American producers started outsourcing animation projects to Japanese studios. Such classics as the beloved stop-motion Christmas specials *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* (1964) and *Frosty the Snowman* (1969),

as well as numerous cartoon series (including *My Little Pony* in the 1980s), were all made in Japan. The boom in American cable television in the late 1980s and 1990s, when dozens of new channels needed fresh content, provided another opportunity for anime in the U.S. marketplace (especially on venues like the Cartoon Network, founded in 1992) and for Japanese live-action programming such as the breakthrough hit *Iron Chef*.

In short, an important reason why American audiences have historically had access to Japanese popular culture—and thus could become accustomed to it over the long term—was not necessarily because it was so stylish, sophisticated, refreshingly different, or critically acclaimed but simply because it was so cheap and readily available to movie distributors, television producers, and cable executives desperate to serve a constantly growing American entertainment market.

THE SMELL OF POP

One of the most important scholars working on Japanese pop culture today is the media studies expert Iwabuchi Kōichi, who has written numerous essays and an important book, *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*, that examine Japanese entertainment products in a global context. Iwabuchi's works, which largely deal with the reception of Japanese television, music, and animation in Asia (rather than the West), revolve around two central propositions. The first is that Japanese pop culture is embraced in Asia because Japan is something of a halfway house between East and West; that is to say, Japan takes the media products of the modern United States and Europe and subjects them to "indigenization and domestication," making them subtly more "Asian" in sensibility, aesthetics, and content and consequently more palatable to Taiwanese, Singaporean, South Korean, or Chinese audiences.⁶ Thus, while *Homer Simpson* or *ER* might seem too foreign, *Pokémon* and Japanese television melodramas ring strangely true to East and Southeast Asian media consumers.

Iwabuchi's second provocative notion regards the *smell* of global pop culture products. In Iwabuchi's analysis, all transnational cultural products—movies, cartoons, advertising symbols—have some sort of odor reflecting the culture and society in which they were originally made. Many American products, Iwabuchi argues, have a good odor, a "cultural fragrance," because they are associated with positive attributes of the American lifestyle and the American dream. Thus Hollywood movies have international buzz because their fragrance carries with them envious yearnings for American wealth, freedom, democracy, leisure, and coolness. Japan, Iwabuchi suggests, does not

have this kind of pleasant scent in the noses of the world's consumers. In fact, pop culture products that make people think too readily of their Japanese origins are likely to have a bad odor—a stink—that comes from negative preconceptions of Japan. Western audiences, for example, may call to mind lingering stereotypes of Japanese racial difference and inferiority while Asian consumers may be reminded of a painful history of Japanese imperialism, colonialism, and regional dominance. The only Japanese pop products that have hit it big globally are those that are “culturally odorless,” that are slick and sophisticated, creative and well marketed, but which do not smell of Japan to consumers overseas. To Iwabuchi these odorless products, called by other scholars *mukokuseki* (lacking a sense of national origin), are the “three Cs”: consumer technologies (such as transistor radios, karaoke, and the Walkman), comics and cartoons (in other words, manga and anime), and computer and video games. Indeed, Iwabuchi concludes, Japanese goods can only sell internationally if they are scrubbed scrupulously clean of cultural association with Japan and presented as a kind of placeless, historyless, cultureless, odorless entertainment commodity.⁷

Iwabuchi's ideas are thought provoking and controversial. His approach may help explain the popularity of something like Hello Kitty, whose global appeal has generally been difficult for scholars to understand but which seems a perfect example of an odorless global icon. The same might be said of Pokémon or Yu-gi-oh! although in these cases the role of aggressive and sophisticated global marketing campaigns needs to be carefully considered as well. Iwabuchi's analysis also appears useful in making sense of why some Japanese entertainment products, though vastly popular in the domestic market, have never attracted particular interest overseas. For example, the *Otoko wa tsurai yo* (It's Tough Being a Man) series, a beloved forty-eight-film franchise of sentimental comedies about a ne'er-do-well traveling salesman named Tora-san, may never have attracted large international audiences because it smelled too much of Japan, with its verbal humor and nostalgic sensibilities. Professional wrestling, by far the most popular spectator sport in Japan during the 1950s, and *pachinko*, the unique form of pinball ubiquitous in postwar urban Japan, may also have failed to catch on globally because of their particularly Japanese cultural odors.⁸

Some commentators are skeptical of Iwabuchi's notions of the smell of popular culture, questioning just how *mukokuseki* and odorless something like anime is, even though so many of the characters in Japanese animation, with large round eyes, light skin, and blond, pink or blue hair, look anything but Japanese. As Susan Napier's research has revealed, manga and anime are far from *mukokuseki* to their American fans: enthusiasm for Japanese



Figure 3.2. A U.S. soldier from the 12th Field Artillery Regiment plays *Guitar Hero* on a Nintendo Wii console at a combat outpost near Baquba, Iraq, in February 2008. (Photo © Patrick Baz/AFP/Getty Images.)

entertainment products and interest in Japanese language and culture are, it seems, frequently intertwined.⁹ The very idea that Japan lacks fragrance in the global pop marketplace is also open to question; there can be little doubt that among the factors driving international interest in Japanese popular culture, at least during the 1980s and early 1990s, was Japan's image as a rapidly rising economic power and a kind of high-tech utopia, leading the world in robotics as well as video game technology. Despite such reservations, Iwabuchi's interpretations cast revealing light on the place of Japanese pop in the complex circuitries of globalization and on the factors that have conditioned the international reception of Japan's mass culture forms.

AMERICAN TRAUMA, JAPANESE POP

The journalist Roland Kelts proposed a novel approach to understanding the global popularity of Cool Japan in his 2006 book *Japanamerica: How Japanese Pop Culture Has Invaded the U.S.* Kelts argues that Japanese pop forms such as anime are, as Murakami Takashi has compellingly argued, the creative outlet for Japan's unresolved agonizing over the atomic bombings of 1945; the attacks of September 11, 2001, are the contemporary equivalent of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, leaving deep scars of fear and horror that Americans have not yet been able to heal or put behind them; thus, Japanese popular culture has

"spoken" to U.S. audiences, and especially American youth, whose formative life experience was the spectacle of 9/11, because Americans now share the same unresolved tensions that have haunted the Japanese since World War II. In other words, Kelts bids us to conclude that the United States today has a national trauma to rival Japan's—"our mushroom cloud"—and, as a result, has come to embrace the dark dreams and apocalyptic fantasies of Japanese popular culture.¹⁰

The theory proposed by Kelts is suggestive but problematic. In the first place, equating the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon with the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is troubling, not least because of the difference in scale (with just under three thousand killed on September 11 as opposed to the more than one hundred thousand Japanese who died on August 6 and 9, 1945). Kelts's analysis also does not explain Japanese popular culture's global appeal, which extends well beyond America's borders to nations and regions where, presumably, the trauma of 9/11 was not so acute. Nor does Kelts account for the considerable popularity of Japanese anime, manga, mass cinema, and video games in the United States long before the events of 2001. And, of course, the very cleverness, elegance, and tidiness of Kelts's story inevitably evoke skepticism in a world of pop culture production and media consumption that is anything but simple, obvious, and neat. Yet Kelts's ideas do force us to consider the ways in which changing international conditions—political, social, and economic—have inflected the consumption of Japanese pop culture and invested Japanese forms with new meanings, relevance, and global resonance.

A WORLD OF FANS

Although scholars have been prolific in generating interpretations for the global appeal of Japanese pop, they have seldom directly asked the consumers of Japanese entertainment products, the worldwide fans of anime and manga, Wii consoles and game shows, why they are so attracted to Japanese forms. Those academic studies that have focused on American fans and subcultures immersed in Japanese pop reveal a diverse range of motivations and attractions. Research on the young consumers of Pokémon, for example, confirms the success of Nintendo's intense marketing campaign, which fired a generation of American children with the passion to "catch 'em all" by buying and dealing collectible trading cards.

A large survey of Godzilla fans found that most loved the color and action of Japanese creature features, the exuberant (but stylized) violence of monsters wrestling and Tokyo being stomped, and the movies' uncomplicated good-



Figure 3.3. Cosplay (short for “costume play”), which involves dressing up and performing as characters from anime and manga, is now a popular fan activity globally. Here, a group of Australian anime fans participate in the 2009 Madman National Cosplay Championships in Sydney. (Photo © Sergio Dionisio/Getty Images.)

versus-evil story lines. For middle-aged admirers of the king of the monsters, Godzilla films were perhaps most compelling as a form of nostalgia, a vehicle for recalling memories of childhood and a simpler, gentler time of weekend double features and Japanese actors fighting it out in latex lizard suits.¹¹ The college-aged anime enthusiasts studied by Susan Napier confirmed the scholarly conclusions about the appealing style and content of Japanese animation but also suggested that the sociability of the subculture—gathering to watch new series, meeting at anime conventions, sharing information—was another major attraction of anime fandom in America.¹² None of these international followers of Japanese pop, whether grade-school addicts of Pokémon or misty-eyed fans of Godzilla, indicated (at least consciously) that lingering traumas, unresolved tensions, or cultural odors drew them to mass entertainments imported from Japan.

Fans and fan organizations have been important to the introduction and popularization of Japanese forms, especially anime and manga, in the United States and around the world. Anime conventions, which are now common events in most large American cities and college towns, are significant forums for disseminating Japanese pop, while anime and manga clubs foster networks of fans in schools and universities. Dedicated and vocal fans have been active

in getting manga into public libraries and Japanese animation onto cable television. Fans have also made extensive use of the Internet, creating blogs, chat rooms, and websites (such as the Anime News Network) to interact, build communities, and share information. The Internet has also created new means for fans to distribute Japanese entertainment products, often illicitly; fansubbing, the unauthorized amateur subtitling of animated programming, and scanlation, the scanning and translation of pirated comics, make anime and manga readily available online to the large English-language audience. With a missionary zeal for turning on international audiences to the Japanese pop forms they love, fervent fan communities are an often overlooked element in the global spread of Japanese popular culture.

The reasons for the worldwide embrace of Japan's "Gross National Cool" are, perhaps not surprisingly, as diverse as the forms of Japanese popular culture and the sources of Japan's pop creativity. The intrinsic characteristics of Japanese animation, cinema, and character goods—obvious quality, stylistic and thematic complexity, insistent difference from Western pop conventions—have undoubtedly proven attractive to global consumers. At the same time, external factors—the market forces that consistently brought Japanese entertainment products to American audiences, international stereotypes of Japan's cultural odor, the long shadows of September 11, and even the activities of devoted fans—also created conditions favorable to the diffusion of Japanese popular culture. Through a complicated interplay of content and context, Japanese pop forms have become familiar icons and welcome diversions, mass-marketed commodities and cherished artifacts, as well as meaningful sites of identification, aspiration, and resistance in the contemporary global imagination.

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