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What is This?
Reframing and reconsidering the cultural innovations of the anime boom on US television

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Abstract
The Japanese animation (i.e. anime) boom on US television, which caused a great sensation in the early 2000s, is over. This article explores the business mechanisms that created this boom, the cultural innovations it stimulated, and some of the reasons for its decline. Methodologically, I argue that instead of analyzing the anime boom as an epochal break, it should be analyzed within the context of postwar animation as a global creative industry since the 1960s. By thus reframing it, I can delineate new distribution channels of anime since the 1990s. I also demonstrate that, beyond more series and new genres, the anime boom helped push the envelope of US animation towards adult-oriented productions and that ‘anime’ became a source of inspiration for US animators for formulations of cultural otherness. I argue that the end of the boom was unavoidable because in global creative industries cultural innovations soon become the industry’s mainstay. Finally, I consider the possible futures of the ‘local–global’ nexus in the animation industry.

Keywords
anime boom, anime-inspired cartoons, cultural adaptation, cultural Otherness, global creative industries, global distribution, Japan, United States

I think that in Japan, animation isn’t relegated to being a genre unto itself, it’s just a medium by which you can tell any number of stories be it horror or action or adventure or drama or whatever, and we’re trying to do that as well.

(Peter Docter, animation director of Pixar, in a 2009 interview)

In the late 1990s a golden age of Japanese popular culture began in the United States, spearheaded by Japanese animation (i.e. anime). Japan gained the epithet ‘Cool Japan’...
The interest in Japanese popular culture, and within it in Japanese anime, can be interpreted as the result of the high symbolic value placed on cultural otherness in late capitalist societies (see Friedman, 1999). The popularity of anime was also the result of the global rise of animation and animated media in the 1990s and within it the Japanese animation industry, the world’s largest producer of animation (Lamarre, 2010: xxii). While other mediums were also responsible for the popularity of Japanese animation, which outgrew the niche market of fans (e.g. the video games industry, the internet), this article focuses on the role of US television producers and animators in introducing anime to American audiences, and later in promoting and reflecting the anime boom.

The anime-related market in the United States reached a formidable peak in 2003, with a circulation of US$4.84 billion, including films (US$2 million), VHS tapes (US$72 million), DVD disks (US$316 million) and character goods (US$4.45 billion). By 2009, the numbers had dropped by nearly 44 percent, reaching US$2.741 billion, including films (US$15 million), DVD disks (US$306 million) and character goods (US$2.42 billion) (JETRO, 2011: 39).1 According to Sam Register,2 executive vice president at Warner Bros. Animation, everyone became greedy. American producers were looking for the next Pokémon and Japanese producers were feverishly producing an incredible number of series. Between 2002 and 2006, huge demand from American producers and distributors for new anime series took Japanese animation studios by surprise, leaving them overwhelmed and unprepared (Kelts, 2006: 73). According to one internet database, the number of new anime series produced in Japan rose from around 60 in 2000 to a peak of nearly 200 in 2006.3 Unsurprisingly, many of these series did not deliver quality. They were overly formulaic, and American producers who got burnt once or twice did not try again.4 In the following years, many US-based companies established since the late 1980s with the purpose of distributing anime closed down. In 2008 the Anime Network Channel, which was launched with much fanfare in January 2004, ceased its 24/7 operation and resumed providing only television Video on Demand services (VOD), in which viewers select pay-per-view programs. For Register, who sees himself as an expert on entertaining American kids and who is personally responsible for some of the most interesting anime-inspired cartoons of the early century,5 ‘Cool Japan has become boring’. Already in 2005, some Japanese scholars were talking about the ‘defeat of Japanimation’ (Otsuka and Osawa, 2005). In 2012, it seems that, while anime in the US has come to be an established part of kids’ media basket, and although the number of committed fans of anime is higher than ever, the anime boom on US television is over, allowing us new room to explore what it was all about and what were the cultural innovations that it produced.

Several important perspectives have been prominent in the academic analysis of the anime boom in the United States (which I roughly frame from 1998 to 2008): the role of fans in introducing anime (e.g. Patten, 2004: 45); the importance of global distribution channels in the globalization of anime (e.g. Iwabuchi, 2002: 38); the role of marketing in the reception of anime (e.g. Allison, 2000); and the actual and potential sociocultural and diplomatic implications of the rise of Japan as a global cultural center (e.g. Kondo, 2008). These perspectives, which provide important insights, share an underlying suggestion/assumption that anime broke out of cultural isolation due to several related
factors in the 1990s. This suggestion is sustained by a strong cultural narrative among Japanese artists that anime is specific to Japan, pertaining to some Japaneseness, and that therefore anime’s global popularity is indeed bewildering (see Lamarre, 2010: 336). It ignores, however, the substantial yet transparent market share of Japanese animation on US television and, more importantly, the cultural influence of anime genres on US animation before the anime boom years.

In this article, I reframe the anime boom on US television as another chapter (albeit surely an important one) in an ongoing business and artistic relationship between the US and the Japanese animation industries since the 1960s that includes importations and exportations, outsourcing and transnational productions, as well as transcultural experimentation with themes and styles. Drawing on a variety of sources, including market surveys, governmental and industry reports, internet forums, newspaper articles, interviews with Japanese and American producers and animators, and textual analysis of selected animated series, I propose an examination of the anime boom within what I see as its primary context: that of postwar animation as a global creative industry combining many local industries, among which the American and the Japanese industries are key.

In thus reframing the anime boom on US television, I expand the existing discourses on the agencies and marketing strategies that brought wider American recognition to Japanese animation. Furthermore, this perspective allows me to reconstruct more accurately the evolution of cultural adaptation paradigms of anime and the history of anime-inspired cartoons, and thereby to delineate and evaluate the cultural innovations brought by the anime boom years as well as some of the reasons for its decline.

A global industry ‘avant la lettre’

Animation is a labor-intensive industry. Attracted by stable and inexpensive labor supplies, North American and Western European animation studios have established and maintained overseas production facilities as well as cooperated with existing overseas facilities since the 1960s, first in Japan, then in South Korea and Taiwan, and later also in the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, Thailand, India, Indonesia, China and even North Korea.6

In 2-D animation, the usual procedure is for preproduction (preparing the script, storyboard, and exposure sheets) to be done in a ‘headquarters country’, after which the package is sent to an outsourcing location for production (drawing cells, coloring by hand, inking, painting and camera work). The work is sent back to the headquarters country for postproduction (film editing, color grading/timing and sound). Until a few years ago it was impossible to separate the creative tasks in 3-D animation from the technical or mechanical tasks. This has changed, and today, while preproduction and postproduction in 3-D animation are handled by the headquarters, the technical aspects are outsourced to specialized studios, many of which are located in Asia (Yoon and Malecki, 2009: 257). At the same time, the huge costs of 3-D animation keep the entry barrier into 3-D productions very high, and only major studios can afford to produce them.

In a few outsourcing locations such as China, India and North Korea, the animation industry had some history before becoming engaged in producing for other animation centers. However, in these locations as well as others, a recurrent cultural process has
been noted in which after years of transferring skills through outsourcing and training by foreign headquarters studios, a domestic animation industry develops into a serious global player (Lent, 2001: 245). Japan was a different case. When, in 1966, *The King Kong Show* became the first American cartoon produced in Japan (the US company Videocraft, which was later renamed Rankin/Bass Productions, outsourced it to Toei Animation), Japan already had an animation industry that produced animation shorts and features and had also entered the era of animation productions for television. Moreover, some Japanese companies, like Toei Animation, were looking for global distribution opportunities.

In 1961, three animation features by Toei Animation were distributed in the United States: *The Legend of the White Snake (Hakuja den, 1958; USA release 1961), Magic Boy (Shōnen sarutobi sasuke, 1959; USA release 1961)* and *Alkazam the Great (Saiyu-i, 1960; USA release 1961)*. The first two were selected for international distribution after winning awards at the Venice Children’s Film Festival. Although these movies were produced according to the Disney formula for feature animations, that is, adventures based on folktales, cute humanized animals for protagonists and catchy music, and although references to their foreign origins were removed before distribution, they did not do well in US box offices, perhaps, so it has been argued, because they were based on oriental tales (Patten, 2001: 56).

Japanese television animation, however, turned out to be a different story. Because of cost effectiveness, the potential in finished animation products that can be re-edited and relatively easily domesticated was recognized and manipulated by US production companies in extremely creative ways from very early on. Often considered Japan’s first animated television series, *Astroboy (Tetsuwan atomu, 1963)* was licensed by NBC Enterprises. It underwent re-editing and dubbing and was broadcast with great success on US television from 1963. Next followed other titles that underwent similarly significant adaptations for the American audience, including *Gigantor (Tetsujin nijūhachi-gō, 1963; Delphi Associates Inc., 1964), Prince Planet (Yūsei shōnen papī, 1965; American International Television Productions, 1966), Kimba the White Lion (Jungle taitei, 1965; NBC Enterprises, 1966)* and *Speed Racer (Mach go go go, 1967; Trans Lux, 1967)*. But perhaps the most interesting 1960s American adaptation of a Japanese animated series is the reproduction of *Hang On! Marine Kid (Ganbare marin kiddo, 1966)*. The US Company Seven Arts Productions (which later merged with Warner Bros) used the footage of that series that had been cancelled in Japan due to low ratings. The original number of episodes in the series was expanded from 13 to 78, and the whole show was repackaged for an English-speaking audience. Script and storyboard were prepared both in English and in Japanese, and the animation was produced in Japan. The English version, titled *Marine Boy*, was broadcast first in the United States and other countries from 1966, and the Japanese version, *Bottom of the Sea Marine Boy (Kaitei shōnen marin)*, aired in Japan only from 1969. It is therefore safe to conclude that Japan was selected as the first outsourcing location by US studios because it could provide cheap and skilled labor. Japanese studios were also selected for outsourcing because Japan had a good and reliable trade relationship with the United States (see Lent, 2001: 239).

The forming of business relations between the American cartoon industry and the Japanese anime industry from the 1960s demonstrates how local animation industries
became interconnected through global production and distribution networks, some would say ‘avant la lettre’, and all would agree long before economy experts were talking about ‘outsourcing’ (see Corbett, 2004: xiii), ‘offshoring’ (see Corbett, 2004: 39) or ‘glocalization’ (Robertson, 1992: 173–4). Further complicating transnational flows, outsourcing by Japanese animation studios started in the 1970s: Toei Animation, for example, began a partnership in South Korea in 1977 and a joint venture operation in the Philippines in 1986. Since the late 1980s, animation has surged globally as an important medium, with the rise in popularity of animated forms in mass-targeted and globally disseminated entertainment such as video games, television series, special effects in features, multimedia devices and more (Lamarre, 2010: xxi). The global production networks of the animation industry have since expanded and are sometimes growing underneath the radar of quarreling nations. Today, local animation industries around the world have become even more globally interconnected thanks to the mobility of talent – animators, animation directors and producers.

At the same time, not all players in the global arena have a similar footing in it. Although since the 1970s Japanese animation has gained a significant presence in global markets, unlike major animation production companies in the US, anime production companies have not developed independent international distribution channels. The reason is that the industry in Japan has always been fragmented into several hundred production houses and, until recently, was entirely dominated by external entities (TV stations, movie distributors, DVD distributors, toy manufacturers and advertising agencies) that operate as ‘production committees’. Production committees control funding, hold most copyrights and are inherently domestic businesses because revenues from overseas anime sales are about one-tenth of domestic sales (Dujarric and Hagiu, 2009).

A short history of Japanese-made animation in the US: exportation, importation, adaptation, reproduction and hybridization

What makes the structure of the animation business so complex is the duality of artistry and business characteristic of all creative industries (see Caves, 2000), as well as the interweaving of local industries with the larger global industry, that is a ‘local–global nexus’ (see Alger, 1988). Artistry in animation has its origin in creative individuals from many different disciplines, as well as in the creative context in which they work. Sources of influence on creative individuals and on the creative context in which they work are various and dynamic. Local industries adapt the techniques of animation to local artistic traditions, preferred themes and production constraints (e.g. cultural imageries, censorship, funds). An ongoing transcultural artistic pollination is enabled by transnational business trajectories set by entrepreneurs, trade fairs, international film festivals and fan activities, and, since the 1990s, also by the internet. Animation, however, is not driven exclusively or even primarily by artistic considerations. Some go as far as arguing that the birth of an animated television series depends on so many commercial constraints that the creative aspect is almost insignificant (Bendazzi, 1995: 238). As far as global distribution is concerned, commercial and business interests are the only considerations in the game.
Japanese animation, in its emergent stage, was influenced and inspired by American animated films produced by Warner Brothers, Max and David Fleischer and Walt Disney, to the point that they almost looked like imitations. However, as has been noted in other studies on globalization and cultural diversity, the diffusion of western (in this case American) culture, especially at the popular level, has not generated cultural homogenization, but rather the revitalization and generation of new cultural forms in different localities (see Patterson, 1994). The emergence of anime as a distinct form of expression may be traced back to the 1960s, when the artistic creativity of Japanese anime directors had to negotiate financial constraints, and when they developed ‘limited animation’ techniques in which there are fewer frames per minute. By combining aesthetic conventions drawn from manga (Japanese comics) with innovative camera effects, and adding cost-effective techniques such as moving the background instead of the characters, new and distinct animation styles were developed and became the signature of Japanese animation (Lamarre, 2010: 336).

During the 1970s, television became a major form of entertainment in Japan. Japanese producers of anime expanded their audience by growing up with the first generation of television kids and targeting viewers older than the Disneyesque audience of young children (Asaba, 1989: 254). The prosperous local market of anime in Japan enabled the creation of formulaic television genres as well as the nurturing of outstanding animators who demonstrated their individualistic and sometimes eccentric styles in full-length theatrical features and in animated series. The influences on Japanese animation became much broader and included not only foreign (mostly American) animation, but also cinematographic ideas, storytelling strategies and thematic choices of various domestic and foreign live-action genres, such as Westerns, samurai movies, crime and gangster films, science fiction series and films, action films and period dramas, which manifest in themselves complex and multidimensional cross-cultural pollination and influences.

The initial success of Japanese animated series on US television in the 1960s opened the door for new opportunities. These opportunities did not materialize randomly and unsystematically. They were the product of efforts of a relatively small group of entrepreneurs in Japan and the United States who recognized an opportunity, entered the field and produced a new business milieu with specialized know-how and transnational personal connections. In the late 1970s, the first ‘science fiction space operas’, a Japanese animated genre that focuses on romance, drama and adventure in space, made it to the United States: Battle of the Planets (Kagaku ninjatai gatchaman, 1972; licensed and adapted by Sandy Frank Entertainment, 1978) and Star Blazers (Uchū senkan yamato, 1974; licensed by Westchester Corporation, 1979). Like their predecessors, these series were heavily edited to conform to the more strict standards of US television by removing violence and other storytelling elements deemed inappropriate; story plots were altered, and the overall look and feel of the series were Americanized with the use of American names and the like. One of the notable characteristics of these imported anime series was that their protagonists did not look Japanese. According to Iwabuchi (2002: 94), the Japanese animation industry was aware that the non-Japaneseness of characters (and stories) worked to its advantage in the global market. In other words, from the initial production stage, anime series based on Japanese stories and characters were produced for local audiences, while only culturally neutral productions were considered for export.
Another Japanese animated science fiction genre that made it big in the United States was *mecha* animation (*mecha* deriving from the English word ‘mechanical’). Characterized by the main theme of giant piloted robots, *mecha* animations followed a different path of importation. In the 1970s, the Shogun Warriors, a line of Japanese toys licensed by Mattel Inc., consisting of a series of robots based on popular giant-robot anime shows, entered the US toy market and became hugely popular with American boys. In response to that popularity, five giant-robot animated series originally produced by Toei Animation were repackaged as the cartoon anthology *Force Five* (created by American Way Animation, 1980).10

From the late 1970s, basing American cartoons on Japanese franchises became a popular production strategy in the United States. In 1978, Hanna-Barbera co-produced with Toho Company the animated series *Godzilla*, a loose adaptation of the Japanese *Gojira* films by Toho. Four years later, Hanna-Barbera produced the extremely popular *Pac-Man: The Animated Series*, which was based on the video game called *Pac-Man* by Namco. In the 1980s, the television cartoon market in the United States grew significantly thanks to the increase in syndication initiatives (Erickson, 1989: 289). The financial opportunities in producing television shows tied with toys in the United States became even more promising in 1983 when the Federal Communication Commission’s regulations protecting children from product-based programming were relaxed (Scott, 2010: 4). In 1984, inspired by toy maker Takara’s line of humanoid robots that can transform into vehicles, the US toy company Hasbro joined with Marvel Comics and Sunbow Productions to create the toy-based television series *The Transformers*. The *Transformers* animation series was written in the United States and animated in Japan by Toei Animation and later also in South Korea by various animation studios. Another toy-inspired animated *mecha* series from 1984 was *Mighty Orbots*, which was an unusually highly collaborative transnational/transcultural project – that is, a collaboration in which all parties contributed to several aspects of the creative and production process. The story and music were created by the US companies Intermedia Entertainment and MGM Television, and the Japanese company Tokyo Movie Shinsha was responsible for the character design as well as for animating the series, which was directed by veteran anime director Dezaki Osamu.

Following the enthusiastic response in the United States to *mecha* animation, in 1984, American World Events Productions partnering with Toei Animation, created the American animation series *Voltron*. *Voltron* was not created by re-editing an existing anime series, by making an anthology of several existing series or by creating a new franchise-based series, but by combining the footage of two of Toei’s *mecha* anime series into a new story.11 This production pattern was thereafter repeated. The motivation behind combining unrelated original series by re-editing them, altering dialogue and changing plots was not artistic, or designed to overcome potential cultural barriers, but meant to produce a series with the minimum number of episodes required by the commercial standards of American syndication television.

The presence of Japanese animation in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s was not limited to science fiction series. Nippon Animation was instrumental in that it targeted global collaboration and distribution from its establishment and produced anime series in genres other than science fiction. The studio’s well-known *World Masterpiece
**Theater** animated series consists of animated adaptations of classics of world children’s literature, including *The Moomins* (1969–70), *3000 Leagues in Search of Mother* (1976) and many more. These series had great success around the world, and a few titles made it to the United States, many through the intermediary Saban Entertainment, including *Tom Sawyer* (1980; US distribution, 1988) and *Little Women* (1981; US distribution, 1988). Nippon Animation’s first transnational creative collaboration was in 1975 with Germany’s Kirch Media Group on *Maya the Honey Bee* (licensed by Saban Entertainment, 1990). It has collaborated since then with many studios, predominantly European ones.

Although I have mentioned *Mighty Orbots* as an example of an early American-Japanese highly collaborative animation project, during the 1980s most transnational Japanese co-productions characterized by high degree of collaboration were with European studios. US animation studios at the time were involved in less collaborative co-productions with Japan. One genre that proliferated throughout the decade in the United States was a cross between science fiction and fantasy. Several elements in these series were drawn from Japanese animation, most prominently the industrial design. But they also combined imaginative new themes and had some very American cultural traits, such as massively built characters, hierarchical relations within superhero squads (as opposed to more egalitarian relations in Japanese series) and, in some cases, local cultural references, such as to wrestling or the Wild West. The scripts and storyboards were done by US companies while the animation was often outsourced to Japan. Rankin/Bass Productions was prominent in the mid 1980s with three hits animated in Japan by the Pacific Animation Corporation: *Thunder Cats* (1985), featuring wrestler-looking humanoid cats as protagonists; *SilverHawks* (1986), featuring partly human partly bionic heroes; and *Tiger Sharks* (1987), featuring human protagonists who can transform into sea creatures.

Although huge in economic terms, from an artistic point of view, the US television animation industry hit a low point in the 1980s. Production costs rose, driving producers to outsource more than ever before and badly affecting the job market for new animators. Limited budgets as well as repetitive, formulaic series drove production companies to adopt standardized actions and physiognomies and to recycle previously used cells with minor modifications (Bendazzi, 1995: 238). In the early 1990s, US-based animators who had grown up in the 1970s and 1980s became aware of the Japanese origins of some of their favorite childhood cartoons. According to animator Alex Orrelle, who was a California-based animation student at the time, the sophisticated industrial design in the Japanese giant-robot and science fiction genres, the innovative character animation and the complex storytelling in anime were seen by an emerging generation of animators as offering compelling new possibilities. In 1991, for example, Korean American animator Peter Chung created the experimental science fiction miniseries *Æon Flux* for MTV animation. Chung has acknowledged many influences on *Æon Flux*, among them Katsuhiro Otomo’s feature *Akira* (1988). Another US television animated science fiction series that exhibited Japanese influence is 1993’s *Exosquad*. The show, which was created by Will Meugniot and Jeff Segal for Universal Cartoon Studios, is described on Meugniot’s website as ‘the first attempt by an American studio to do a series with anime-like complexity’. For fans, *Exosquad* stands out among other cartoons because it targeted older viewers with a developing dark and violent saga that included multiple
storylines and complex characters. Although the script and storyboards for *Exosquad* were produced by the US headquarters, the animation was outsourced. In one internet forum in 1995, Meugniot revealed the huge influence of *Gundam* (1979) on him and his team members, to the point that he wanted to have the Japanese company Sunrise animate the show, but they ‘couldn’t work out the business’. Eventually, Sunrise contributed some storyboards to the series, but the series was animated by South Korean studios. The artistic influence of various anime genres and styles reached beyond experimental projects and into the core of the American animation industry in the 1990s. Coming full circle from the first days of Japanese animation, in a 2010 interview Disney and Pixar animator and animation director Glen Keane said that Japanese animation had a huge influence on him at least since the early 1990s and that Japanese animation is part of Disney’s animation heritage.


There are two approaches to the interpretation of the success or failure of creative products in the global market. The first argues that creative products such as animation embody cultural codes and characteristics that may thwart global market success (see Caves, 2000: 283; Yoon and Malecki, 2010: 263). The second argues that good marketing – including, in the case of animation, efficient advertising and promotion, favorable broadcast hours and timely release of merchandise – might play an even more crucial role (see Allison, 2000). Although when interviewing television producers I heard much support for the first view, empirical data increasingly supports the latter. *Dragon Ball Z* and *Sailor Moon* became popular when they were properly marketed and broadcast in 1998 during prime-time weekday afternoon slots on the action-oriented Toonami block on Cartoon Network. *Pokémon*, which aired mornings and afternoons on syndicated television before moving to the Kids WB block, was allocated, from the beginning, prime-time television slots. Moreover, it was an irresistible marketing machine, with collectible toys, a trading-card game and a video game based on it launched by Nintendo in September 1998. The *Pokémon* package was a pioneering example in the US of the ‘media mix’ marketing strategy developed by Japanese media industries since the 1970s, which produces an integrated media ecology of anime, manga, trading-card games, toys, electronic gaming and character merchandise (see Steinberg 2012).

These series, like their predecessors, were heavily re-edited for the US market. What was new about them was, first, that they belonged to animated genres and subgenres never before seen on US television, and there was something very remarkable and innovative about their visual styles. What was also new in these series was their Japanese origins becoming part of their marketing. This can be explained by looking at the
licensing companies. The media companies who licensed and distributed these series saw great potential in promoting ‘Japanese anime’ as a product unto itself. *Dragon Ball Z* was licensed and distributed by FUNimation, which was established with the purpose of creating direct distribution channels for anime. *Sailor Moon* was initially licensed by DiC Entertainment, which did not focus solely on anime yet had a long history of collaboration with Japanese studios. Starting from the third season, however, *Sailor Moon* was licensed by Cloverway Inc., the international branch of Toei Company (the owner of Toei Animation) at the time, with the aim of distributing and marketing Japanese anime. Lastly, *Pokémon* was licensed by 4KIDS, which had not been focusing solely on anime but for which anime became a major business.

From the mid 1980s, a number of US-based, Japanese and American companies were established specifically for the purpose of opening licensing and distribution channels for Japanese animation in the American market, on television and through direct sale of VHSs and DVDs.16 Some of the entrepreneurs who established these companies were fans of anime, *manga* and Japanese popular culture who had been around since the 1970s. Others were offered an opportunity by partners in Japan or saw the potential in this business. Most companies had strong business partners in Japan and were founded by Japanese-Americans or co-founded by Japanese and American partners. Some were founded as an international branch or international affiliate of a Japanese publisher or media company. As a result, the number of Japanese animation series on US television grew, including some shows that would have been regarded until then as ‘too Japanese’ or too ‘different’ by television producers and therefore ill-suited for the American palate.

Within only a few years, there was a growing number of US-made feature-length live-action films, animated features and television cartoon series inspired by Japanese anime formulas, formats, style and thematic choice.17 There was also an unprecedented public relations celebration of co-productions with Japanese anime studios in real-life action movies as well as in animation projects.18 This celebration extended to media coverage of how studios in Japan engage in innovative experimentation with American directors and artists.19

**Innovative cultural production paradigms during the anime boom**

Having outlined the adaptation paradigms of anime to US television developed by producers over several decades, we are now ready to unpack the cultural innovations brought by the anime boom beyond the obvious growing number of anime series and the introduction of new anime genres.

The first innovation was the marketing positioning of anime. In describing the anime boom of the late 1990s to the 2000s, I emphasized the role of entrepreneurs who marketed anime as a product unto itself. In other words, these entrepreneurs, who created new global distribution channels, also changed the terms of the distribution: Japanese animated series, even if heavily localized, became distributed as ‘Japanese anime’. While some people in the business acknowledge the pluralism and variety inherent to Japanese animation, the effectiveness of marketing anime as a coherent Other was reaffirmed in
my interview with Register, when he explained that as a producer he exploits all ‘formats’ of animation, including 2-D, 3-D, and anime.

Second, the growing exposure of American animators and producers to anime has been instrumental (although not the only vector) in pushing the envelope of US animation from being oriented towards children to being oriented towards young adults and adults as well (see Patten, 2001: 66). The shift in the cultural conceptualization of animation as targeting older audiences, and the affinity of this shift with the influence of Japanese anime, was demonstrated in the strategic decision to launch Adult Swim, the adult-oriented cable television network that has shared channel space with the Cartoon Network since 2001. On the day Adult Swim was launched, it broadcast for the first time on US television, the series *Cowboy Bebop* (Shinichiro Watanabe for Sunrise Studio, 1998) oriented towards young adults. The channel has since broadcast many popular young-adult anime titles, as well as some of the more edgy ‘anime-inspired cartoons’.

This brings me to the third point, that the influence of anime on the US animation industry since the turn of the millennium is most interestingly exhibited in ‘anime-inspired cartoons’. Surprisingly, many anime-inspired cartoons exhibit individualistic and even eccentric artistic approaches to animation instead of the expected formulaic products designed to capitalize on a market trend. The niche of anime-inspired cartoons demonstrates how innovative cultural products are born when creative potential and production power merge. What anime-inspired cartoons that are otherwise often very different from one another share is an underlying exploration of the *otherness* of Japanese anime that comes into a play with the *otherness* of Japanese culture itself, exhibiting the cultural fascination with cultures and the Other in late capitalism, and the tendency for these to be broken down in a relentless search to discover yet more formulations of otherness (see Featherstone, 1995: 99).

Some anime-inspired cartoons emulate Japanese animation genres as cultural experimentation, such as *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (created by Michael Dante DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko for Nickelodeon Animation Studios, 2005–8). An adventurous quest set in an expansive world that draws on an oriental setting, and mythology and storytelling where humans, animals and mystic powers mingle, this show follows the adventures of teenage Aang and his friends who must defeat evil with their special powers, enabling them to bend and manipulate nature’s elements. The creators of the show have explained that their love for Japanese anime, Hong Kong action and kung fu cinema, yoga and Eastern philosophies led them to the initial inspiration for *Avatar*. In particular, they emphasized how they were inspired by Hayao Miyazaki’s work and by the character design, storytelling and animation of the anime *Fooly Cooly* (written by Yōji Enokido for Studio Gainex and Production IG, 2000–1). The result has attracted the warm attention of anime fans, to whom the creators have responded by saying that ‘America – us included – has a long way to go to catch up with the animated work being done in a handful of countries, namely Japan.’

When compared to *Avatar* and a handful of other series, most American anime-inspired cartoons use the otherness of anime as a stylistic reference to create something more culturally hybrid. One example is the edgy series *The Boondocks* (created by Aaron McGruder for Adelaide Productions, Rebel Base, Sony Pictures Television, 2005–), which is oriented towards young adults. The series is a social satire of African American
culture and race relations. It follows the lives of two young African American brothers from inner-city Chicago who move to live with their grandfather in a suburb. It joins other animated social satires on American society and culture, such as *The Simpsons* (1989–), *King of the Hill* (1997–2010) and *South Park* (1997–), as well as other African American-centered cartoons that have become less of a rarity since the turn of the millennium, including *The Proud Family* (2001–5), *Static Shock* (2000–4) and *Hey Monie!* (2003–). *The Boondocks*’ visual style, however, is noticeably influenced by anime (as attested by McGruder himself), particularly by *Cowboy Bebop* and *Samurai Champloo* (Shinichiro Watanabe for Manglobe Studio, 2004).22 Both of these series are structured around multicultural and multiple cinematographic references. One major reference in both series is to Black American music, focusing particularly on jazz in the case of *Cowboy Bebop* and on hip hop in the case of *Samurai Champloo*. The influence of director Watanabe’s style on *The Boondocks* is discernible in the designs of the main protagonists, the realistic settings and the battle sequences. It is also discernible in the opening sequences that pay homage to the visual style of the opening of *Cowboy Bebop*, with hip hop music reminding viewers of *Samurai Champloo*. According to McGruder, from the second season the production team of *The Boondocks*, not entirely satisfied with the visual look of the series, tried to work with the Japanese animation studio Madhouse, but that did not produce results for reasons that remain unexplained. Thereafter, the two animators responsible for bringing the visual look of the series closer to how McGruder envisioned it have been US-based South Korean Seung Eun Kim and African American Carl Jones.23 As for the question ‘Why anime?’ McGruder has replied:

> It’s a better type of art for animation. I designed the characters [in the original comic strip] that way because I wanted it to be animated one day, and I knew that was the direction I wanted to go way back then.24

It could thus be argued that McGruder used an ‘anime package’ to tell a story that could have only been told in the United States, but there is more to it.

For many American viewers, the cinematographic visual style of *The Boondocks* may not be very meaningful. But for those who notice the references in *The Boondocks* to director Watanabe’s work in particular and to anime in general, there is the consideration of cultural/racial representation in animation. This is a very broad topic that should be dealt with carefully at another opportunity. Within the framework of this article, however, suffice it to say that since the 1990s, local Japanese reproductions of Black American culture have grown to be references for a defamiliarized liminal cool (see Bots-Bornstein, 2011). The combination of anime avant-gardism with references to American Black culture imagery yields a cool counter-cultural stance. Meanwhile, on the other side of the ocean, *The Boondocks* is very critical of the sociocultural politics of African Americans and of their relations with white America; its dialogue with anime style creates a critique that nevertheless highlights positively the individualistic eccentricity and resistant spirit that has come to be part of the construction of ‘Black American culture’.

A third and last example of a play with otherness in anime-inspired cartoons is the exploration of cool, contemporary things Japanese almost as a fetish. This play is, in other words, a reference to, or a take on, the contemporary juxtaposition of
Japan—America popular cultures. In Kappa Mikey (created by Larry Schwarz, Animation Collective and Schwarz Productions, 2006–8), for example, American Mikey Simon, a 19-year-old actor, goes to Japan where he stars in a live-action series LilyMu that is presented in the series as ‘anime’. Thanks to Mikey, the once popular show goes back to the top of the ratings, and Mikey becomes a star in Japan. Thematically speaking, in calling the show Kappa Mikey, the creator reveals his acquaintance with and fondness of Japanese culture. It is not common knowledge among non-Japanese that Kappa is a reference to the mischievous and prank-loving mythical water demon by that name who usually finds itself in trouble when leaving the water, much like Mikey in Japan who is therefore like ‘a kappa out of water’. On a different level, the idea that an American intervention in an otherwise Japanese production is responsible for the best ‘anime’ ever is intriguing, particularly when imagined by an American creator (i.e. Schwarz), who is involved in producing anime-inspired cartoons. Most of the characters in Kappa Mikey are drawn in an anime-inspired style (thin outlines, big and detailed eyes, small mouths and ten fingers), while Mikey and other American characters are drawn in an American cartoon style (thicker outlines, single black-dot pupils, a large mouth and only eight fingers).

Conclusion: the futures of anime

In this article I have argued that, methodologically, the anime boom in the United States should be analyzed within the larger perspective of transcultural artistic pollination and transnational commercial entrepreneurship enabled by the global animation industry that emerged in the 1960s. Admittedly, the differentiated analytical usage of transnational and transcultural in this article does not always survive closer scrutiny; transgressing national borders with business initiatives such as outsourcing and importation often involves cross-cultural comparisons and contrasts, resulting in transcultural interactions and influences. It is nevertheless productive in emphasizing the complex duality of artistry and business characteristic of the animation industry.

Thanks to new distribution channels established in the 1990s, Japanese animation on US television was redeemed of its transparency and its presence became more daring and more recognizably influential. The popularity of anime outside Japan caused much euphoria among the Japanese media, policy-makers, entrepreneurs and fans (Daliot-Bul, 2009). Disappointingly for many, this cultural hype, at least in the United States, is over. Japanese commentators on the general decline of Japanese anime lament the lack of new talents in Japan because of the increasing dependence on outsourcing, the tendency toward formulaic otaku-oriented series (because in Japan this is where the money lies), the outdated industry structure (i.e. dependency on production committees) and government intervention with cultural policies. The Japanese anime industry, it is argued, has lost its cutting edge avant-gardism because it has become too commercial and not sufficiently adventurous or artistically driven (see Otsuka and Osawa, 2005). However, it is also arguable that the global hype around anime could not have lasted forever. As has also been demonstrated by Kohler’s (2005) work on video games, creative industries are competitive and attentive to the formation of new trends and markets. Successful innovations are soon emulated by competitors and become the global animation industry’s
mainstay, thereby disturbing the temporary balance among global leaders and promoting anticipation for the ‘next thing’. In other words, we see a normalization of anime genres and visual styles that were previously marked as outstanding. It is a reflection of the life-span pattern of cool popular culture products that lose their edge as they are massively reproduced by marketers (see Goodman, 2001).

The anime boom in the United States exemplifies a globalization process in which the cultural and linguistic barriers to creative products – considered until recently as determining exportability – have been coming down in dramatic ways. Meanwhile, in a somewhat counter-intuitive way, although anime genres and themes previously deemed unexportable break out of their provincial boundaries and become global currency, they retain their foreign identity as ‘anime’. This foreign identity is actually used for marketing them in sociocultural environments where cultural otherness is cultural capital. This process demonstrates how globalization is promoting contradictory processes of de-territorialization and re-territorialization and how the question of cultural identity remains at the center of contemporary cultural experience. This ambiguity, however, may be an interim stage after all. As the animation industry continues to globalize, particularly with the contemporary mobility of talent, the global–local nexus of the animation industry may gradually be replaced by a different equilibrium, in which local industries are eroded by global production trajectories in ways that will eventually lead to a supranational animation culture.

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Notes
1 This data does not include Hello Kitty, Domo-kun, Power Rangers and Transformers merchandising.
2 Interview conducted by the author in April 2011.
4 It is estimated that only 10 percent of all anime series make any profit (Dujarric and Hagiu, 2009).
6 It is estimated that about 90 percent of all ‘American’ television animation is currently produced in Asia (Yoon and Malecki, 2010: 246).
7 Mitsu no Hanashi (Three tales, 1960) and Otogi manga karandā (Otogi manga calendar, 1961) preceded Astroboy on Japanese television.
8 For example, US companies are forbidden any trade with North Korea; however, the internet is full of suggestive rumors and concrete data that some series, including Teenage Mutant Ninja
Turtles (1987–) and The Simpsons (1989–), and some Disney films, including Pocahontas (1995) and Lion King (1994), were partially outsourced to North Korea through South Korea (see Korea Times, 2010; Lee, 2007; Made in North Korea, 2010).

9 In 2004 METI estimated that about 60 percent of all animation shown worldwide is made in Japan (JETRO, 2005).


11 The two series were Hyakujûû goraion (Beast King GoLion, 1981) and Kikô kantai dairagâ fijîtîn (Armored Fleet Dairugger XV, 1982).

12 Interview conducted by the author on 23 August 2011.


14 See: http://groups.google.com/group/rec.arts.anime/browse_thread/thread/a54afcb1b5844395/3beeb481026001eb?#3beeb481026001eb (consulted September 2011).


17 For example, The Powerpuff Girls (created by Craig McCracken, produced by Hanna-Barbera for Cartoon Network, 1998), Samurai Jack (created by Genndy Tartakovsky, produced by Cartoon Network Studios for Cartoon Network, 2001), Hi Hi Puffy Ami Yumi Show (created by Sam Register, produced by Renegade Animation for Cartoon Network, 2004); The Matrix Triliogy (Wachowsky Brothers, 1999–2003), Transformers (Michael Bay, 2007), Speed Racers (Wachowsky Brothers, 2008), Avatar (James Cameron, 2009), Astroboy (David Bowers, 2009).

18 For example, Kill Bill Volume 1 (Quentin Tarantino, 2003), Animatrix (US production companies Village Roadshow Pictures and Silver Pictures, together with studios Square Enix, STUDIO 4°C, Madhouse, DNA, 2003) and Batman: Gotham Knight (US production companies DC Comics and Warner Bros; animation together with Japanese animation studios Bee Train, Madhouse, Production IGG and Studio 4°C, 2008).

19 For example Tekkon Kinkurit (Michael Arias for Studio 4C, 2006), the Afro Samurai TV anime series (created by Takashi Okazaki for the studio Gonzo with the creative collaboration of Samuel Jackson and a music score by The RZA, 2007).


References


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