

# PEEK-A-BOO PIKACHU

## EXPORTING AN ASIAN SUBCULTURE

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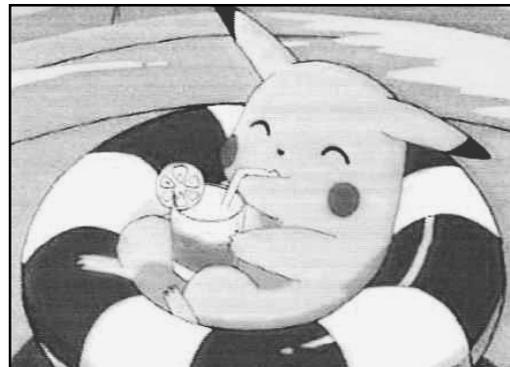
On my desk in front of me is a photograph of a pretty blonde girl dressed in what looks like an old fashioned gown, accompanied by two cloaked and strangely made up figures. A costume party? In a sense, yes, but this is a special kind of costume party. The place is one of the ballrooms at the Dallas Airport Hilton, the setting is the Project A-kon anime convention, and the activity is something called *cosupurei*, from the Japanese pronunciation of the English words "costume" and "play." As for the "cosplayers" themselves, they are masquerading as figures from a popular animated video game called *Final Fantasy*.

What is going on here? Why are young Americans wearing "Japanese" costumes (although the *Final Fantasy* figures are far from traditional Japanese) and what makes them journey hundreds, sometimes thousands of miles to venues such as A-kon? And, once there, what is it that incites them to perform such activities as cramming by the hundreds into a room to watch special showings of Japanese animation, lining up to get autographs from Japanese actors whom they know only by voice from their favorite series, exhibiting copious quantities of "fan art" (pictures related to favorite animation), and spending considerable sums of money on anime-related merchandise?

What is going on is a phenomenon that is in some ways quite old but in other ways startlingly new. This is the phenomenon of a subculture, specifically an anime subculture in the United States. What is a subculture? Subcultures can be generally defined as groups of people who come together to share a common interest in a single area in a way that distinguishes them from mainstream culture. Contemporary America may be seen as a hotbed of subcultures, ranging from the Hells Angels motorcycle group to fans of romance novels. Although subculture groupings in some form have probably always existed, it is only recently, with the development first of mass culture and then of the Internet, that subcultures have proliferated. Mass culture allowed for individuals to develop a variety of new interests, while the Internet offered them opportunities to "meet" and bond with other, like-minded individuals.

One area where subcultures have grown immensely is in what might be called the *ubersubculture* of fandom. The

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Symbol of a rising cult?

most famous of the fan subcultures is undoubtedly that of the "Trekkies," devout fans of the *Star Trek* television series and films, whose enormously successful organization is legendary among subculture scholars. But there are many other fan subcultures as well, usually organized around a popular television show or recently, around books, such as the popular *Harry Potter* series.

The anime subculture in America is clearly related to this massive culture of fandom. What is so crucially fascinating about the anime subculture, however, is that it is an American fan subculture that is *not* based on an American or even a Western cultural product. Instead it is based on an Asian cultural product—anime—and its related media of video games and manga, or Japanese comic books. While often stereotyped in the West as either children's cartoons or else "adults only" narratives, anime is actually a rich and wide-ranging cultural mode whose products offer far more variety than conventional American animation.

Not only is anime non-American but, as film scholar Susan Pointon emphasizes, it is *uncompromisingly* non-American. Anime is of course full of references to indigenous Japanese culture but, even more significantly, its narrative structures, style, pacing, and overall emotional tone differ notably from that of American animation and from American cinema in general.

Whereas American cinema participates in what I call a "dynamics of reassurance" in which happy endings are virtually guaranteed and no "good" character can die, Japanese animation is remarkable for its often downbeat emotional tone, emphasizing painful complexity over easy closure, grief over gladness, and world destroying events over world affirming ones. "Good" characters do die and often these characters, whether "good" or "evil," are notable for their moral complexity. Far more intricate and challenging than most American animation, and often more so than most Hollywood blockbusters, anime offers visions of the modern

world that range from zany romantic comedies in which the boy often does not get the girl, to surpassingly bleak apocalyptic films and television series that juxtapose heroism and self-sacrifice within a generalized sense of cultural despair.

It is this dark and richly nuanced world that has captured a small, but increasing, number of Americans over the last decade. It is hard to pinpoint exactly when self-conscious

anime fandom began because many of the original fans of anime were not aware that they were watching anime itself. Many older fans reminisce fondly about seeing and particularly enjoying such

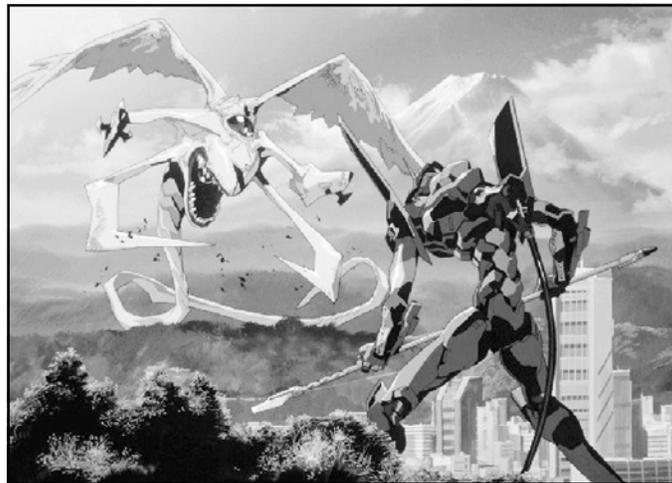
animated cartoons as *Speed Racer* or *Star Blazers* without being really aware that these were actually dubbed (and often heavily cut) versions of Japanese animation. A similar process may be occurring now among the younger generation of viewers. Many high school students I encountered at A-kon came to watch anime because of the dubbed *Sailor Moon* cartoons that they watched as children. Similarly,

children today who love *Pokemon* may or may not be aware that they are watching Japanese animation but they are undoubtedly being subliminally conditioned to enjoy and appreciate a certain kind of artwork and cultural value system that is quite different from their American counterparts.

Perhaps the most obvious inception point of conscious anime viewing oc-

curred in the late 1980s and early 1990s when science fiction conventions, or cons as they are called in fan parlance, began to screen selected anime. Intimate and low budget affairs, these screenings would often take place in hotel rooms late in the evening, after the official convention events were over. Most of the time the anime would be neither subtitled nor dubbed, necessitating a Japanese speaking fan to shout out the basic plot and dialogue points for the other viewers. Thus, for many early fans the initial anime viewing experience was primarily a visual one, an aspect that is still important today. Furthermore, many of these early screenings tended to emphasize anime with a distinctly "adult"

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Arena of conflicting cultural values.



Rooted in the commitment of fandom.

content, leading to the still prevalent stereotype that Japanese animation is mostly sex and violence.

As time went on, however, the perception and reception of anime in America became more sophisticated and knowledgeable. During the 1990s, with the proliferation of VCRs and the rise of the Internet culture, a strong fan subculture began to emerge in which fans imported tapes from Japan and, with the aid of Japanese friends or through their own forays into Japanese language learning, began to develop subtitled versions of popular anime. These versions would often be traded across fan networks under an honor system in which selling of tapes was strictly prohibited and fans would pay only the cost of the tape itself. Even today one still runs across tapes which proudly document that they are "subtitled by fans for fans".

Many fans look back on the period of the early to mid-nineties with some nostalgia as a time when the anime subculture was still very small, specialized and uncommercial, the province of a very few committed fans. Inevitably, however, as Japanese animation began to spread, albeit gradu-

ally, into mainstream American life, larger commercial interests began taking over, marketing not only tapes, but also DVDs, toys, and other anime related paraphernalia. These ventures are still relatively small by corporate standards, but they have an important impact in spreading anime into the mainstream. Anime now has its own virtual section at Amazon.com not to mention a real section at every Virgin Megastore. Furthermore, in large cities one may find stores largely devoted to anime. Anime is shown extensively on the Cartoon Channel and the Sci-Fi Channel of American television. Perhaps most excitingly, in 1996 Walt Disney Corporation signed a contract with Studio Ghibli, the most important animation studio in Japan to distribute a range of Ghibli classics.

Fan interaction remains an extremely important part of the American anime experience, however. Fan based conventions are an active business across the United States. Anime fan clubs, often high school or college-based, have proliferated in both the United States and Canada while anime related chat groups and web sites have spread throughout the Internet. These chat groups can range from highly technical (discussions of DVD quality are common) to deeply philosophical, as is evi-

denced in the discussion of Nausicaa.net, a group devoted to the works of one of Japan's greatest animators, Miyazaki Hayao.

Anime fans maintain a strong, even proprietary interest in how anime is disseminated in the West. Thus, fans of the *Sailor Moon* series even got together the so-called SOS (Save Our Scouts) campaign to save their favorite series from cancellation. Although ultimately unsuccessful, it may have inspired other fan-based campaigns such as a successful drive to ensure that the Disney Studios include a Japanese language track on their DVD version of the popular film *Princess Mononoke*.

It is perhaps time to ask: who exactly are the anime fans? As part of a book I was writing on Japanese animation (*Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke*), I interviewed a number of fans across the United States and also in Canada and Europe, and found a wide range of personalities. It should first be acknowledged, however, that there is a persistent stereotype of the anime fan and that is of the "otaku". "Otaku" is actually a Japanese term which is used pejoratively in Japan to describe

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an obsessed fan who lives for nothing else but his (the stereotype is usually male) hobby. In fact, some anime fans in America embrace the word "otaku" as a badge of honor, but many others disavow it, and others are simply indifferent to it, pointing out that their interest in anime is simply one part of their life.

It is true that certain general qualities of anime fans can indeed be suggested. In my interviews and surveys I found that anime fans were predomi-

nantly male (about seventy six percent in a survey I conducted at the University of Texas, for example). This gender distribution may change, however, as anime continues to proliferate. In my anime course at the University of Texas, over thirty percent of the students were female, while at Project A-kon last summer, I noticed quite a large number of young women participants, many of whom were fans of such strongly feminine series as *Sailor Moon* and *Revolutionary Girl Utena*.

Another stereotype that has some accuracy is the impression that many anime fans are science or math majors if they are students, and work in the high tech industry if they are adults. I have found this to be the case among my students at both Texas and at Harvard University and it is surely no accident that MIT has a very strong anime fan club. Again, however, it should be emphasized that anime fans include students whose majors range from the humanities to the social sciences, and that working fans include those with jobs in the arts or in teaching. It is also the case that many fans are Asian Americans, although it would be hard to say if they are a majority. Certainly, students in my courses have ranged across a wide variety of ethnicities with no single ethnic category predominating.

Another supposed truism is that many of the fans are young, and this is certainly quite accurate. Partly this is because young people are more likely to watch television and to be open to the Internet, but I suspect that a deeper reason is that older North Americans still retain a deep seated prejudice against seeing "cartoons" as art. Raised on Disney and Warner Brothers and accustomed to valorizing live action cinema, the generation over forty tends to feel that animation should be "innocent" or at least child-oriented. For the younger fans, raised on such cutting edge American animated fare as *The Simpsons*, such a concept is far less likely to prevail.

All these supposed truisms are only partially accurate, however. I have found anime fans to be a fascinating and diverse group of people, and I began to want to know more about them as people, rather than as simply fans. Accordingly, in my recent research, I have been trying to develop a more personal profile of the anime fan

by conducting in-depth interviews with selected anime fans around the country. One of the most interesting results of my work so far has been the responses I have received to the question "Do you feel your values are in accord with those of mainstream America?" Perhaps, not surprisingly, the majority of those I have interviewed thus far have responded that they do not necessarily feel part of mainstream America. Many indeed were critical of mainstream American values. Often, most intriguingly, it was my female respondents who felt most outside of American society. One woman said she found "that I was too cynical to be mainstream the day I realized I couldn't watch the local news without yelling at it." One of my Texan respondents told me that she felt different because, while growing up, she had "never wanted to be a cheerleader." Clearly anime's own "different" quality may appeal to individuals who feel themselves to be different from the mainstream as well.



Anime: a community for the marginalized

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It is worth returning to the question of anime's appeal at a more general level. I have suggested that anime is thematically more complex and stylistically more sophisticated than much of American animation or, for that matter, much of contemporary Hollywood fare in general, and I believe that this is a major part of its attraction to young American fans. Anime is indeed uncompromisingly different, and this may well be a major attraction for viewers yearning for a change from the often banal quality of conventional American entertainment. A number of those surveyed mentioned how much they appreciated the darker themes in anime, the surprising plot twists, and the fact that "some-

times the good guys get killed off, too" as one respondent put it. A female student wrote eloquently, "Disney animation is 'pretty' but it lacks the emotions of anime. These characters are like us as we really are, not an idealized image of a hero or 'bad-guy' etc. The good guys have bad qualities and the bad guys have good." Perhaps most poignantly, she concludes with, "The characters in anime are human."

Other respondents mentioned the sheer visual appeal of Japanese animation. One respondent suggested that

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"Anime possesses an aesthetic which is different to what is produced in the West—an aesthetic with an emphasis on a quality of beauty different from Western standards." Another person, referring to some of the more esoteric masterpieces of the genre, called it simply "a new form of art."

Another aspect of anime's attraction that is worth examining is the question of its "adult" content. Clearly, at least at the beginning of its popularity in the West, this was an important element in anime's attraction. Anime does indeed contain its fair share of violence (although often heavily aestheticized), and also includes many products that most Americans might be likely to label pornographic. Even child-oriented anime will often contain nudity or seem to be occasionally sexually suggestive, at least to Western eyes. In its most problematic form anime can contain scenes of truly disturbing violence often of a sexual nature, and frequently this violence is directed at women.

It is hard to say how important overall this aspect is to the anime fan community. Certainly at fan conventions the *hentai* (sexually explicit anime) are usually relegated to very late night viewings and often are not officially sanctioned. Stores that stock anime materials may also include adult material but usually cordon it off. And according to at least one of my informants, there is usually little demand for it except among a very few "creepy" customers.

In my surveys and discussions with anime fans, the majority have acknowledged that sexuality and violence was in-

triguing but "not one of the main reasons for watching". A few were adamant about their lack of interest in the sexual content. As one engineering student put it "I like anime but I don't watch smut. In fact, I'm vehemently opposed to "adult" material in general. People like animation for its music, violence, intricate stories, continuous series, Japanese culture."

It seems safe to suggest that anime's 'adult' content is certainly not the most important aspect of anime's appeal to fans. Although a few fans may initially come to anime out of an interest in that area, most go on to appreciate the immense variety which anime offers. It also should be noted that much of the violence and sexuality and anime is no more intense than what would be found in American live action films. Undoubtedly, one reason why some viewers find it shocking is simply the notion of seeing sexuality and violence in a "cartoon" context.

One other possible reason behind anime's appeal may be the medium itself. For older audiences more conditioned to live action film and television, the inherently non-representational world of anime may be somewhat off-putting. For younger fans however, growing up on video games and computer animation, the very "otherness" of anime may be paradoxically liberating. Anime offers an array of diverse identities and ethnicities to choose from that are not bound by the strictures of the "real" world. Watching anime may therefore become a kind of "*cosupurei*" of the mind where the viewer can revel safely in a rich and fascinating world of difference. ■

