Anime: A Critical Introduction

by Rayna Denison

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Rather than defining anime as a specific text or by its aesthetics, in *Anime: A Critical Introduction*, Denison considers it as a cultural phenomenon whose meanings are dependent on context. Taking into account the shifting and complex sets of meanings and audiences that anime creates, Denison locates it as a genre that is constructed in the discursive practices of the industry, in the fans' reception and in the academic gaze, as well as in the traces left behind as it moves through culture; its meanings renegotiated at any specific configuration. Anime, in this formulation, moves through culture in ways that speak to local as well as transnational groups.

Rayna Denison, a Senior Lecturer in Media Studies whose scholarship on Japanese television culture is already strong, takes the reader in an interesting journey from the manga and sci-fi origins of anime to video games, and from fans' practices to industry merchandising and advertisement. The book is divided into three sections of a few chapters each. It firstly addresses the development and transformation of anime's genre and cultural categories. Denison's privileged method of analysis is discursive and is broad in scope. This allows her to dig into fan communities and presses as primary sources of investigation in her quest for understanding a broad and popular phenomenon, although high profile films, and some of the studios that produced them, are also analysed.

In the second part of the book, Denison investigates the historical account of anime in relation to its fandom and as a burgeoning industry. From VHS to digital, anime has become a globally visible phenomenon. Denison positions fans at the centre of the anime world with their work of re-

production, translation, and distribution; this often goes well beyond the industry's affordances and desires.

The final part of the book is dedicated to the contemporary landscape of anime and its evolving patterns. The popular Studio Ghibli, for instance, is used as a case study for both brand and genre. In order to look for the shifting 'intertextual relays' of genre—that is, the creation of its own demand, which in turn feeds, via anime assemblage and industry, back to the production line—Denison analyses text, fanzines and online hubs, and takes us to the 'field' of Tokyo Anime Fair. Put under the lens of ethnographic methods, the cultural geographies of anime are scrutinised through fans, tourist industry, merchandising, and the whole world that anime commands. Anime therefore becomes a phenomenon split into myriad subgenres and spatial practices: from museums to fans' fairs, audiences create a feedback loop which impacts on the notion of genre itself. Anime is therefore more an umbrella term connoting a genre, but its translation and re-adaptation throughout transnational markets provide anime with a constantly shifting cultural landscape. In Japan in particular, anime is much more than a subcultural text: it is a media empire that takes the form of a complex system of industrially and culturally understood genres and audiences that crosses back and forth between everyday culture and extreme forms of fandom.

Anime's rising global profile is, for Denison, the product of a long-term growth in the transnational fandom, whereas fans are being thought as active prosumers and prime actors in the genre. Fans' interventions are related to technological development (from VHS to DVD to digital forms), shifting distribution patterns that integrate community formation and maintenance (e.g. forums and online hubs), industrial diversification (media mix and merchandising), and increased cooperation between Japan's media industries and international partners (such as Studio Ghibli's deal with Miramax and Disney). With the advent of digital technologies, a new dimension is added to the ever shifting cultural landscape of anime.

Software is crucial, for instance, in generating a remix between anime text and rock or popular music. This latest trend only added to fans' existing traditions of subtitling and translation.

Denison's book invites us to look at what anime means to particular groups of people at specific moments in time. As a consequence of generic remixing and inventions, anime moves 'from being a massive transmedia meta-genre at one end of a spectrum to a subcultural collection of genres (or even subgenres) at the other' (29). *Anime: A Critical Introduction* is an eye-opener to the global and always evolving world of anime as a cultural genre and as a set of consumers' cultural practices, which Denison unpacks with comprehensive discourse analysis and ethnographic fieldwork.