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BREAKING THE “RULES”: THE TRANSMISSION OF JAPANESE CULTURE IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZATION

In the more than 150 years since Japan opened to the West, its culture has become a source of fascination and inspiration to artists, intellectuals, and writers throughout Europe and America. In 19th century New England, scholars and collectors such as Fenellosa, saw the traditional culture of Japan as compensating for the materialistic “Gilded Age” that America was immersed in. Across the ocean in France young artists such as Monet, Manet, and Degas, and writers such as Goncourt found in “Japonisme” a liberation from the conventions of 19th century painting and portraiture. In the 20th century writers, from the pre-war poets such as Pound and Eliot, to cyberpunk science fiction novelists such as William Gibson, found in Japan an inspiration to create their own visions of the contemporary and also future worlds.

Recently a new trend has emerged and that has been the increasing influence over the past decade of Japanese popular culture. Starting on the children’s level with the global success of the animated series Pokemon, and the popular stuffed animal Hello Kitty, Japanese popular culture has become a many billion dollar global industry. Japanese pop music is heard from Brazil to Los Angeles, while young teenagers from Boston to Austin cluster at bookstores to buy English translations of manga while wealth adults compete to buy the paintings of Murakami Takashi, famous for his “superflat style”, and are increasingly interested in collecting the works of Murakami’s disciples as well.

One of the most important elements of Japan’s popular cultural spread has been the popularity of Japanese animation around the world. Beginning in 1989 with the cult hit Akira, a dystopian science fiction classic; anime began to be taken seriously by Westerners, on both a popular and a critical level. In the 16 years since that time anime’s influence has grown exponentially. Roughly equivalent to Hollywood cinema in terms of its influence and importance in Japan (about half of Japanese film and cinema studio’s output is animated) anime spans a broad range of films and television series. These comprise a far wider range of works than conventional animation culture in the West usually includes. Although there are of course many comic anime aimed at children, there are also a large variety of anime targeted towards older viewers. These range from romantic comedies (such as the immensely popular works of Rumiko Takahashi whose 150 episode comedy series Inuyasha is one of the most popular anime ever in both Japan and America), to challenging science fiction works exploring the influence of technology on contemporary humanity, such as the oeuvre of Oshii Mamoru (Ghost in the Shell, Patlabor).

Without a doubt, however, the most popular anime director in the world today is Hayao Miyazaki whose Studio Ghibli has produced some of the most popular and most critically recognized works in contemporary animation, including the 2001 movie *Spirited Away*, which was the highest grossing film in Japanese history (beating out not only American films which consistently tend to dominate but also Japanese live action films as well), and won the Academy Award for best animated movie.

Because I have so little time, I would like to concentrate on Miyazaki's work and world view, a world view which, as a recent *New Yorker* profile puts it "inspires a sense of wonder about the natural world, a fascination with flight, a curiosity about hidden or miniature realms" (Jan. 17, 2005). What is particularly exciting about Miyazaki is not merely his international following (his films are popular from Thailand to Norway, to Texas), but WHY he commands such a following. In my research on anime fandom in the West I have discovered that anime fans are moved to become fans for a number of reasons. The most major one is that anime offers something different from Hollywood cinema. This "something different" can include: a superior artistic aesthetic (many fans comment on the sheer beauty of Japanese animation versus the vulgarity of American cartoons, more interesting and wide ranging stories - unlike in America, anime series are not episodic but develop characters and plots over a long period of time and finally, and most importantly, their adult content. By "adult" I do not mean sexual, although it should be noted that a certain percentage of anime offerings are erotic or, indeed, pornographic, but "serious" or "mature". Many Western and non-Japanese Asian fans comment on how much they appreciate the complex story lines, the fact that leading characters sometimes die, the lack of a simplistic good-versus-evil moral framework and willingness to offer something besides a Hollywood style "happily ever after" ending.

While Miyazaki's films are more family oriented and often contain basically upbeat endings they are still far more challenging and ambiguous than American cartoons. In my research on anime fans in general and recently on Miyazaki fans in particular, I have found that fans seem to crave something deeper than the "feel good" Hollywood oeuvre. Seiichi Kondo, a Japanese diplomat, has suggested that, over the years, Japan has been more known for exporting aesthetics rather than values but it is my contention that anime in general and Studio Ghibli in particular are offering something that is seen as a genuine alternative to American values. In Miyazaki's case this means a worldview based on environmentalism, (often harking back to traditional Shinto beliefs), humanism, and an unwillingness to look at the world in simplistic black and white terms. The fact that so many people around the world are embracing this suggests that Japan's "soft power" is more than simply entertainment; it also includes the exporting of values as well. Roger Aden has suggested that the culture of fandom sometimes provides a place that allows individuals a "break from the rules" and an opportunity to see "how the rules limit us". (Roger Aden *Popular Stories and Promised Lands: Fan Cultures and Symbolic Pilgrimages*, p.9). I would suggest that Japanese animation (and its cousin manga) in its most challenging form at least, allows contemporary citizens of the world a chance to explore the possibility of "breaking the rules" of Western (especially American) culture. Miyazaki offers a world view based on cherishing the environment, seeing the complexity of humanity, and accepting the possibility that we must work hard and, even then, things

may not always turn out as we would like them. It is interesting to see how many people are responding to that view.