# More Than Just an Animation

## *Melanie Collins Diaz*

Shouting, fighting, incomprehensible dialogue, exaggerated behaviors. A strange cartoon had just come on the TV, catching me by surprise. Intrigued by the unusual animation, I let it play. I was only a few minutes into the episode before I turned the TV off. Something about the cartoon was just too different. Maybe it was the characters with the big eyes or the strange graphics. Whatever it was, I did not like it. It wasn't long before I learned that what had appeared on my TV that day was a Japanese animation called anime. Knowing this, I tried giving it another chance. I felt guilty for having judged it too quickly. Nevertheless, just like the first time, I was unable to get through it. It was unbearable.

It came as a surprise to me when I learned that some of my friends liked anime. I wondered how they, or anyone for that matter, could like such an odd cartoon. Afraid of coming across as critical, I refrained from asking them this question. Instead, I asked those who shared the same perspective as me. More often than not, they would shrug and say, "Everyone to his own taste". A reasonable answer, I thought; everyone is entitled to their own interests and tastes. Still, I believed there was something deeper. Something about this foreign animation was appealing to Americans in a way US cartoons were not. Yet, I did not understand why. Growing up watching US cartoons, I became accustomed to seeing cute characters going on adventures, singing, and teaching life lessons. Anime, on the other hand, had a very different style, including complex storylines and Japanese dialogue. I

assumed the disparities between the two types of animation would discourage other Americans who, like myself, were brought up watching US cartoons. Nevertheless, I was wrong. The Japanese art took many Americans by storm, thereby making the US the country with the highest demand for anime, right after Japan ("The Global Content"). How could something so culturally and stylistically different appeal to such a large American audience? What was it that set it apart from US cartoons?

I contacted a long-time friend of mine who I thought could shed some light on the issue. Ricardo Rodríguez, a current film student, has always had a passion for film. Throughout his life, he has learned to critically engage with movies by reflecting on the aspects few people tend to consider. With such seriousness towards movies, I was shocked to learn that he was an avid anime fan. According to him, he has been watching anime for most of his life. As a kid, he just watched anime for fun. "I really didn't understand what was going on. I just liked all the action, the fights and the colors." It was fairly recent when he began looking at anime as more than just entertainment. "I liked watching anime because I found it entertaining. It wasn't until some friends recommended certain movies that I started to look at anime from a whole other perspective." As a kid, he had limited himself to watching series like *Dragon Ball Z* and *Naruto* where action and fighting scenes were frequent. But, when his friends recommended films that had less to do with fighting sequences and more with drama, he developed a new appreciation for anime. In our conversation, he mentioned three of his favorite movies. The first one he mentioned was *Your Name.* As he explained it, the movie is about two people who are connected by a

red string of fate, even though they are thousands of miles apart. They switch bodies and slowly get to know one another by experiencing each other's lives. This ultimately leads to them falling in love and looking for ways to meet. This complex story was one of the many things Ricardo admired from this movie. Moreover, he found the visuals presented throughout aesthetically pleasing.

Just as he did with *Your Name*, Ricardo continued detailing other anime movies and series with tremendous passion. "After watching these movies, I never saw anime the same way again. You definitely can't compare American cartoons to it," he said matter-of-factly. "The only thing they have in common is that both are animated. That's it." Needless to say, Ricardo prefers anime over US cartoons. Although he grew up watching US cartoons, he resonated more with anime. When I asked him why that was, he said, "US cartoons are meant for kids. After growing up, I didn't want to keep watching childish cartoons, though I still wanted to see animated films. Anime allowed me to do this." For Ricardo, anime was a solution to a personal dilemma.

I noticed that other American anime fans struggled with the same problem. Kess, the founder of *Techanimate*, is another example. In one of her blog posts, Kess explains that one of the reasons she loves anime is because it allows her to indulge in animated films without having to worry about them being childish. Like Ricardo, she says that she had outgrown US cartoons but did not necessarily want to stop watching animated films. For her, US cartoons "were just full of jokes and didn't have much behind its story." She wanted cartoons with more substance, which she found when she stumbled upon anime. She wrote, "I could never have imagined animation could handle any type of tone

or genre. From light-hearted comedies to stories of darkness and betrayal. From soft, soothing romance to a gory horror that even rivaled Hollywood..." (Kess). Anime provided her a variety of options, all including the seriousness she hoped for in animated films.

Evidently, a recurring argument among anime fans was that US cartoons were not mature enough for older audiences. The US film industry has, in fact, neglected a large population by directing its animation to children. Yet, after anime entered the US market, many production companies sought to follow its example and appeal to a larger audience (Daliot-Bul 85). They began including mature themes in family films in order to engage older audiences. But, as Ryan Walsh – a writer for *The Artifice* – points out, US animation is still deemed childish by American society, regardless of companies' attempts to make them more mature. He says, "Every time a film tries to be more adult in a film that is aimed towards families, it makes the film much more childish in the end." Walsh argues that this is due to the fact that animation cannot be realistically compared to live-action films. Anime, however, proves his assumption wrong. Since its inception, anime has been produced for all audiences (Chambers). For this reason, animators produced films and series that fit within many of the subgenres that are present in live-action films. In short, the seriousness American film producers dedicate to live-action films is the same one Japanese animators dedicate to their animations.

So, why don't Americans just watch live-action movies? As Ricardo explained to me, "The things that happen in these [anime] movies are only possible through anime. It would be too expensive for production companies to produce the same film as a live-action movie."

Anime can be more imaginative and over-the-top because it is cheap to make, whereas live-action films are limited by funding. Not only does anime's distinctive style, its 2-D animation, make it cheaper than other mediums, but it also allows animators' imaginations to run wild (Mahinder). As Mahinder suggests, 2-D animation is less complex than other mediums, therefore making it easier for animators to create unimaginable worlds and characters. Animation is not exclusive to anime, though; US cartoons can also introduce viewers to fictious worlds and characters. However, anime does it in a way that US animation does not.

US cartoons may be funny and entertaining, but they will never have you wishing to be part of their universe. Or, at least, not for many adults. Anime, on the other hand, does. Shinobu Price, a Japanese media expert, explains, "Americans are seeing an inventive worldview filtered through a Japanese perspective. This creates a realm that is doubly removed from Western reality, and therefore, doubly mysterious and enticing" (166). This "realm" Shinobu mentions seems so distant from reality that it becomes a form of escapism for American fans. Viewers become immersed in the worlds they see in films and find themselves wishing to be a part of them. This tendency is particularly common among those who are seen as outcasts or who have a difficult time fitting in their communities ("Fandom and Participatory"). Typically, they find solace in anime's fictious worlds because they envision their best selves through characters living in alternative worlds. Unlike US cartoons, anime provides a gateway into people's ideal worlds.

Seeking to understand the effects of escapism, Patricia Hernández – the deputy editor of a gaming website – conducted various

interviews with anime fans. One particular interviewee, Kat Elisabeth admitted to being "teased pretty badly growing up because of her interest in games, anime and sci-fi" (Hernández). As someone who was constantly excluded in her community, she found comfort in the imaginary worlds found in anime. Within these worlds, she felt safe and included. In fact, Elisabeth developed "such 'a love and connection to [characters]' that was strong enough to want to bring said character into our world" (Hernández). Elisabeth, like many other anime fans, sought to include their ideal worlds and characters into the real world. By doing this, their sense of escapism impacted modern American society.

Currently, there are many ways in which anime fans have incorporated the fictious world of anime into the real world. This is done through physical encounters or virtual channels. A common physical interaction among fans are conventions. They have become very popular in the US. In fact, Nissim Otmazgin, a senior lecturer at the Department of East Asian Studies in The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, says that "over 200 fan gatherings [take place] every year in the United States, where anime takes on a central role" (64). One of the largest anime conventions in the world is Anime Expo, which takes place in Los Angeles, California. It is so popular that, in 2017, they reached over 108,000 attendees ("Largest North"). Most fans, if not all, usually partake in cosplay when attending these conventions. Fans dress up as their favorite characters and behave as though they were them. This activity has become a key part of the anime community. So much so that Nicolle Lamerichs, a scholar in Media Studies at Maastricht University, argues that "characters are used as signifiers of

the fan's own identity" (8). She suggests that not only are fans dressing up, but they are embodying characters whom they personally identify with. This way, fans leave out their real-world selves and become their ideal selves through anime.

The anime community has not stopped there. They have also found ways to live their alternate reality through the internet. Through activities such as role-playing and *fansubbing*, fans live out their desired lives. Role-playing, much like cosplay, allows fans to embrace a character and behave like them virtually, either through a game or a forum (McCain et al. 5). On the other hand, *fansubbing* is when fans prepare their own subtitles for films or episodes where they feel is appropriate (Lee 1132). These are very common practices done by anime fans in order to participate in the community. However, there is an even greater practice that has surged from social media. The growing communication among fans has led to the rise of fandoms. Tsay-Vogel and Sanders define fandoms as a "phenomenon that encourages individuals to collectively and socially unite within a subculture based on shared interests or appreciation" (33). Through these fandoms, fans generate a variety of creations based off of the film or series they are interested in. Fans either write their own stories using anime characters, create short films by mashing up bits of films and series, or write songs about anime ("Fandom and Participatory"). Evidently, once fans find their place in the anime community, they do as much as they can to contribute to it.

As the anime community continues to grow, these activities are becoming more popular than ever. This has had a particularly deep impact on American society because a community, which was excluded

for many years, is now becoming socially acceptable. Jessica McCain, a psychologist from the University of Georgia, and her peers refer to this as the rise of the geek culture (1). She explains that "specific geek interests were too small to independently support a large convention" (McCain et al. 2). Nevertheless, that is no longer the case. Social media have helped unite a community, and ultimately make it attractive for other people to join. This is not to say that the stigma given to anime has disappeared. Talking to Ricardo, he mentioned how people tend to react when they learn he is an anime fan. "I may be meeting a person and somehow the topic comes up. I tell them that I like anime and all I receive is a disgusted look." However, he has seen a change. "Recently, I have met a lot of anime fans. I was surprised by how many people were telling me they saw anime, even those who did not seem like people who would like it. Clearly, anime is becoming more popular." Whether it is because of the Japanese animation or the community that backs it, people are giving anime a chance. Its growing popularity suggests that anime fans will no longer be marginalized from society. Instead, geek culture will become prevalent.

Never did I imagine that the strange cartoon that once appeared on my television would have had such great implications on people. Anime was not just an animation, as I came to understand. Anime was a solution to Americans' problem with the US film industry. Anime was also a breath of fresh air for those who needed a distraction from their problems. Anime created an inclusive environment which spurred into a global community. It changed and helped many Americans. Something in me will always prefer US animations over that of the

Japanese, but I will no longer see anime as a strange cartoon. Instead, I will see it as the influential force it is.

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