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Ameritaku: How Goku Beat Superman

Introduction

Walt Disney once stated that he would never patronize his audience: children who devotedly followed and loved his work. Disney fully expected that his young audience would be more than capable of understanding the deeper and darker motifs included in his work, beyond the cute animation and catchy songs. Western animation no longer seems to hold to this standard of appealing to an intelligent audience. When one thinks of examples of popular Western animation, *Family Guy* and *The Simpsons* may be the first to come to mind. A fan of anime, however, may think differently. They may suggest titles like *Cowboy Bebop* or *Samurai Champloo*, shows which meld casual storytelling with complex themes and high stakes.

But wait! Some of you may be thinking, isn't anime just a bunch of people with oversized hair and eyes yelling at and fighting with each other? I will not deny that some of these stereotypes do exist, yet anime has managed, in general, to stay true to Disney's aforementioned ideal. Anime is a subgenre of animation that has captured the hearts of millions of Westerners by giving them rich stories and characters that Western media rarely produces through either live-action or animation. Using themes ranging from haunted criminal pasts to metaphysics, anime has transcended cultures and stereotypes by giving us stories that speak to multiple aspects of a person simultaneously.

It's funny, actually. Anime, with its adult themes and complicated plots, would not exist in its current form if a certain young Japanese boy had not gone to see *Bambi*. Disney kept his word after all.

Chapter 1

Mighty Atom: The New Art Form

“These are unbelievable forms of expression. You just don’t see that in the cartoon form anywhere else.” – Steve Alpert¹

The forms we know as anime and manga have been part of Japan for some time. Japanese artists have expressed stories and depicted the spirit world on painted scrolls for hundreds of years, telling stories of the supernatural and dramatic aspects of life from different perspectives.² A Japanese artist by the name of Hokusai (1740-1849) would draw inspiration not only from such works, but from the world around him as well, these inspirations and interests lending to an art form that was “precise and concise, suggestive and naturalistic, and [had]... a maximum of expression with a minimum of materials.”³ Hokusai’s styles and the style of these scrolls would be followed by subsequent generations who were fond of the paintings and scenes evoked through the artwork, using such style in pre-World War II manga and animated war propaganda as well. Yet, the form of manga and anime we have come to know and love today is of a post-war variety – post-apocalyptic, even.

The dropping of the atomic bomb on Nagasaki and Hiroshima, as well as the fire-bombings of cities such as Tokyo, created a traumatized and broken Japan. There were the traditions of old and the influences of generations past, but there was no modern framework on which to base pure anime or manga conventions. The propaganda anime of the World War II years was now wiped from everyone’s thoughts as the nuclear explosions and defeat tore from the minds of the Japanese any hope of victory. Indeed, the vision of a “victorious, virtuous Japan... [crashed] to reality,” along with the major publishing houses of Japan.⁴ During Reconstruction, the anime and manga industries were ignored completely. According to the expert Gilles Poitras,

“The decade after the war was a hard one for both anime and cinema...the manga industry grew as a cheap form of entertainment...one could easily rent manga from special shops, predecessors to video stores.”⁵

The manga and anime artists were thus out of the view of the public eye, flourishing in areas of society to which the everyday people of Japan didn't normally pay attention. They were able to express feelings and anxieties through artwork that was not permissible in Japanese society at large, due to the code of strict conduct that still existed at those times. Yet, the artists went on with their work as they saw fit within the new underground movement, expressing "what a certain kind of brave, new world truly feels, looks, and acts like."⁶ The fact that manga and anime now had this freedom to address societal traumas in a free and expressive way was what would give the medium its new identity as a creative outlet. Yet, this new redefinition of the medium and its identity had ties to the past.

During the years of American occupation of the Japanese islands, there was a wealth of American animation that entered the Asian nation, giving these aspiring post-war artists exposure to new ideas and new inspirations. Among these American animators whose works invaded Japan

was Walt Disney, his Mickey Mouse cartoons and movies appearing on screens overseas. Among the people who went to see Disney's works in the theater was Osamu Tezuka (1928-1989), who went to see Bambi numerous times. Originally, Tezuka had attended college and

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obtained a medical degree, but as the years progressed he found himself more attached to the drawing of manga. While other studios were on the rise creating work as well, Tezuka was busy creating new works and stories that would eventually become "the blueprint for Japanese manga and anime artists."⁷ In Tezuka's works, there was a wealth of subject matter and stories confronted, from a "willingness to confront... the messiness of the human body" to telling the story of the Buddha "in often graphically violent and erotic detail." These were testament to the how "the stories [were] really good. The depth of character, the variety of subject matter. And [there was not a] need to have happy endings."⁸

With the wealth of story and works Tezuka was capable of producing, publishers flocked to him for new work.

His works were able to appeal to a vast audience, as is evidenced by one of his early manga works eventually “selling 400,000 copies.”⁹ His stories were becoming popular, his characters were reaching a memorable status, and by the 1950s, people were looking to his work to help vitalize a returning anime industry. Indeed, Tezuka saw the potential for the medium of anime and definitely wanted his work to appear on the television. As the 1960s approached, the anime industry in Japan became a more lucrative business, and Tezuka wanted in badly. He sold a few of his early works to Toei Animation, a powerhouse in the realm of anime then and now. After he allowed his works to appear for that production studio in 1961, Tezuka established Mushi Productions so that his own work could appear on the big screen along with the hits Toei was churning out. To compete with the production studios, the “god of manga” set the price for his work “at an absurdly low (roughly) \$3,000 dollars per episode” allowing him to “[dominate] the Japanese airwaves with his titles while competing studios dropped out of sight.”¹⁰ This allowed for Tezuka’s characters to appear on the scene, lending to new anime and manga phenomena, one of which finding its way into America.

When Tezuka decided to make his way into the realm of televised media, he chose one character in particular: *Tetsuwan Atomu* (*Mighty Atom*). The Mighty Atom is a boy robot created by a scientist to resurrect the memory of his dead son. After a series of events, the Mighty Atom soon becomes the savior of the futuristic world he inhabits, coming into contact with characters and situations that help him solve problems and defeat villains. The character was rather refined for what could be considered a comic book character, with emotions and issues that were at the time different from other child-oriented anime, occasionally dealing with moralistic issues of violence and humanity. Yet, the stories were always compelling and soon “an estimated 40 percent of all households in Japan tuned in to watch the robot boy’s next adventure.”¹¹ NBC Films in America noticed the popularity of the show overseas, as well as its low production costs (the mouths of the characters barely moved and numerous frames were repeatedly used). They acquired copies of the anime and saw its potential, redubbing *Tetsuwan Atomu* with the name *Astro*

Boy. So, in September, 1963, NBC sent the program into syndication, where “it proved to be popular among its young viewers.”¹² In response to the popularity, American production and television companies saw the potential to import possible popular shows as well, bringing other shows to the states that became known as *Kimba the White Lion* and *Speed Racer*.¹³ Yet, anime would not become as popular in America during these years as it would in decades to come. Anime “often lacked the quality of American animation” and numerous scenes were cut out due to how anime was “portraying violence in children’s programming.”¹⁴ Simply put, going through all this work to market a potentially popular show to younger viewers was not worth the time and effort.

Thus, Japanese animation, even though it had great appeal, made no inroads into television and, “from 1967 through 1978, no new Japanese cartoons made the transition to U.S. television.”¹⁵ However, this by no means meant Japanese production studios were slacking off. Tezuka himself was producing more sophisticated manga for an older anime audience in Japan, writing and drawing what would become the epic masterpieces known as *Buddha* and *Phoenix*. In fact, all around plots in most anime and manga were getting more complicated, examples being *Space Battleship Yamato* and *Macross*. These new sci-fi epics were starting a new chapter in the history of anime and manga, with intricate and dramatic storylines appearing quite frequently, showing production companies across the Pacific that there was more to anime than simply “giant-robot and [superhero] shows.”¹⁶ The genre of sci-fi was still not entirely within the realm of popular consciousness, until another Japanese-cinema-inspired film, *Star Wars*, premiered in 1977. Inspired by filmmaker Akira Kurosawa’s *The Hidden Fortress*, *Star Wars* brought the sci-fi genre into the mainstream and made it extremely popular. Soon, young children everywhere were clamoring to be like Luke Skywalker or Han Solo, and American production companies picked up on its popularity. With only a library of *Looney Tunes* cartoons and numerous *Hanna-Barbera* produced shows, the production companies looked towards Japan for a plethora of shows to choose from that were already part of the genre. Anime was preparing to make a comeback into the American market, and this time around, it would be staying.

Chapter 3

Destroy the Past and Enter the Future: *Akira to Evangelion*

“When a man tries to see into the distance, what does he do?

He narrows his eyes.” – Lady Miyako (*Akira*)¹⁷

“You must seize the future. It is what you live for!” – Kaworu Nagisa to
Ikari Shinji (*Neon Genesis Evangelion*)¹⁸

During the late 1980s, an artist by the name of Katsuhiro Ōtomo turned the anime and manga industry on its head. His epic masterpiece, one of the greatest manga and anime films ever made, is a psychological thriller the likes of which had never been attempted before. His work, *Akira*, included themes of a different quality than anything Osamu Tezuka could ever have conceived, characters that were as complex as ever, and included philosophies that somehow found room to fit in the same frame. Ōtomo’s work found critical acclaim, and Japanese fans from all over the island nation bought it to see exactly how this manga was breaking barriers. A post-apocalyptic world ravaged by corruption and urbanization, the story was about psychic super humans. It exposed the fragility of the human psyche and tore at the fabric of time and space. Its setting in the world of Neo-Tokyo revealed humankind in a state of disrepair and fear. From

beginning to end, the inhabitants were pushed to their final limits. The characters were either disturbed or flawed. The

anti-hero Tetsuo and hero Kaneda are children deemed troublemakers by society. They are sent to reform school, where they follow the path of lawless biker gangs. Yet, from their lowly beginnings, they are thrust into the core of a struggle the universe is having with Tetsuo and the immensely powerful child Akira, the mentally evolved form of man. Never before had such characters been on the pages of a manga, and never had the dark aspects of life shone so brightly within the annals of *tankobon* (manga collection).

What was successful in Japan also proved to be successful for

Akira in America. Even though the manga had been published by Marvel before the film had reached American shores, the manga did not find the following that the movie would soon have. Most of what has been described above stayed intact within the film, except for the ending. Yet, as Simon Richmond writes,

“As Hiroshima was to warfare, so was *Akira* to the film industry: after *Akira*, no one would ever look at Japanese animation quite the same way again...*Akira*’s revved-up energy barely flags for a second as it unfolds its tale of sinister establishment plots and dark, doom-laden menace.”¹⁹

No other anime had the same feel or look as *Akira*. It stood alone within the pantheon of the greatest anime and manga ever written. The film itself was “a technological achievement... ‘*Akira* was a visual tour-de-force, including experiments in digital...animation that were to stun audiences worldwide, enjoying greater success abroad than in its country of origin.”²⁰ No one was expecting it. *Akira* was essentially a surprise, a mystery within the fold of the Japanese anime production world that would be a slap in the face to international audiences. Not only had anime evolved from black and white, low-quality television series such as *Astro Boy*, it had ultimately proven itself against Western animation. The barriers were blown to bits, and the American anime boom of the 1990s started.

The sophistication and depth of *Akira* attested to the fact that American audiences wanted more from their animation. They were not satisfied with their slap-stick cartoons or their child-oriented plots. American audiences wanted something to relate to, something they could understand on levels that were rarely touched within Western animation. This sophistication was essentially a type of trademark that the American anime audience looked for, and soon found, in another appealing anime and manga of the late ‘80s and early ‘90s known as *Ranma ½*.

The series focuses on Ranma Saotome and his father, both of whom are afflicted by an odd curse. Ranma is changed into a girl and back into a boy at some points, and his father is fated to be a panda because of his love of food. The manga and anime deal with “the issue of constructing gender identity at the individual level and the public level

of society's expectations for gender norms" through which Ranma "unwittingly [spreads] confusion and sometimes outright craziness at every turn."²¹ *Ranma ½*'s formula was then something that many teenagers could relate to, as the protagonist was thrown into maddening and crazy situations he was not used to, something many teenagers are subjected to throughout their begrudging adolescent lives. *Ranma ½* was a manga and anime of hilarious situations and gender-bending rules, but the way it integrated the situations into the story in such a seamless way impressed people. *Ranma ½* was particularly favorable not only because it was funny, but also because it was believable in some respects.

The anime and manga of the 1980s were adored by thousands for the complex science fiction narratives they offered during a time when American film and television media were rife with the usual fare of sitcoms and dramas. The different and deep storylines, as stated numerous times before, would still prove to bring American audiences flocking to the medium at an unprecedented rate. The anime *Ghost in the Shell* would attest to that. Coming out around 1995, it was a psychological thriller that looked to copy the success of *Akira*. It did so. A memorable anime, the "intellectual depth... [and] ethereal music score" would make it a distinctive anime for its complexity, which was a type that was similar to other anime, but different in the ways it was approached.²² Set in a futuristic Hong Kong, the technology of heroine Motoko Kusanagi's time allows humans to receive cybernetic upgrades, she herself being one of those humans. While in the process of hunting down a hacker known as Puppet Master with the rest of her covert police force, she has an identity crisis as she questions if her soul, the only thing that truly makes her human, is real.²³

The adult nature of anime was always a factor in its popularity, and *Ghost in the Shell* kept true to that reputation. The anime contained "apocalyptic and unreliable narrative threads sewn into the fabric of their mise-en-scene," a testament to the aspects of anime that make viewers watch because of how anime provides "a deeper engagement with their art forms...to what we expect and demand from portrayals of reality."²⁴ Especially within the narrative of *Ghost in the Shell*, "the absence of easily definable dilemmas, moralities, or resolutions that run through the form," yet the "case-by-case approach to life's innumerable narratives" are what made *Ghost in the Shell* as popular as it was.²⁵ Peo-

ple were able to relate to the growing complexity of narratives within anime. As the fans of the 1980s grew older, they saw that life was not as clear cut as they may have been led to believe. Anime was reaffirming in that sense. The doubts and fears we held as an American people were finally being addressed through a foreign media. The emotional complexity the 1990s provided was enlightening to the fans who had grown up with edited versions of anime. 1995 would only continue to prove this to be extremely true.

With *Akira*, boundaries nobody knew existed had been broken, and with subsequent popular '90s manga and anime, American audiences were able to delve into stories that the mainstream of our Western culture was never very comfortable with. But the true beast was yet to come. The advent of barriers being broken came faster than expected, and with the premiere of *Neon Genesis Evangelion* in 1995, no one would be looking to the last decade for inspiration ever again.

Neon Genesis Evangelion was the brainchild of Hideaki Anno and the answer to a thousand fans' prayers. Featuring a whiny teenager as the main hero, Shinji Ikari is known as the Third Child, the third in a group of 14-year-old teenagers who are the only people capable of piloting mechas (giant robots – another trademark of the anime industry) known as EVA units. Within those units, they battle against the threat known as the Angels, beings who will bring about the downfall of mankind if they are not defeated. Thrust into an uncomfortable world, Shinji must deal with the complexities of his duties and his life at the same time, coping with a stressful and distant relationship with his father and his personal relationships with his fellow pilots, Rei Ayanami and Asuka Soryu.

The plot thickens quickly within this short anime, with the motivations of Shinji's father, the director of the program that oversees the EVA units, gradually being called into question. In fact, things are not what they appear to be: Shinji's father plans on awakening the souls of the original humans, Adam and Lilith, and use their power to revert humankind back into a primordial liquid known as LCL, thereby destroying the concept of loneliness while abolishing the individual identities of all human beings. In the end, before the apocalypse they all expect to come, the episodes look at the inner minds of the characters, revealing anxieties and fears that have been repressed under a façade of stoicism,

liveliness, or dedication. Each character is disturbed or dealing with issues of inferiority, showing them to be fragile pawns in a game that consumes the world.

Neon Genesis Evangelion became the defining anime of the early 1990s, and as one watches the series, he or she can clearly see why. Compared to the science fiction storylines present within *Battle Ship Yamato* and *Gatchaman*, *Evangelion* has an extreme degree of complexity and even neurosis that was never seen before. While *Evangelion* had included many of the old story archetypes, the way Anno and his staff made the personalities and egos of the characters come into conflict while still having enough time to finish the episode with stellar battle sequences was amazing and impressive. If people were breathless when they viewed *Akira*, they would be in awe after seeing *Evangelion*. The anime also proved that master class storytelling was not bound to the realm of cinema or early manga, but with a degree of individuality present within certain aspects of each story, Anno was able to morph what seemed to be a regular mecha storyline (young pilots have to save the earth/universe while dealing with political machinations and/or sinister plots) that can “psychologically take you apart and make you think about things a lot more deeply.”²⁶ To this day, it “is still considered by many fans as the ‘definitive anime.’”²⁷

These anime and others in between the genre-defining *Akira* and mind-bending *Evangelion* were a glimpse into a bright, multifaceted future of animation in America. The new possibilities the previous six or seven years had opened up in terms of the themes that could be confronted, the storylines that could be told, and the characters that could be formed put anime in a ripe position in America for gaining attention. It too, with hits such as *Cowboy Bebop* and *Gundam Wing*, would soon be within the grasp of American cable producers. Yet, there was also a burgeoning growth in the youth industry that would follow the more mature anime across the Pacific, essentially setting up the third time that the youth of America would be targeted with anime, with which American cable and production studios would then be able to exploit within the realm of merchandising. Although, this time around, children would be more preoccupied with attempting to “catch ’em all” than with the exploits of orphans in space.

Chapter 4

Saiyans and Saturdays: The Youth Boom

“Pi-ka-pi!” – Pikachu, the mascot of *Pokémon*

“I am the warrior you have heard of in legends, pure of heart and awakened by fury, that’s what I am! I am the Super Saiyan, Son Goku!” – Son Goku (*Dragon Ball Kai*)

i. The First Wave

The late 1990s would see a surge in interest among the new and younger generation. Interest in the old days of anime would resurface on television, when “MTV brought back *Speed Racer*... [and] The Cartoon Network aired *G-Force (Battle of the Planets)* on their channel in 1995.”²⁸ Yet, the anime of the late ‘60s and early ‘80s would not compare with the new anime and manga that would make their mark on the ensuing years. No longer were children interested in the science fiction epics of the days when that was all fans had. Especially when the American market was being flooded with new stories being tried out by different companies in America, there would be a plethora of previously

untouched material reaching the airwaves of suburbanites. From Fox Broadcasting Company to Turner Broadcasting, to FUNimation and Toei, the anime these companies were putting on television for American audiences would lead to a rejuvenation

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of Japanese media in America, leading not only to certain shows finding powerful sway, but video games and manga as well.

Around 1997, the video game magazine *Nintendo Power* sent out a promotional video cassette to its subscribers. When one put the cassette in the VCR, a character appeared stating what the viewer was in store for, the character later revealed to be the new show’s protagonist, Ash Ketchum. He warned that what they were about to see was the

advent of a new phenomenon on American soil, which would be the eventual release of the *Pokémon* video game franchise by Nintendo and an accompanying anime and manga series that would be distributed by Shogakukan and 4Kids. The Game Boy Color would be released a year later, meaning that all of these events would obviously coincide perfectly with each other. Sure, the American anime and manga audience had routinely been video game enthusiasts as well, but they were usually more concerned with the new stories and movies by acclaimed directors and mangaka than some pixelated game by a small development team that collectively termed itself Game Freak. Yet, with the passing of 20 years, from the introduction of *Battle of the Planets* to the upcoming release of *Pokémon*, the millennial generation was born. Ranging from preteens to small six or seven-year-olds, they were not aware of the sophisticated manga and anime, and the cultivated American fan base, that existed. Nor would they anytime soon. They would soon come to learn the names of all 151 *Pokémon* and their counterparts in other anime as well.

Pokémon was not a particularly familiar concept to old anime and manga fans. Sure, there were oddball creatures permeating the consciousness of anime throughout the different sci-fi stories, and there was the occasional video game accompanying such anime, but never had any adult laid eyes on the kind of creatures the world of *Pokémon* was about to expose. The premise of the video game and children's show is that once a child turns ten years old, they are then able to travel around the continent, catching and raising creatures known as Pocket Monsters, or *Pokémon*, battling other "*Pokémon* trainers" along the way, and facing off against bosses known as gym leaders. This simple premise fueled the video games and show, culminating in battles to determine the best trainer. While the show deviated from the path of the game a bit for the sake of character development, the *Pokémon* franchise awakened a new kind of anime fan interested simply in these fascinating creatures rather than issues or plot.

American children had played with cards and video games before, but "the anime style that accompanied them was the 'Japanizer' of the theme, allowing their diminutive consumers to absorb the very character of a distinct cultural style."²⁹ The media franchise giant that *Poké-*

mon was becoming was also preparing child consumers in America, as Kelts points out:

“...*Pokémon* was the crowbar that levered Japanese animation back into the United States as a powerful commercial force – and that the Dragonball, Yu-Gi-Oh, and Gundam trends that followed owed their entire acceptability to *Pokémon*. The vanguard Japanese cartoons of the 1970s had softened the market somewhat, but *Pokémon* was the driving force that tore it open...it familiarized kids with the aesthetic form of Japanese anime – the hairstyles, the big eyes,[etc.].”³⁰

Pokémon was not only a force in revitalizing the anime industry and its acceptability on this side of the Pacific Ocean; it also brought the Japanese video game industry back to the forefront in American households. Even though the Game Boy and Famicom systems had always been popular among children, “if they already didn’t have one, kids were buying Nintendo’s handheld Game Boy machines just to play *Pokémon*.”³¹ *Pokémon* was directly hitting Americans with these new ways of enjoying games and cartoons, but also with different themes and modes of escapism than the ones provided by their Western counterparts within the market, allowing for “a colorful world of adventure, risk, and competition and even, according to some scholars, a vision of personal maturation.”³²

Pokémon was offering children an adventure that was new from week to week with the anime and with the different Pokémon one could catch within the game. The anime was a way to make children feel part of the new world that was presented to them; then, the game made those children feel as though they could manipulate it. No matter what team a young child had formed or what obstacles Ash ran into from week to week, the formula was still addictive and provided the American-based company 4Kids – which had obtained the rights to air the show – with enough material to keep the commercial and media aspects of the phenomenon perpetually running as long as it possibly could, and is still providing *Pokémon* to young audiences today.

Yet, *Pokémon* was not the only electronically-based media franchise that could put up a fight in the American market. Toei, one of the

oldest anime production companies, had latched onto one of the most popular fads in Japan before *Pokémon* had made their debut on the market. This was the *Tamagotchi*, a portable digital pet that a person could carry around with them, taking care of it as though it were alive. Toei took the concept of the “digital pet” and used it to spawn the television anime series known as

Digimon and market the *Tamagotchi* to American youth. Fox, seeing the chance to provide a rival on the American market against the all-encompassing media mega-hit that was *Pokémon*, started to air *Digimon*

“Fox, seeing the chance to provide a rival on the American market against the all-encompassing media mega-hit that was *Pokémon*, started to air *Digimon* on their Saturday cartoon children’s block...”

on their Saturday cartoon children’s block in the summer of 1999.³³

There had been American-based distributors of anime and manga for a time now, the prime example being the Toei-established “VIZ, located in San Francisco, [which had] been one of the main translators and publishers of manga in English since 1987.”³⁴ Another such company that existed was FUNimation, formed during 1994. Setting up a relationship with Toei, FUNimation looked to adapt the ever-popular 1986 follow-up to Akira Toriyama’s *Dragonball* series that was known as *Dragonball Z*. FUNimation had unsuccessfully “from 1995 to 1998... tried releasing *Dragonball* in syndication, found it was a flop, skipped ahead to *Dragonball Z*, which... required lots of censorship... didn’t get good timeslots,” and was simply not respected within mainstream culture. However, there would be hope soon enough, and *Dragonball Z* would soon be at the forefront of the largest impact on the youth boom yet.

Dragonball Z was a science fiction fighting parody, an anime and manga hit in Japan. The series starred Son Goku, a martial artist who started out as a seemingly normal human martial artist and ended up as one of the most powerful warriors of an alien race called the Saiyans. He finds out about his heritage after his brother Raditz comes to destroy the Earth because Son Goku had failed to do so when he was sent to the planet as a child. From there, the show focuses on the characters honing

their abilities as immensely powerful alien martial artists to defend the Earth from inhuman forces from outer space, such as cyborgs and demons. The show is focused on the physical fights that occur between the villains, sometimes with limbs being cut off, blood spilling everywhere, holes being blown through bodies with powerful blasts of energy, or even disintegration. The action of the series and the uncanny characters that were a part of it attracted a wide audience in Japan, finishing on that side of the Pacific before it found its place America.

Since its inception in 1992, The Cartoon Network never really had any new material to work with. Usually pulling old shows such as *The Jetsons* out of the Hanna-Barbera vault and re-airing old, lackluster superhero shows, such as *Space Ghost*, it was a channel that was in the backwater of the cable networks popping up here and there during the 1990s. Yet, the ever-connected and tech-savvy science fiction and anime fans that had been part of the loyal subculture fan base previously discussed saw an opportunity to have their favorite shows broadcast on television once again. Seemingly out of nowhere, “fans started petitions to get shows like *Voltron*, *Thundercats*, *Robotech*, and others back on the airwaves.”³⁵ The executives at The Cartoon Network started to give these requests serious thought, and “on March 17, 1997...the wildly popular *Thundercats*...and another popular show *Voltron* launched the Japanese-influenced Toonami.”³⁶ Yet, the network wouldn’t realize the potential of Toonami until *Sailor Moon* and *Dragonball Z* premiered in 1998.

When *Dragonball Z* found its way to cable television, the public’s interest in the show immediately skyrocketed. Toei, seeing the possible potential, had its North American branch, VIZ, publish and distribute the manga, and shortly afterwards “*Dragonball Z* started appearing on tattoos, T-shirts, skateboards and wall scrolls in people’s dorm rooms.”³⁷ Originally created during the science fiction focus among Japanese mangakas in the late ‘80s, Akira Toriyama’s work never really found footing in America until this point. Part of this may have been due to censoring; with American laws being strict about what can be shown on television, *Dragonball Z* was probably regarded as rather too violent to appeal to children. Yet, in the late ‘90s, that was one of the exact reasons it was so appealing. With characters “powerful enough to split an entire planet in half... training under 50 times Earth’s gravity, or... doing the *Kamehameha*,” audiences were enthralled and curious

as to what incredible moves the fighters could pull off next.³⁸ Young boys were fascinated with the heroic endeavors and powerful characters throughout the course of the anime, and the interest in the story and the characters also gave Toonami a golden goose, with people tuning in to see “episodes of *Dragonball Z* every weeknight at 12:30.”³⁹

Toonami was also able to attract young women through *Sailor Moon*, one of the most successful of the “magical young girl” genre. The series tells of a young girl named Serena who has to transform into Sailor Moon with her other female comrades, saving the Earth from evil, while balancing her own life and school work along with it.⁴⁰ As Sailor Moon, a reincarnation of a princess from a celestial kingdom that existed on the moon thousands of years before, Serena and her comrades fight against evil and its attempts to destroy any chance of regaining universal peace. When it landed on Toonami as an intact version of what was shown in Japan, “*Sailor Moon* and other anime films and TV shows... [were] years if not decades ahead of American animation... in depicting women as equals to men.”⁴¹ It was not a static story either, with stand-alone episodes like in *Pokémon*. The characters “grew braver and more aware of the needs of others. As [the] story unfolded, Serena grew older and more mature and found romance.”⁴² Sailor Moon essentially “set new records in popularity,” attesting to the fact that mainstream, albeit youthful, audiences were taking an interest in stories that were complex and meaningful, whether they were depicted in a pure fighting show or a show about the demands and duties life puts on a teenage girl.⁴³ Either way, Toonami was leading the way in animation with the new attachment the cable block had with anime, and the relationship with the medium was only going to grow.

As Toonami’s attachment with its anime franchises grew, the type of content the cable programming block thought would be best to show delved into anime that was maturely themed and contained different situations than the youthful audience was used to. In 2000, Toonami premiered the shows *Mobile Suit Gundam Wing* and *Tenchi Muyo!* These shows dealt with interstellar battle and the divergent themes of political intrigue and love. These themes were new to younger audiences, who were used to what seemed to be more fun fare in the vein of *Digimon* or the exploits of Goku or Serena. These shows displayed a level of so-

phistication and maturity that were previously unseen in the other anime of the late 1990s that had become so popular. *Mobile Suit Gundam Wing* became famous for its “near faithful adaptation... the first anime series to be shown in its entirety in the US.”⁴⁴ These two shows were indicative of a more mature turn that The Cartoon Network would take in airing its anime, the late night block known as Adult Swim eventually becoming the programming block where anime was dominant.

When Adult Swim first started, there was not much on the late-night block on The Cartoon Network except a few humorous cartoons that were eerily similar to *The Simpsons*, due to the awkward, adult-oriented situations the shows presented. However, the block was perfect to premiere the sort of anime that couldn’t be premiered on the Toonami block, which was primarily aimed towards children. Producers at Turner Broadcasting sought to

attract the kind of audience anime had been able to capture for them in the past. In doing so, they not only achieved their goal, but they also unveiled to audiences a more mature version of

“[*Mobile Suit Gundam Wing* and *Tenchi Muyo*] displayed a level of sophistication and maturity that were not seen in the other anime of the late 1990s that had become so popular.”

anime that had not been seen by the mainstream for quite some time. They started off this trend by broadcasting the anime *Cowboy Bebop*, a show about a group of misfit bounty hunters in a futuristic galaxy. *Bebop* probed the issues of its characters individually, exposing dark, complicated pasts that affected their current relationships. Fans of the show who were already attracted to the story before it appeared on cable were of the opinion that it was “too mature to ever appear on American TV.”⁴⁵ Yet, this was only the first show in a list of anime that would routinely become known for their mature themes and enthralling, dramatic stories.

Another notable Adult Swim anime of repute was *Full Metal Alchemist*. Taking place in a parallel universe, the show follows two alchemist brothers who work for the military so they may attempt to atone for their unforgivable sins. Yet, as they travel, they are revealed to be pawns in events beyond their control. *Full Metal Alchemist* was a certain hallmark in the new wave of anime directed towards the young because

of how it maturely dealt with the themes existing within the plot. Instead of simply focusing on dark issues or violence, it also dealt with “sin and consequences [as] a main theme of the series,” while focusing on alchemy as a catalyst to put forth “a series of existential questions: Is life really fair? Does effort always pay off?”⁴⁶

These mature anime and the others that accompanied them helped expose a young audience to mature and detailed plots of stories that were a far cry from the Western animation they were used to. The similarity between the new fans and the fans of the last decade was rooted in their attention to detail. Now that the ratings were in the hands of producers and companies who had helped provide anime, there was a new prerogative in distributing the materials that was the backbone of these commercial successes. The Cartoon Network boosted the popularity of anime, providing people a wide range of shows over the course of a day or week that piqued people’s curiosity into where these stories came from and how they were made. These inquiries and the popularity of American producers’ new gold mine would help spark a second wave of Japanese popular culture into the commercial conscious of the West.

ii. The Second Wave

The growth of anime led to the eventual growth of manga, anime’s literary counterpart. While the influence of manga had been felt since the late ‘80s in the fan magazines and mainstream comic books of companies such as Marvel, “publishing and marketing expectations that comics be equated with superheroes initially eclipsed any chance for the diversity of manga genres to flourish.”^{47,48} Yet, the anime that audiences were exposed to from the years 1996 to 2003 had prepared most in the “American audiences for the different conventions in manga storytelling.”⁴⁹ Manga was of a different variety than anime, on a scale far more established in some terms than the shows that premiered weekly or monthly. While the American versions were far friendlier to the affinity for comic books found in most American households, some also had to be condensed or revamped for the entertainment of Japanese households. So, manga would present a wider range of possibilities, with “qualities that were foreign to American readers... a quality that would become its main selling point after the year 2000.”⁵⁰

Whereas VIZ was more interested in making a profit with their carbon copies of Akira Toriyama's hits, TokyoPop, a manga company founded in America, was taking a different approach. Copying the earlier trend of *shojo* manga – revealing new genres and stories to the public that they were not aware of on television – TokyoPop looked to appeal to the “nontraditional readers of comic books and manga... TokyoPop pushed the ‘authentic’ experience of their manga.”⁵¹ They also provided a diverse set from which to choose, ranging from the romantic comedy *Love Hina* to the political robot battles in outer space featured in *Mobile Suit Gundam*. They did not attempt to keep their focus on one particular group, but widened their horizons so as to find success in a market that was filled with fans of particular choices and a willingness to read new manga.

Sometimes this new manga even takes a whole different and vastly more mature approach than its brother medium of anime. Popular manga featured for adults in Japan is that of a rather homoerotic or light novel nature. While the light novels have made a larger impact on the youth, the homoerotic tales of certain manga appeal to the adult audiences of America. While not explicitly sexual, the genres of *yaoi* and *josei* manga are of a variety that features single sex relationships. They depict androgynous characters and storylines that contain none of the action or themes of manga directed towards the younger generations of America. Sometimes the storylines are also normal, yet difficult, as exemplified by “Tobe Keiko’s *Hikari to Tomoni... Jiheishouji Wo Kakaete...* about a mother’s relationship with her autistic child.”⁵² Even though such manga is usually meant for the wiser or more mature audience, the easy access of manga on the Internet has made these titles available to children everywhere who may be curious as to what certain kind of manga is being kept from them.

The youth boom in America showed different degrees of anime and manga in a rather short time to a young audience. Preteens and young adults, the main supporters of the industry, were exposed to giant leaps in art and storylines as they were simultaneously exposed to anime such as *Naruto*, which is about a ninja in training, while reading manga such as *Death Note*, which deals with a morally abstract character who has the power to kill people at will. The vast differences in the way art styles were approached, how stories were told, what kinds of characters

were used, what they wore, and how they interacted with other characters – questions not normally answered in the rather shallow and humorous content of Western cartoons – were able to be answered through the detailed plots of many manga.

The commercial aspect was rather promising as well, the potential of anime presenting to American producers “the most effective way of internationaliz-

ing toys and expanding the potential market for each new product.”⁵³ In fact, it seemed that the American producers’ voracious need for profit was because of the child-oriented anime they had invested so much in during the late ‘90s, with the “merchandising links be-

“The vast differences in the way art styles were approached, how stories were told, what kinds of characters were used, what they wore, and how they interacted with other characters ...were able to be answered through the detailed plots of many manga.”

tween *Yu-Gi-Oh* and *Pokémon* taking it to the mainstream.”⁵⁴ Yet, after that purely commercial beginning, anime and manga had ended up in a place no one expected it to be: in the minds and hearts of the American youth, not in their wallets. Instead of accepting them merely as cartoons, the different styles of storytelling and art style have made manga and anime popular a step ahead of Western animation. While it may not be fair to judge on art, the stories seemed a far cry from television and were more the stuff of Hollywood. Death, violence, war – all of these could be aspects of an anime directed towards American teenagers. The American audience’s affinity for anime seemed to hinge on how well a story could be told. While the quality would vary over the years with different manga, there will always be those which stand out, and if this report has consistently shown one thing, it is that those anime and manga which stand out, with stories that captivate the human imaginations with tales of love and struggle, are usually the ones prone to make the largest impact.

What you have just read is an excerpt of a larger work. This excerpt has been altered and condensed to fit the format of the print version of this magazine.

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