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Geemu and media mix: Theoretical approaches to Japanese video games

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Book review:

Marc Steinberg

Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan

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Coming from University of Minnesota Press, *Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan* (2012) continues the publisher's tradition of releasing academic books on anime and Japanese popular culture, such as the annual journal *Mechademia* (2006–today), Thomas Lamarre's *The Anime Machine: A Media Theory of Animation* (2009) and translated works from Japanese such as Hiroki Azuma's *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals* (2009) and Saitô Tamaki's *Beautiful Fighting Girl* (2011). In *Anime's Media Mix*, Marc Steinberg sets out to explore the links weaving together media, characters and toys in Japan since the 1960s. To do so, he chooses as his centerpiece example the transmedial movements of the character Atomu (also known as Atom or Astro Boy in English), the protagonist of the *Tetsuwan Atomu* manga and its anime adaptation that first aired in 1963. In what Steinberg describes as a “major historical coincidence,” 1963 is also the year that the term *media mix* entered the marketing lexicon in Japan (p. 138).

Right from the start, the author informs the reader about the similarities and distinctions between the media mix and other related concepts such as media synergy, transmedia and convergence (p. vii). As Steinberg puts it, media mix *is* media convergence, but as it is

experienced in the *Japanese* context (p. viii). That being said, the book concentrates on the *anime* media mix: a type of convergence that revolves around Japanese animation and includes manga, video games, novels, toys, live-action TV shows and music. The author mentions that while convergence is usually used to discuss *digital* media, the roots of the anime media mix are very much *analog* ones (p. viii): indeed, they originated in the bonds that were forged in the 1960s between a manga, an animated television program, a chocolate manufacturer... and stickers!

The notion of convergence has gained a lot of traction in the West, notably thanks to Henry Jenkins' landmark treatise on the subject, *Convergence Culture* (2008). Academic literature on the Japanese example of convergence is not uncommon: Jenkins himself broaches the topic, and Mizuko Ito previously covered it in her own writings, for example in her collaborative effort *Fandom Unbound* (2012). However, Ito is more concerned with otaku culture and practices rather than with convergence itself. What Steinberg offers in his book is not an opposition to Ito's work, but rather a complement. Anchored in economic and technological considerations, Steinberg's discourse takes a materialistic perspective and focuses mostly on how the cultural products are conceptualized, marketed and disseminated.

While his approach distances him from the surge of fan studies (a phenomenon which our very own *Kinephanos* contributed to in its previous issue, joining annual journal *Mechademia's* 2010 issue, to name only two examples) of the last few years, it offers a different point of view: that of the creators of the convergence. In this first in-depth, book-length, English-language study of the anime media mix, the author distills an impressive amount of archival work from the 1960s to depict for the reader the inception of not only the anime media mix, but also anime itself. Let's now take a more detailed look at the author's arguments through each chapter.

The first chapter of the book is dedicated to movement in animation, particularly examining how the limitation of movement, by creating a form of "movement-in-stillness aesthetic" (p. 20), gave birth to anime. The author aptly summarizes and differentiates the two main schools of thought governing the creation of animated works: full animation and limited animation. During the 1960s, the first was used by Disney in the United States and by Toei

Animation in Japan for their feature-length movies (p. 8) and had fluidity of movement as the cornerstone of its aesthetics, leading to an end product that necessitated a large number of drawings per second. On the other hand, limited animation, which was prevalent in Hanna-Barbera and UPA's cartoons and then in *Atomu* (p. 11), relied on shortcuts in the animation process to drastically reduce the number of drawings needed per second. With these shortcuts, which included extensive panning of the camera on the drawings, dynamic character design and posing, short shot length and the decomposition of movement to its bare minimum, animators were able to reduce the number of drawings to only 10% of what full animation required (p. 16). This way, studios were able to produce weekly installments of animated TV shows at low cost, thus presenting viewers with an aesthetic experience where immobility was predominant. Steinberg states that it is the stillness of the anime image that connects it to other media forms (p. 6). The author carries this idea throughout the book, and it is the cornerstone upon which rests his own concept, that of "dynamically immobile character image," or dynamic immobility. This ability to connect to other media forms allowed the anime image to be disseminated across media, multiplying opportunities for merchandizing.

The second chapter is about how anime and the anime media mix both emerged in the 1960s, primarily due to the broadcasting of *Tetsuwan Atomu* and the merchandizing of its characters. In this phenomenon, the sticker plays a pivotal role as "a proto-merchandizing" item that paved the way for a plethora of anime toys. Steinberg relates that, by adding Atomu stickers as a premium in its chocolate boxes, the candy manufacturer Meiji Seika (which was the sole sponsor of the TV show) achieved resounding commercial success and helped the dissemination of the Atomu character image. With its portability, potential to be stuck anywhere and ability to be seen at any time, the character on the sticker became environmentally "diffuse" (p. 83), making Atomu a ubiquitous character in Japanese everyday life. While the Atomu sticker boom was well documented and commented in Japan, Steinberg considers that scholars took a shortcut in their reasoning, attributing children's enthusiasm for the anime-themed stickers to some sort of "natural" desire to be surrounded by their favorite characters. He supports this by dissecting the aesthetic qualities of the stickers and postulates that the dynamic immobility found in these character images was actually the basis for their successful transmedia movement from television to stickers to toys

and thus their dissemination into the physical space. It is dynamic immobility, coupled with special care given to visual consistency across incarnations of the characters that laid the foundation for the anime media mix and allowed Atomu to move across media so successfully.

Having demonstrated how the sticker brought Atomu out from the screen and into children's physical space, Steinberg then brings up the more tangible, "playable" toys, such as weapons, cars and robots. He describes how the first character-based toys, or *mass media toys*, were based on popular manga series and allowed the children to play *as* their heroes, be it by wielding a samurai sword (*Akadô Suzunosuke*) or a gun (*Maboroshi Tantei*), or by donning a mask (*Maboroshi Tantei* and *Gekkô Kamen*). But with the boom of the *Atomu* anime and the dissemination of the character image (helped by the successful sticker campaign), character-based toys changed: they began offering children the opportunity not only to play as their favorite characters, but also *with* them. Character-based toys became a three-dimensional representation of the characters themselves: children could now squeeze their inflatable Atomu doll or make their Atomu toy fly in the air. Once again, the author highlights the ability of the anime image to travel across media thanks to the dynamic immobility of its characters. For example, the more popular Atomu toys showed him flying with his arms outstretched, physically immobile yet infused with movement.

The fourth chapter marks the beginning of the second half of the book, in which the author focuses in greater detail on large-scale media mix strategies. Setting aside chocolate maker Meiji Seika, he elects to examine the history of an actual media conglomerate. Founded in 1945, Kadokawa Books originally sold classical literature until, in the 1970s (p. 149), the company began mimicking what was done in the West by publishing movie novelizations and soundtracks, and even producing their own movies. While Kadokawa wasn't publishing manga or producing anime at the time, they did borrow some of the strategies deployed to *Atomu*'s benefit in the 1960s by making characters and narratives travel across media. What Kadokawa did differently, however, was to apply that logic to mainstream media in order to reach general audiences instead of limiting themselves solely to children.

In the last chapter, the author tackles the way the media mix honed by Kadokawa Books in the 1970s changed during the following decade. The target consumer shifted again, from the general audience to a very specific segment: the otaku, or enthusiastic fan of anime, manga and video games.

The author explains how the consumption of *characters* (*kyara*) gave way to the consumption of the *worlds* (*sekai*) these characters inhabit. In this new mode of producer-consumer interactions, the consumer accumulates character goods in order to have access to—or inhabit—these worlds he is already familiar with from reading manga, watching anime, and playing video games. In this regard, Steinberg revisits Eiji Ôtsuka's concept of narrative consumption he established in the 1980s, where the fan was encouraged to acquire each fragment as a way to embrace the world.

In parallel to this, Steinberg identifies the *character* as a key element in the shift from a Fordist to a post-Fordist mode of consumption (p. 197). In this mode, the character is at once advertisement, production and consumption (p. 197), and the world is entered through the consumption of its characters (p. 199). Steinberg echoes the theories of sociologist Maurizio Lazzarato, “that the contemporary enterprise ‘creates not the object (the merchandise), but the world where the object exists’” (p. 200). In his closing words, the author argues that no history of post-war Japanese mass cultures and subcultures can be accurate without “an understanding of the media mix and the character-world relation on which it depends” (p. 202). That was the path he led the reader on over the course of the book, from manga to anime and from to stickers to toys, while exploring the ever-expanding relations between characters and worlds.

I approached the book first and foremost as someone with a background in anime and in video game studies, but without much familiarity with the term “anime media mix”. As such, I was perplexed by the use of *anime* to name this type of convergence. Is “anime media mix” ideal to describe this phenomenon? Is anime truly the cornerstone of Japan's popular culture ecology, which includes anime, manga, video games, TV dramas, light novels (the “light” from “light novel” comes from the fact that the narratives in such works are somewhat simple, with numerous anime- or manga-style illustrations punctuating their pages,

“lightening” the reading experience), drama CDs and songs? Perhaps *manga* should be given center stage—it is, after all, the foundation for more pop culture intellectual properties and franchises than anime. The author even provides statistical evidence to support the prevalence of manga as a basis for anime, stating that two-thirds of 2005 anime shows were adapted from manga (p. 9 #30). But what emerges from Steinberg’s consideration is that, while manga has provided the initial spark for many intellectual properties that “move” between Japanese media forms, it is still anime, fueled by the dynamically immobile character image, that’s driving the dissemination of characters and worlds across media. Is Steinberg’s explanation strong enough to justify naming anime the essential element of this convergence? The book certainly makes a compelling case for it.

Now, it’s worth noting that a good background on anime and manga will greatly help reader comprehension. I found myself relying on the cultural products being used as examples (*Tetsuwan Atomu*, *Akadô Suzunosuke*, *Haruhi Suzumiya*) to find my bearings, as Steinberg often jumps between time periods over the course of his text. The first two chapters are set in the 1960s, after which we are told about pre-war Japan, the American occupation, the 1960s (again), the 1970s, the 1980s and the early 21st century. Luckily, the author’s prose is generally clear enough for the reader to navigate through these back-and-forth hops. The latter half of the book, though, adds a layer of difficulty to the reading experience when it starts tackling multiple forms of media mix. In the two last chapters, we are successively introduced to the *marketing* media mix (which concerns advertising), the *Kadokawa* media mix (which focused on the movie-novel-soundtrack triumvirate during the 1970s), and the *Kadokawa Media Office* (later *Kadokawa Media Works*) media mix (which targeted otaku in the 1980s). Despite the slight unwieldiness of those concepts’ cohabitation, it would be unfair to blame Steinberg for reporting this information, which turns out to be particularly relevant to his exposition of Japan’s transition from Fordism to post-Fordism over the years. It can nevertheless remain a hurdle for the reader.

Moving on, I’d also like to point out two areas where I thought the book was lacking. First, while the television program side of the anime media mix is covered at great length, very little is said about how animated feature films “fit” into the mix. This exclusion seems all the stranger when you consider how the author takes the time to properly address how important

live-action movies were in establishing the media mix at Kadokawa Books in the 1970s. In the same vein, while the light novel-to-manga-to-anime example of *Haruhi Suzumiya* is relevant, I was surprised that Steinberg didn't dig deeper into this topic. Both *Atomu* and *Haruhi* made the transition from the TV screen to the theatre over the years (as early as 1964 for *Atomu*, and in 2010 for *Haruhi*), and a mention of how these animated features fit into the mix would have been informative. Choosing not to go further in that direction felt like a missed opportunity.

Secondly, there is another piece of the anime media mix that I felt could have benefitted from more discussion: video games. In fact, they are all but entirely excluded from the book. The author mentions their importance, calling them one of the most important recent innovations to the media mix, but they are not given as much space in the book as anime, manga, movies or even light novels. As I read the first chapters, I frequently wondered how video games, as a heavily marketed cultural and technological piece of the anime media mix, would fit into the overall schema. My curiosity was only stoked as I learned about dynamic immobility, the consumption of characters and the consumption of worlds. Reading about those concepts, I naturally wondered how they could be applied to video games. Alas, the topic was dismissed too quickly. Perhaps the subject would warrant its own book? In any event, it seemed to me, as a video game scholar, that their importance to the media mix was overlooked, and I feel an opening to other scholars' research would have been a natural complement. Fortunately, this special issue on *geemu* and the media mix, which this review is part of, addresses this matter.

Despite those minor misgivings, I want to stress the quality of the work as a whole. The scope of Steinberg's efforts is apparent from the sheer number of Japanese-language sources he refers to. The numerous citations guide the reader to important texts that have not (yet) been translated to English. As a bridge to these texts, *Anime's Media Mix* is commendable. The archival work that was necessary to make this book happen is staggering—presumably due to the fact that the first incarnation of this book was Steinberg's PhD thesis—and I can only applaud the distillation of a plethora of Japanese sources for the reader's benefit.

Of course, that's far from all the book has to offer. I'm particularly fond of the author's concept of dynamic immobility. Steinberg explains the dichotomy between full and limited

animation and then moves beyond these notions to describe the popularity of the movement-in-stillness aesthetic. Setting off on a kind of archaeological exploration of the dynamic image in Japan, he mentions the importance of manga, of course, but mostly credits the *kamishibai*, or storyboard theatre, for accustoming the country to moving-yet-still images. Infused with dynamic immobility as they were, *kamishibai* performances paved the way for the acceptance of limited animation by children. Another element I appreciated is the idea of addressing the *Haruhi Suzumiya* franchise and its light novel over the course of the book. As Steinberg himself puts it, light novels are “an increasingly important source for manga and anime narratives,” strengthening the bonds across media, so it stands to reason that he would cover them. While he is more succinct in his description of *Haruhi*'s impact than he was regarding *Atomu*, including this franchise strengthens his argument with a recent and relevant example of a franchise that was prominent in fan discourse in the late 2000s.

I also strongly approve of the way the author handles the works of Osamu Tezuka, he who is often called the “God of manga,” not only in mainstream media but also in academic discourse. While Steinberg constantly comes back to *Atomu*, Tezuka's most iconic creation, throughout the book, his approach seems fueled by academic curiosity rather than reverence or wonder. He makes sure to always stay at a safe critical distance from the object of his scrutiny. On a related note, I appreciate the fact that Steinberg quotes important figures from the three decades of media mix. These include Osamu Tezuka, Haruki Kadokawa (president of Kadokawa Books in the 1970s), and Eiji Ôtsuka, critic, scholar and creator of manga, but also a chief engineer of the otaku media mix, since he worked at Kadokawa Media Office in the 1980s. They endow parts of the book with a refreshing “insider's” point of view.

Last but not least, Steinberg's timely and relevant explanations throughout the book are also praiseworthy. Since convergence is such a broad concept, it requires interested authors and readers to have at least a basic grasp on many different fields. Luckily for the reader, Steinberg seems to be aware of this difficulty. The author knows he is tackling a subject that is both very broad (convergence) and very narrow (convergence in the context of anime-centric popular culture in Japan). Consequently, he takes the time to explain numerous terms employed by media scholars and marketing specialists, clarifying their use both at the time they emerged and today. While some readers may think these explanations would better serve

the author's discourse by being placed in footnotes, the in-text definitions never feel out of place or superfluous—they are informative without sounding patronizing.

Marc Steinberg's *Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan* is a fine addition to the anime studies books available from University of Minnesota Press. With a staggering amount of archival work to his credit, Steinberg provides a much-needed treatise about the convergence in Japan's anime culture, starting at the time it emerged. As there is already abundant scholarship about how fans experience anime culture, it is refreshing to read about the architects who brought the convergence into being.

In my opinion, *Anime's Media Mix* is a must-read for anyone interested in the rise of anime in the 1960s. I also highly recommend it for those interested in Japanese media or anime in general, as well as in an academic approach to toys. Still, I think the book's greatest strengths emerge when it is read as a complement to Ito's texts on otaku culture and/or Lamarre and Azuma's books. In my first reading of this work, I was hooked by the transmedial adventures of the Atomu character image across manga, anime, stickers, and toys. During my second reading, though, the part that popped out at me was how marketing, technology and culture intertwined to result in the inception of anime. This impression was fueled by my reading of Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter's *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing* (2003), a book that exposes the forces at work in the video game culture and industry. As such, I joined Steinberg's *Anime's Media Mix* with Lamarre's *Anime Machine* and Azuma's *Otaku*, each providing elements that completed each other's view of the marketing (Steinberg), technology (Lamarre) and culture (Azuma) of anime. As a complement to those two books, *Anime's Media Mix* shines light on an important and often overlooked piece of the anime culture puzzle: that of marketing and its vital role in fostering and nurturing desire in the consumer.

In the end, however you read this, it remains a formidable archival resource for anyone interested in the movement behind Japanese toys in the 1960s, with multiple toy advertisements from the era that epitomize the book's status as a thorough overlook of the inception of anime's media mix.