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Anime: A Critical Introduction, by Rayna Denison. Bloomsbury Academic, 2015, 200 pp.

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Rayna Denison's comprehensive study *Anime: A Critical Introduction* constitutes an innovative and compelling approach to the study of anime not simply as a "genre", but as a continuously shifting set of texts influenced by context and by the constant exchanges at work between the practices of the industry, the global communities of fans and the academic discourse around it. In Denison's own words the subject of her book is "not just anime, but the ways in which anime is talked about by those enabling its creation and watching over its global dispersal—including industry professionals and academics, but also the trade presses, popular presses and fan communities supporting anime's domestic and transnational life" (2). Starting with these premises, then, *Anime: A Critical Introduction* is not a study that simply focuses on the analysis of specific anime texts, but rather on the exploration of the primary sources cited above, with a privileged eye for places of popular debate rather than for the assertions of authoritative figures, such as anime directors, that tend to restrain debates on the meanings of anime instead of sparking further reflection. The use of alternative primary sources and varied voices means that Denison's study does not propose to answer the question "what is anime?" but attempts, instead, to explore the wide range of meanings associated with it. To this aim, the analysis of the context in which anime develops is crucially important: "anime needs to be understood more broadly as a cultural phenomenon whose meanings are dependent on context" (2). The Introduction provides textual and technical definitions for anime and explores anime's relationship to nation and culture by drawing on previous studies, such as those by Ian Condry, Dani Cavallaro, Thomas LaMarre ("Animation"; *Anime*), Susan Napier (*Princess*; "When"; *Howl's*) and Koichi Iwabuchi.

The book is composed of nine chapters roughly divided into three sections: the first section explores anime's transnational histories, whilst the second one (starting with Chapter 4) maps the history of anime in relation to several genres that have developed concurrently with specific technologies, namely film and television (Chapter 4), home video (Chapter 5) and digital formats (Chapter 6). The third section (chapters 7 to 9) explores anime's contemporary landscape by looking at some crucial case studies, such as that of Studio Ghibli, to identify new evolving patterns.

Chapter 1, "Approaching Anime: Genre and Subgenres" approaches the study of anime by employing genre theory as a possible theoretical framework. Shifting and mutable, anime shares with cinematic genres the same difficulty in being critically mapped and it defies easy and all-encompassing definitions. Is it possible, then, to conceptualise a study of anime using tools already present in genre studies? Denison proceeds to answer this question first by referring to crucial studies in genre theory, including those by Thomas Schatz, Rick Altman,

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and Steve Neale, and by bringing attention to how surface elements can help audiences to recognize immediately the specific styles of different directors and studios. This immediate recognition, however, cannot be assumed to be directly related to the concept of anime as a cultural category and Denison observes how anime, being drawn, is always placed one step away from the simple presentation of reality. This aspect is deemed to be crucial since "anime encompasses a variety of pre-existing media genres within its representational lexicon, and it ostentatiously mixes and hybridizes its categories, all the while creating new local subcategories" (16). The first consequence of this constant hybridisation is to discard frames for the study of anime that, whilst providing a helpful set of references, also risk to excessively simplify the scope of anime's connections to genre. A case in point, here, would be the famous distinction suggested by Susan Napier of three modes of anime: apocalyptic, festival and elegiac (*Princess*; *Howl's*). In order to avoid simplistic categorisations, a method must be found to "work through anime's nationally and industrially shifting frames of reference" (17). The second part of the chapter clarifies how this study will mainly focus on anime's cultural life within three distinct geographical contexts: Japan, the USA and the United Kingdom. Japan obviously provides the most immediate and vibrant context for the study of anime, while the USA are chosen as a second significant context because they are recognised, also by the Japanese industry, as being the most important overseas market for anime. The UK is used as a third case study for its reliance on the cultural exchanges that take place between the Japanese and American markets, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, for having produced since the 1990s a very distinctive and active local industry and fan culture. The last section in the chapter focuses on the concept of "meta-genre", which is crucially important in explaining the different understanding of anime in Japan and in the rest of the world. As Denison writes,

> This suprageneric term is necessary […] because anime in Japan is not just texts or a subculture built around them: it is a complex system of industrially and culturally understood genres and audiences that crosses back and forth between everyday culture and extreme kinds of fandom. (24)

Chapter 2, "Sci Fi Anime: Cyberpunk to Steampunk", focuses on the crucial place that science fiction—with its subgenres of cyberpunk and steampunk—has had in the popularisation and definition of anime, which often employed tropes deriving from this genre to explore and comment upon aspects of human existence. The central place of science fiction has very clear historical roots. One of the earliest examples of sci-fi anime, *Astro Boy* (*Tetsuwan Atom*, Osamu Tezuka, 1963–1966, established an interconnection between anime and sci-fi that has continued steadily and successfully over the decades. The centrality of *Astro Boy* is accompanied by a crucial cautioning against the simplistic reading of all anime as "SF animation for children" (Miyao 31) but this link is undeniable, and sci-fi can be regarded as being anime's most popular genre, a fact also proven by the high number of academic and popular writings that explore and comment science-fiction anime. Denison selects two specific film texts to investigate this connection: *Akira* (Katsuhiro Ōtomo, 1988) and *Ghost in the Shell* (*Kōkaku kidōtai*, Momoru Oshii, 1995). These two films marked a breaking point in the popularity of anime in the American and global markets and became essential texts to amplify the discourse on the ultimate nature of Japanese animation (the section in the chapter devoted to the discussion of classification problems is particularly interesting), on its link with sci-fi, and on the existence and nature of a great spectrum of subgenres. In Denison's words,

> Science fiction provided the starting point from which our understanding of "anime" as a category could be tested out and, in return, anime has provided useful spaces in which subgenres can be explored and expanded. […] science fiction has not just been critical

> to the success of anime; anime has been just as important to the continuing development of a transnational, transmedia genre of science fiction. (49)

The third chapter, "Anime's Bodies", draws on some aspects already anticipated in Chapter 2 and explores further the varying depictions of human—and humanoid—bodies in anime. This section in the book covers a wide range of issues, from body debates across different genres, to the way anime characters are transformed and adapted to toys or other commercial products or inhabited by fans through the practice of cosplay. The fascination resulting in anime's capacity of depicting bodies in constant mutation and shifting is connected to animation's capacity of exceeding the visual and creative possibilities of live-action cinema. The (im)possible bodies created by anime can be explored both across genres and often with great variations within the same text and they open up crucial debates about gender ideology and the challenge posed by anime to questions of "gendered power and dominance" (51). The discourse around anime's body depictions presents a wide range of issues and there is no real coalescence point where all these strands can be unified. There are, however, some interesting groupings that are particularly strong in relations to specific genres such as *shōjo* and *shōnen* manga and anime that are often characterised by a direct connection between emotions and body depictions. Some examples of *hentai* anime and pornography, such as the OVA (original video animation) *Urotsukidōji* (Hideki Takayama, 1987–1994) are also explored as instances of extreme body modification and disquieting cultural products that "defamiliarize our concepts not just of animation's cultural purposes and potential, but of humanity itself" (68).

Chapter 4 in the study, "Early Anime Histories: Japan and America", opens with an overview of Japanese animation before anime and then proceeds to establish the crucial role played by television in creating a commercial culture, mainly, but not exclusively, aimed at a children's audience, within which anime could thrive and expand. The creative experiences of Tōei Dōga (later renamed Tōei Animation) and of Osamu Tezuka are treated as essential moments in the industrial history of animation in Japan. In its closing part, the chapter also looks at how early television anime started circulating in America and at how this expansion triggered fears around Japanese animated exports that were often regarded as not suitable for the "US conceptions of morality and child-friendly content" (82). In order to respond to these concerns, anime was often cut and redubbed and circulated in highly Americanised versions that disregarded essential aspects of the original by, amongst many practices, amalgamating different shows and inserting completely different soundtracks.

The fifth chapter, entitled "Anime, Video and the Shōjo and Shōnen Genres" explores the crucial technological shift from film and traditional cel animation to the remediation provided by home video formats. The move from television to home video allowed anime to continue shifting and changing, not only in terms of genres and topics but also from the point of view of gender representations. The focus in this chapter on *shōjo* and *shōnen* productions, explored through a series of brief case studies, provides a poignant overview of the expansion of gendered audiences, the rise of new artists and genres and the growing of anime fandoms both in Japan and in global markets thanks to a transnational network of exchanges.

Chapter 6, "Post-Video Anime: Digital Media and the Revelation of Anime's Hidden Genres", looks at how anime is responding to the digital era. This has brought about not simply the global expansion of its audience but a series of issues for the industry, which is now forced to face the growing role of fans who share and exchange videos outside official channels, for instance through the practice of "fansubbing"—which is only one of the many ways anime fans impact, manipulate and interpret films and series. In this chapter, Denison argues that anime

genres continue to proliferate together with fans' incessant online search of new anime experiences. The new relationships developing amongst industry, fans and anime genres have triggered changes in established genres but also the emergence of new genres. More specifically, Denison uses the so-called *nichijōkei*—the "slice of life" anime—as a good example of these developments.

Chapter 7, "Ghibli Genre: Toshio Suzuki and Studio Ghibli's Brand Identity" looks at the most famous anime studio from the point of view of genres and branding. More specifically, the chapter explores the way "Studio Ghibli means different things depending on the context in which its works are being consumed. […] the extent of Studio Ghibli's brand is observably different within and outside of Japan" (117). In her chapter, Denison explores the hidden but crucial role played by Toshio Suzuki in shaping Ghibli from an anime studio to a "multinational, multistudio, multimedia brand entity", thus attempting to disenfranchise Studio Ghibli from the weight and visibility of its most famous directors, Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata (127).

The eighth chapter, "Experiencing Japan's Anime: Genres at the Tokyo International Anime Fair", takes its moves from the claim that anime is a complex marketplace where television, film and digital platforms cross each other and expand into the exploitation and consumption of anime as industrial and commercial products. Considering also Mitchell's argument on the spatiality of culture, Denison explores here specific places and times in which anime are consumed and reshaped. More specifically, the chapter offers an account of the Tokyo International Anime Fair. Held for the first time in 2002 and relaunched as Anime Japan in 2014, the TAF has gone through ups and downs of fortune and popularity. Denison's chapter examines the importance of the TAF event in the years between 2008 and 2013, "the former being the year which marked the high point of the anime industry's investment in the event (with 289 exhibitors represented) and the latter, the end of TAF's cultural geographic significance to anime in Japan" (138). Through a number of focused cases, the chapter reinforces the idea that anime is perceived and consumed in Japan in a deeply different way compared to international markets.

The ninth and closing chapter, "Anime Horror and Genrification", explores the increasing significance of the horror genre within anime. Denison argues that, although often present in various genres, horror is often sidelined by the formulas and conventions of other more dominant genres from *hentai* to *shōnen*. Its importance, however, is becoming increasingly prominent and "this chapter uses the idea of horror as a subordinated or mixed generic presence in anime to find out what can be learned from treating anime's meanings as contextually dependent, generically complex, always already hybridized" (153). Instead of reclaiming the existence of a fully formed anime horror genre, the chapter investigates the creation of new subgenres, the cross pollination between anime and geographically localised horror styles and the borrowing of horror characters that coalesce into new and hybrid texts.

The richness of the case studies and first-hand accounts combined with the author's insightful analysis make *Anime: A Critical Introduction* a valuable study of the complex and constantly shifting world of anime. Denison's study is a recommended reading for all those with an interest in animation, fandom, Japanese history and culture, both inside and outside the academic community.

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