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**JAPANESE VISUAL CULTURE  
IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN SPACES**

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*Abstract: The present paper explores the ways in which Japanese popular culture managed to blend in and gradually be accepted into the American society up to the point when it became a part of contemporaneity. Although both manga and anime were considered mere cults because of the violent scenes and language used, they have become more and more popular among children and even adults, due to numerous influences and adaptations from a variety of cultures. This paper will also provide an insight into the specificities of Japan, thus proving that culturally-bound elements can make themselves visible into the American consumerist society, as the influence of Japanese cartoons on American culture is indeed an outcome of a mass culture assimilating various elements in order to enrich its history together with customs and traditions that until recently were considered taboo.*

**Keywords: popular culture, globalization, visual culture, anime /vs/ cartoons, consumerism**

As the title suggests, this paper is concerned with elements related to Japanese visual culture which have managed to gradually blend in and be accepted by the contemporary American society. Moreover, the present paper also brings to the fore concepts related to popular culture, as it is crucial to differentiate between high and low culture in a continually globalized world. For these reasons, it is of great importance to state that in recent years Japanese animations gained terrain not only in Asian countries but also in America, thus proving that a consumerist culture constantly searches for elements that could be included into its own history. Nevertheless, only after familiarizing himself/herself with some Japanese animations, one could easily agree that the anime influence brings to life childhood dreams in which any one could live love stories, engage into battles, where either good or evil could prevail, or even get acquainted with mythical and historical tales. Through an anime one could also imagine having supernatural powers, as there are many genres of such cartoons which vary from action to fantasy or even from love to horror. This is another reason why the present paper is intended to bring to the fore aspects related to the influence of anime on American popular culture by highlighting the fact that there is no need to get acquainted with the actual Japanese culture in order to be a fan of anime and manga. However, after familiarizing himself/herself with the Japanese visual culture, the viewers often want to know more about the customs and traditions originating from Japan. It should be noted that although the already mentioned aspects of Japan were until recently considered cults, they gradually have become more and more popular not only in the United States, but also all around the world.

In trying to demonstrate that Japan clearly influenced the American culture, it is of great importance to mention several definitions of popular and visual culture, as well as globalization. If we take into consideration Storey's definitions of **popular culture**, then we could discuss the widely favored culture which also represents the culture which originates from the people for the people and it is equivalent to folk culture. Moreover, from a neo-marxist perspective it is the culture used by dominant groups of intellectual and moral

leadership to win the consent of subordinate groups in society. From a postmodernist perspective, popular culture is the one that no longer recognizes the distinction between “high” and “low”, but from an American perspective, it is also the culture shared by the majority of people, in this way giving the floor to what one often calls “mass culture”<sup>1</sup>. Taking all these definitions into consideration, one should further argue that the influence of Japanese cartoons on American culture is indeed an outcome of a mass culture assimilating various elements in order to enrich its history together with customs and traditions that until recently were considered taboo. **Visual culture**, on the other hand, could be seen as being concerned with all the information that can be gathered by a consumer due to his/her cultural background. Hence, the customer must develop a sense of meaning and, implicitly, pleasure from witnessing visuals<sup>2</sup>. In other words, the term implies not only what can be seen, but also what benefits one has after observing comparing different fields of study that can be integrated into the visual culture sphere. One should mention here films, short videos, photographs and, more importantly, the internet as a means of communication as well as information. Nevertheless, both popular and visual culture seem to occupy important places into the field of globalization, and one important figure of this field of study is Manfred Steger who defined **globalization** as applying “to a set of social processes that appear to transform our present condition of weakening nationality into one of globality”<sup>3</sup>. To put it differently, this term does not link to a single process; instead it needs a set of processes that operate simultaneously on several levels and dimensions, in this way creating a border-less world.

Moreover, if one were to talk about the Japanese visual culture, there must be made a clear distinction between “anime” and “manga”, as an individual who is not familiar with these concepts could easily confuse them. In simple terms manga is the comic book, while anime is the result of such graphic novel. When intending to elucidate the cultural meaning of anime, one should mention Poitras who rightfully considers that “(1) anime is simply the word used by the Japanese for all animation, without regard to its nation of origin; and (2) outside of Japan, the common use of the word anime is to refer specifically to Japanese animation”<sup>4</sup>. Nevertheless, one should be aware of the fact that Japanese animations hardly resemble the western-like cartoons, in which the society initially imposed social and behavioral norms that would appear especially on television. One could easily recognize an anime character from a Disney one, as the Japanese characters usually have big round eyes; their hair can be unnaturally long and colored in various bright nuances such as red, green or even blue. What is typical for many anime is the tear that can sometimes show embarrassment, while other times it can show a state of shock. The anime series *Sailor Moon*<sup>5</sup> best depicts such a feature, while *Full Metal Alchemist*<sup>6</sup> makes itself distinguishable by showing the characters getting blue and having ghost-like eyes – a clear example of extreme fear. Obviously, these unique

<sup>1</sup>Storey, John. “What is Popular Culture?” *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*. London: Longman, 2009.p. 5-12.

<sup>2</sup>Mirzoeff, Nicholas. *An Introduction to Visual Culture*. London: Routledge, 2009.p. 3.

<sup>3</sup>Steger, Manfred. *Globalization: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.p. 8.

<sup>4</sup>Poitras, Gilles. “Contemporary Anime in Japanese Pop Culture”. *Japanese Visual Culture: Explorations in the World of Manga and Anime*. Ed. Mark Wheeler MacWilliams. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2008. p. 48.

<sup>5</sup>*Sailor Moon*. Dir. Junichi Sato. 1992-1993.

<sup>6</sup>*Fullmetal Alchemist*. Dir. Seiji Mizushima 2003-2004

features are intended to stir interest in a humorous way, but at the same time they create a sense of relating to Japan through visual culture.

In her article Chambers contends that American viewers initially rejected anime because it was considered “socially inappropriate” as “they acted under the impression that all animation was for children”<sup>7</sup>. Hence, viewers deliberately chose to ignore the sarcasm of Japanese animations and refused to acknowledge their artistic value simply because they believed that all that was beautifully drawn or more colorful was for children. Because of the violent scenes present in numerous Japanese animations, the American production companies chose to cut scenes or alter their translation because such things were not acceptable by the western society. However, people gradually learned that the cultural background of anime was as important for Asian countries as Hollywood was for the American society.

However, in order to prove that the Japanese culture encountered difficulties in gaining the western trust, it is crucial to mention that: “Japanese anime was initially very hard to come by in the West [...] Somehow, however, a few of the viewers began to recognize that they were seeing something different from American television fare and ultimately became aware of the Japanese origins”<sup>8</sup>. One could again see the American skepticism towards a country with different cultural values. As it is stated in the above selected quote, the audience was the one who questioned and ultimately “built” the bridge between these two distinct countries. People learned that what was different was not necessarily harmful. Hence they acquired new elements into their own personal identity, fact which led to the development of a new popular culture. Although initially the concept of globalization was also referred to as Americanization due to the spreading of trademarks like Coca-Cola, McDonalds and KFC, one can, in this case, talk about “Japanimation”, as it gradually became a global cultural force, which “is apparent in such divergent areas as sushi restaurants, karaoke bars, Hello Kitty merchandise, and the latest episode of *Inuyasha* on the U.S. cable Cartoon Network”<sup>9</sup>. To put it differently, globalization refers to all elements that “cross” borders in order to gain intercultural awareness. Hence, if we were to accept that Americanization is a part of globalization, than it is fair to claim that Japanimation occupies the same place.

Accordingly, when watching Japanese animations one does not only familiarize himself/herself with the actual visual culture, but also gets acquainted with various types of food (miso soup, ramen, sushi) and certain customs such as changing shoes when arriving to school. When reading Poitras’s paper one also notices that food and festivals link to certain seasons and also that cherry blossom trees are iconic for anime and signify the coming of spring and implicitly the beginning of school<sup>10</sup>. In other words, the world of anime provides an insight into the Japanese specificities, thus offering information about Asian customs and traditions in a pleasant way.

When intending to elucidate the gap between something that was once censored and the result of acknowledging Japanese elements, one finds it crucial to mention the 1990s, a period which led to the development of some well-known animations. For these reasons

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<sup>7</sup>Chambers, Samantha Nicole Inëz. “Anime: From Cult Following to Pop Culture Phenomenon.” *The Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications* 3.2 (2012): p. 95.

<sup>8</sup> Napier 2007, as cited in Chambers p. 96.

<sup>9</sup> Ueno 2002, Moeran 2004 p. 1 as cited in MacWilliamsp. 13.

<sup>10</sup>Poitras, Gilles. *Ibidem*.p. 61.

Annie Manion rightfully considers that: “since the success of the animated series *Pokemon* in the late nineties, Japanese animation has been enjoying greater popularity and recognition in America”<sup>11</sup>. Manion further argues that the effect on American popular culture is undeniable, as many children’s cartoons such as *The Powerpuff Girls* or *Kim Possible* adopted the anime looks. In other words, big eyes, super-powers and high tech gadgets were so fashionable that even the western society adopted it. However, there is more than meets the eye when talking about *Pokemon*<sup>12</sup>. Its success had to do less with the animation than with the video game that appeared before it. According to Manion “unlike most anime, which begins as a manga series, or is original material, *Pokemon* actually began as a video game for the portable Nintendo Gameboy system”<sup>13</sup>. The animation success came hand in hand with commercializing the game, a benefit for both parties. Another plausible explanation for accepting so quickly this animation could have to do with the catch phrase “Gottacharch ‘em all!”, as it refers to collecting all pokemons from all around the world with the purpose of training and winning battles.

Another extremely popular anime is *Naruto*<sup>14</sup> and it also includes a catch phrase “ttebayo” which is translated as “you know”. Just like *Pokemon*, *Naruto* involves themes like journey, and acquiring self-discipline and power through training. Uzumaki Naruto is an orphan who puts very much emphasis on friendship while attempting to save Konoha, his village, and, later on, the entire world. The particularities of this anime revolve around the inner power a shinobi possesses as well as around his/her tragic life as a warrior because according to *Naruto* (and *Naruto Shippuden*<sup>15</sup> likewise), a shinobi must possess at least one of the battling styles (fire, water, earth, wind) and he/she must get acquainted with different ninja techniques such as ninjutsu (offensive/defensive technique), genjutsu (illusionary technique) and taijutsu (hand-to-hand technique). Another anime that involves the theme of war and implicitly battle is *Bleach*<sup>16</sup> in which Kurosaki Ichigo is a substitute shinigami (or death god) whose mission is to protect his city by fighting either fallen spirits called “hollow”, or humans with special abilities named “bountou”, and later on, other fallen death gods who attempt to destroy both the living world, and Soul Society, the spirit world.

One should also bring to the fore *Death Note*<sup>17</sup> as it differs from *Naruto* and *Bleach* both in terms of coverage and approach. The anime introduces the genius adolescent Light Yagami who happens to find a note of death and ends up in being called Kira (from the English “Killer”) because he chooses to punish criminals. Obviously the Death Note belongs to a Shinigami (a god of death) who finds humans interesting. And because bad things cannot prevail without justice, it happens that Light’s father, a police officer, is pursuing Kira together with L., the most brilliant detective the world has known. If in *Naruto* and *Bleach* the characters circle around the theme of journey, in *Death Note* Light remains in his town and controls the lives of people with the help of other secondary characters who support

<sup>11</sup>Manion, Anne. *Discovering Japan: Anime and Learning Japanese Culture*. Diss. University of Southern California, 2005. p. 1.

<sup>12</sup>*Pokemon*. Dir. Satoshi Tajiri, 1997-ongoing.

<sup>13</sup>Manion, Anne. *Ibidem*. p. 14.

<sup>14</sup>*Naruto*. Dir. Hayato Date, 2002-2007.

<sup>15</sup>*Naruto Shippuden*. Dir. Hayato Date, 2007-ongoing.

<sup>16</sup>*Bleach*. Dir. Noriyuki Abe, 2004-2013.

<sup>17</sup>*Death Note*. Dir. Tetsurō Araki, 2006.

Kira's cause i.e. disposing of thieves, criminals and liars. One could say that Light's dream is concerned with an ideal world in which only honest people have the right to live. Hence, he forces the world to prepare for a spiritual journey, which, to his mind, is prepared to follow Kira.

Another Japanese animation that involves the theme of journey in order to accomplish a certain goal is *Full Metal Alchemist*<sup>18</sup>, a series based on the manga which portrays the lives of two brothers, Edward and Alphonse, in search of the philosopher's stone. Wanting to revive their mother, the brothers end up losing their bodies, or at least parts of it. Now they intend to change their misfortune by breaking the spell. In a similar way, *Fairy Tail*<sup>19</sup> presents Natsu in search of his "father-figure", the Fire Dragon, Salamander. It should be noted that such animations make constant references to intertextual and intercultural elements because they often point to well-known aspects or even characters from other cultures. If *Fullmetal Alchemist* explores the field of alchemy, *Fairy Tail* links to the antiquity in which dragons were widely favored. In a similar way, while *Death Note* points to leaders who are willing to sacrifice anyone and anything in order to achieve worldwide awareness, *Bleach* gives the floor to cultures that believe in the after world, thus providing a possible explanation to what could happen once one dies. Surprisingly, one could watch *Naruto* and realize that it emphasizes the value of true friendship in a world where human life is not thoroughly appreciated. Another anime that links to intertextuality is *Hellsing*<sup>20</sup>, where the main character Alucard (Dracula spelled backwards) is the evil itself. However, in this animation, he does not hunt humans; instead he kills other vampires with his two silver guns. *Hellsing* brings to the fore elements related to another influence in the American popular culture, in this way presenting an evolved, or decayed, character in comparison with Bram Stoker's *Dracula*.

In order to further discuss the anime influence on the American culture, it is of extreme importance to also reflect upon certain issues related to terminology, apart from the already mentioned culturally embedded violent scenes and themes of journey. There are also specific words that are frequently used throughout the field of the Japanese filmic images. For instance the noun "Shinigami" appears in many animations and it represents the ones who died and are now able to save other human souls. One could clearly see that there is a huge difference between the Shinigami Ryuk from *Death Note*, a God who takes human lives in order to extend his own "life" as a Death God and the other ones present in *Bleach*, for example. Those Shinigami are spirits who protect human lives by fighting Hollow who aim to destroy human lives and devour their souls in order to become more powerful. Other features that are connected to Japanese terminology circle around other frequently used terms, namely "tamashi" which in English means "soul", "satsujin" which means "murder", "baka" which is "stupid" and even "teme" which can sometimes mean "you" but not in a nice way, as it is synonym with "bastard". Hence, when a character calls another one "Temeeee!" with a rough voice, the viewer already knows that the immediate translation would be "You, bastard!".

<sup>18</sup>*Fullmetal Alchemist*. Dir. Seiji Mizushima, 2003-2004.

<sup>19</sup>*Fairy Tail*. Dir. Shinji Ishihara, 2009-2013.

<sup>20</sup>*Hellsing*. Dir. Kohta Hirano and Duane Johnson, 2001.

Through the constant repetition of such words and phrases, the viewer does not only get acquainted with the foreign intonation and pronunciation, but also becomes aware of culturally-bound elements and gradually accepts them into his/her own vocabulary.

Another culturally-bound element of anime has to do with the monologue-like speech, which is present in almost any Japanese animation. Accompanied by numerous flashbacks and recollections, the characters' monologue is an icon for the culture, as it creates a powerful impact on the viewer due to different angles from which the talking character is filmed. Here one could observe the difference in ways of expressing feelings, because the American cartoon would just insist on the way the individual is perceived by the society, whereas an anime puts more emphasis on the individual, thus encouraging the viewer to take control and ignore the socially imposed norms, if necessary. To put it differently, it makes the viewer empathize and identify with the character's feelings, way of dealing with everyday problems and even aspirations towards a world in which super-powers are not just myths.

This paper has provided an overview of how Japanese visual culture was successfully integrated into the American one, in this way proving that a mass culture constantly assimilates elements that play a fundamental role in the development of contemporary Japanese filmic images. It also demonstrated that the intricate field of American popular culture comprises a multitude of ideas taken from other cultures, because one must bring to the fore not only its own folklore, but also intercultural particularities when talking about globalized ideas. To put it differently, both Americanization and Japanimation bring together various spheres that, to some extent, succeed in connecting cultures. Nevertheless, living in a consumerist society in which people need to exhaust all forms of information, has proven to be beneficial for both popular and visual culture.

Moreover, the paper has also proven that the Japanese animation culture has certain specificities that succeeded in blending in with the American culture. One of them is the monologue-like lines of the characters, while another one has to do with the frequently used words in different kinds of animations. Of course, it has been demonstrated that these types of TV series have culturally-bound elements that to some extent succeeded in making themselves visible in a consumerist culture. It is well known that when watching anime, the viewer familiarizes himself/herself with fictional characters that can be either dream-like representations or nightmarish ones. What is indeed interesting about anime is that no matter the thematic background, they always provide the audience with enough information even from the very first minutes of an episode.

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