

Book Review

Michal Daliot-Bul and Nissim Otmazgin. 2017. *The Anime Boom in the United States*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

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Before starting this review, I want to acknowledge that this book was made possible through the financial support of the Israel Science Foundation, a scientific organization financially supported by the State of Israel, whose continuous occupation of Palestinian territory in the West Bank renders the funding of this publication complicit in the violence of settler colonialism. While I acknowledge the intellectual and cultural significance of publishing academic works on Japanese animation, I do believe the funding provenance of such work matters. A goal of a university should be to create an intellectual community in solidarity with marginalized peoples—especially through postcolonial and feminist hermeneutics. The current state of Israel does not appear to me as compatible with these precepts.

That being said, *The Anime Boom in the United States* by Michal Daliot-Bul and Nissim Otmazgin is a rigorous and informative book for students and scholars interested in the industrial history of the distribution of Japanese animation in the United States. Their focus on the American and Japanese entrepreneurs who have made the wide distribution of anime possible throughout the years, and their serious engagement not only with the field of industry studies, but with the industry itself is particularly valuable. Throughout their five chapters, the authors aim to rewrite the history of anime distribution in the United States. They argue against

the common narrative of a singular “boom”: the arrival of the televised series *Pokémon* in 1998. Instead, relying on fieldwork conducted between 2011 and 2016, the authors demonstrate how the continual presence of Japanese animation in North America since the 1960s can be situated within an older relationship between both countries, “which included imports and exports, outsourcing and transnational productions, as well as cross-cultural experimentations with themes and styles—an ongoing cross-cultural pollination much like that of the film industry” (31). Overall, I would primarily describe this book as useful from a historical perspective. Indeed, by being empirically grounded and thus providing an academic platform to many voices in the anime industry, the authors are contributing to a long overdue institutional legitimization of the study of animation industries. Furthermore, they are generously proposing many approaches that are precious for later scholars who aim to explore the industry side of animation in America and Japan.

In the first three chapters, Daliot-Bul and Otmazgin offer three different angles to analyze the arrival of anime in the United States. The first chapter, “Reframing the Anime Boom in the United States,” the two authors examine numerous shows that were produced according to a collaborative method between American producers and Japanese, such as anime-inspired cartoons like like

Avatar: The Last Airbender (2005), *The Boondocks* (2005), and Japanese-American animated co-productions such as *The Transformers* (1984) or *Maya, the Honey Bee* (1990). By providing such a genealogy of anime distribution, they situate anime history as part of a bigger picture: a transnational and transcultural one (50). In the second chapter, “Building Silk Roads,” the two authors analyze several American and Japanese animation studios to understand and demonstrate how America has historically become a major player within the animated industry, but also how Japan was prevented from marketing itself as an international player in animation. One reason, they argue, is the organizational differences within both industries, such as network monopolies, media mix strategies and the power given to fan consumption. American television animation networks, whose major players (Nickelodeon, Warner Brothers Animation, Cartoon Network Studio, and Disney Television Animation) distribute “their shows in the United States using television networks that are divisions or subsidiaries of their holding companies” (57). In contrast, the Japanese distribute anime using *seisaku iinkai*, or “production committees”: “Television networks or advertising agencies organize a production committee of sponsors for each show, including, for example, publishers... DVD makers... producers of game software... toys makers... music companies... television channels... and advertising agencies” (62–63). The third chapter, “Entrepreneurs of Anime,” describes the different individual actors in the anime business “bridging the organizational and cultural differences between Japan and the United States” (85). They identify two forms of entrepreneurship in the anime trade business, “company-led entrepreneurship” and “individual entrepreneurship” (90), arguing that some individuals also assume positions within both forms, such as Haim Saban, president of Saban Entertainment, who produced *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Power Rangers*, and Gen Fukunaga, the founder of Funimation, which licensed the *Dragon Ball* franchise (1986–present) in the U.S.

The last two chapters, “The Legacy of Anime” and “Japan’s Anime Policy,” lead me to the first of my critiques. These chapters explore the aesthetic heritage of anime in American productions and

Japan’s infamous “Cool Japan” export strategy. These chapters raise methodological questions that should be addressed. They do not augment the overall mission of the book, and they fall short of the ambition of the project the authors were aiming for. Anime-inspired productions and the “Cool Japan” strategies are both well-documented phenomena in and outside of academia (see Allison 2009 ; Pelitteri 2010; McLelland; 2017), and both could have been addressed sufficiently in previous chapters especially as they are, indeed, already touched on previously in the book. They could have been replaced by a large sample of the most valuable interviews as appendixes, which would have better served the book’s ambitious subtitle: “Lessons for Global Creative Industries.” Transcriptions of these conversations would be valuable considering that Daliot-Bul and Otmazgin made sure to talk both to academics and industry actors.

Moreover, the authors avoid engaging with the anime industry as subjected to highly contentious gender politics that go beyond the one specific to animation commercial institutions. Daliot-Bul and Otmazgin ask (rightfully so): “what makes a good entrepreneur in the transnational market of anime” (104)? Yet, they do not critically examine the gender politics of entrepreneurship, as both the majority of professional interviewees and the major industry players mentioned throughout the book are male. As early as in 1995, Annalee Newitz (1995, 4) argued “it is important to understand that, what is at stake for Americans watching anime, is certainly bound up with gender identity, especially masculine identity.” While I am not trying to diminish the role of female actors within the industry (whether producers, distributors or fans), the book does not address the industry’s inaction around gender issues. In 2020, scholarly work on the entertainment industries cannot avoid the gender disparity and discrimination in particular. Anime studies, thus far, has largely avoided a wide variety of cogent political issues, among which are those linked to gender inequality. Yet, as a monograph published by Harvard University Press about Japanese and American animation industries, the book is itself a step toward greater academic inclusivity of work on anime, which has political stakes in itself. On the other hand, any approach to anime

studies and the distribution of anime in America that neglects gender as an important component of that transnational circuit ignores a fundamental part of its history.

References

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