Identity Crisis:
Cosplay as Cultural Hybridization

Submitted By
Daniel Casey

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

BACHELOR OF ARTS IN HISTORY

School of Arts & Sciences
Tufts University
Medford, Massachusetts

May 2010

Abstract

This paper examines the phenomenon of "cosplay" in America and attempt to determine whether it is a twenty-first century form of Orientalism. Cosplay, short for "costume play," is a subculture of Japanese *anime (*animation) and *manga* (comics) fandom in which fans dress up as their favorite characters. In an era of increasingly globalized media, cosplay is a uniquely Japanese form of soft power which, playing upon the "identificatory fantasy," enables Western participants to assume identities and achieve levels of Otherness in ways which Western cultural products cannot equal. The average cosplayer is not merely putting on a costume; the experience is one of metamorphosis, a transformation of identity, a phenomenon which I explore on both an individual and societal level. Yet, all of this begs the question of intent: why do people do it? Is this simply a form of subcultural escapism or is it yet another Orientalist mode, a vehicle for Western fetishization and domination of Eastern identities? There is a rich historical tradition of Western cultural imperialism in regards to Japanese culture, beginning with popularization of Japanese *ukiyo-e* prints in Paris in the seventeenth century, expanding from there. This is by no means a new behavior, but it is a relatively unexamined one and through the paper, I examine the the role of fandom in the formation of modern identity, trace the historical roots of cosplay, and finally I seek to synthesize scholarship with fieldwork in order to determine whether cosplay is a manifestation of cultural imperialism of cultural hybridity.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Fandom & Mass Culture

Introduction

March 21, 2008 was a staggeringly grey, overcast morning – typical of springtime in Boston. There was, however, something decidedly different about this day. Amongst the thousands of shades of gray that comprise the city of Boston, one giant Jackson Pollock-esque splash of color made itself glaringly apparent at the Hynes Convention Center. A stunning sight to behold, the Hynes Convention Center had been overrun with thousands upon thousands of people dressed in a variety of strange and fantastic costumes. From girls dressed in sailor suits with fluorescent tresses cascading down their backs to intricately armored men carrying all manner of samurai swords to massive robot suits that lit up and more, the collective imagination of these people seemed boundless. Amidst a sea of six-foot-long swords and dazzlingly bright costumes, thousands of people had congregated for one purpose: to celebrate a shared passion for Japanese animation.

This was Anime Boston, the largest Japanese animation convention in the northeast United States. According to its website, Anime Boston's most recent festival had 17,236 people in attendance, a vast increase from the 4,110 that it attracted in its first year, and an indication of how anime's popularity has exploded in recent years. Anime Boston, which began in 2003, is a three-day festival during which fans of Japanese animation, or *anime* as it is more popularly known, gather together from across the country to watch anime, read *manga* (Japanese comics), buy, sell, and trade anime and manga-related products, listen to Japanese pop and *visual kei* music, and generally indulge their interests in the expansive world of Japanese visual culture. People in the aforementioned costumes fill the hallways, striking poses for pictures and conducting mock fights with their larger than life weapons, creating an atmosphere akin to an otherworldly carnival.

For those few days, the convention space becomes a world unto itself. It is a liminal playground, a veritable Mecca of desire to which fans make pilgrimage to pay homage to their shared obsession and surround themselves with like-minded intimates. For some, the convention experience can be overwhelming, though most find it exhilarating, a seventy-two hour marathon of escapism as they dash from activity to activity, film screening to film screening, with brains addled by late nights and early mornings. One fan interviewed in Susan Napier's *From Impressionism to Anime* summarized the convention atmosphere rather succinctly:

> "[The con atmosphere] is one of unconditional acceptance and support – people feel like they have found a real family, a family that doesn't reject them for being "geeky" or into weird things…spending a weekend with people living, sleeping, eating in the same space with them (and going through sleep deprivation) and partying and watching lots of anime creates that 'instant family' feeling."[1]

Fandom is bred upon fan participation, and a convention is both a highly active form of involvement, and an inherently social activity, allowing. The fan convention has long been a staple of American culture and anime conventions are no exception. Anime conventions are, in a sense, similar to those international expositions and world fairs of the early twentieth century which were so instrumental in bringing Japanese culture to the world spotlight. Today, anime conventions can be seen as "cultural ambassadors, offering participants a taste of Japanese culture.

When considering all of the time and effort that goes into conventions of this magnitude, one inevitably wonders why? Why spend so much time preparing for three days? Most importantly, what exactly is anime and why is it so popular? To define anime is a difficult task – simply calling it "Japanese cartoons" is too shallow a definition and does not give a sense of the thematic complexities or artistic intricacies that comprise the medium. Most attempts to define the medium place it in relation to Western animation, a result of the natural, though often

[1] Napier, Susan. From Impressionism to Anime. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2007, pp. 151

misguided, tendency of Westerners' attempts to parse foreign cultures by placing them in relation to their own. Contrary to popular belief, anime is neither the "Japanese Disney" nor mere children's fare; rather, anime combines the filmic techniques of Hollywood cinema and covers a vast array of tropes – from romance to comedy to tragedy to space opera and beyond – for viewers of all ages. It is a quintessentially Japanese art form that draws from Hollywood and a variety of other sources to create a truly global medium.

On a grander level, what does fandom offer the modern fan? Why is it an important phenomenon? According to a member of the Miyazaki Mailing List, an international group of fans of the works of Miyazaki Hayao, Japan's greatest living animator, fandom fulfills myriad roles:

> "What I think the various fan subcultures do is provide a space for community. They allow people of diverse background and experience to form bonds around a common interest. They let people know that they are not alone in their likes and their passions. Fan subcultures provide the sense of belonging that used to be common among most American communities and families prior to the 1980s. Today kids are raised by daycares and public schools. Parents are too busy working and building careers to devote significant time for family building and family life. Kids are just one of the many entries on the day planner. . . . Fan subcultures help to provide a space for community where people can come and be accepted for who they are. In a society as fragmented as America has become, fan subcultures can provide an oasis for the weary soul."[2]

In addition to these traditional forms of participatory culture, many fans engage in a uniquely performative expression of anime fandom called *cosplay*, in which fans dress up as their favorite characters and spend the weekend parading around in costume. Cosplay, short for "costume play," is a rapidly growing subculture within anime fandom and is a staggering example of one's dedication to the fan-object. Unlike dressing up for Halloween, cosplayers often spend months and months on their costumes, meticulously laboring over minute details in a painstaking effort to recreate precisely their characters so that they can bring them to life in vivid

[2] Napier, Susan. "The World of Anime Fandom" Mechademia 1 (2006): pp. 47, Project MUSE. Tisch Library, Medford, MA. 17 Apr. 2010 <http://muse.jhu.edu/>.

fashion. It is a uniquely performative form of popular culture consumption in that, rather than simply putting on a costume, these people actually assume new identities. Most intriguingly, many cosplayers choose to remain "in character" for the duration of the period that they wear the costume, meaning that they attempt literally to embody their characters, in both personality and appearance, moving between their everyday identities and this seemingly idealized version of themselves.

Having participated in cosplay on several occasions in the past, I can attest personally to the power of the experience, and it is one that over time became a very near and dear to my heart. Since Anime Boston's inception in 2003, I have attended both in and out of costume, and admired the dedication to minutiae and commitment to character demonstrated by the scores of cosplayers that I have encountered. However, as I spent an increasing amount of time at the convention space and took an active role within the cosplay community, I began to notice some intriguing trends and felt that there were certain nagging questions that needed to be answered. First and foremost, why do people cosplay? What is it exactly that people find so appealing about assuming another identity completely? Moreover and perhaps most perplexingly, why did American cosplayers (myself included) seemingly never cosplay as Western characters?

One would assume that Western characters would be more identifiable to a Western audience, particularly since many anime/manga characters are rooted in a foreign culture (with reference to the story/setting of most anime/manga) and that most anime/manga fans do not speak Japanese.[3] This observation was also surprising in lieu of the fact that cosplay is purported to have emerged after Japanese encounters with Westerners who dressed up as *Star Wars* characters at science fiction conventions in the 1970s. Nevertheless, such is the case, and

[3] This is not to say they do not understand *any* Japanese. The vast majority of participants in this fandom tend to know basic phrases acquired from repeated consumption of the cultural products.

determined to find out "why," I conducted a case study, reflecting upon my own experiences, reading scholarly literature about fan and media cultures, and conducting interviews with cosplayers themselves – both American and Japanese.

One of the overarching questions I seek to answer in this paper is, why do people cosplay? In order to answer this question, I sought to trace the origins of cosplay in America and, to a lesser extent, in the West. In the first section, I examine both cosplayers as a community and the role that fandom plays in the twenty-first century. Subculture and the emergence of expressions of subcultural style (e.g. cosplay within anime fandom) are the results of the media having "progressively colonized the cultural and ideological sphere."[4] As Stuart Hall writes:

> "As social groups and classes live, if not in their productive then in their 'social' relations, increasingly fragmented and sectionally differentiated lives, the mass media are more and more responsible (a) for providing the basis on which groups and classes construct an image of the lives, meanings, practices, and values of *other* groups and classes; (b) for providing the images, representations and ideas around which the social totality composed of all these separate and fragmented pieces can be coherently grasped."[5]

The twenty-first century is one of globalized media and one of media dominance. The rapid globalization of media has fundamentally altered the cultural landscapes of belonging and calls one's personal and consequently national identity into question. Participation in fandom and subculture allows one to craft an identity for oneself based upon a shared interest and body of information. Anime fandom has always been a highly participatory culture, and cosplay represents the peak of this participation. By attempting to become the character, one is able to abandon what could be otherwise parochial dictates of a society into which they feel they do not quite fit.

[4] Hebridge, Dick. "The Function of Subculture" in. The Cultural Studies Reader. 2nd ed, eds. During, Simon. London: Routledge. 1993, pp. 448
[5] Ibid, pp. 448-449.

In the second section, I contextualize cosplay historically, tracing its roots back to the 1850s in the wake of Commodore Matthew Perry's opening of Japan to the West, and trace its evolution through modern day. Contrary to popular belief, cosplay is not simply a recent phenomenon. Rather, it is part and parcel of a long tradition of co-opting and appropriating Eastern cultural identities. Cosplay, as a subculture and subcultural activity, exists upon a gradient, ranging between those who don the uniform of their favorite characters at fan conventions to those who attempt to achieve a sort of cultural transvestism by "going native." Unlike those who dress up for fun, they are not playing at a specific character, but rather they are wearing their own identity masked by the trappings of a different culture. In this section, I analyze American and Japanese cultural policy and synthesize primary source documents (e.g. historical travelogues, letters from people like Charley Longfellow, etc.) scholarship on media imperialism and Edward Said's landmark work *Orientalism* in order to understand why Japanese popular culture occupies such a prominent place in contemporary American culture.

Finally, in the third section, I unify the scholarship of the first two sections with my field studies at anime conventions and cosplay events in America and Japan in order to define more clearly the stratification between what constitutes an Orientalist mode of thought and what might simply be a means of twenty-first century escapism. For example, as anime has increased in popularity in America, the Japanese have struggled to meet increasing demand for new material, and consequently have had to outsource some of their animation to second-tier animation studios in places such as, Korea and China. In effect, increased American demand for anime is both helping and harming Japanese soft power. What it accrues in soft power and cultural capital is offset to a certain degree by what it is losing in potential financial capital. Using sociological and anthropological studies, and analyzing semiotic theory in relation to the visual cultures of the

United States and Japan, I seek to help determine whether cosplay's popularity in America is the result of cultural imperialism, cultural hybridization, or something else entirely.

In this paper, I posit that, in an era of increasingly globalized media, cosplay is a uniquely Japanese form of soft power which, playing upon the "identificatory fantasy," enables Western participants to assume identities and achieve levels of Otherness in ways which Western cultural products cannot equal.[6] The average cosplayer is not merely putting on a costume; his experience is one of metamorphosis, a transformation of identity, and a phenomenon that I examine on both a societal and an individual level. In broad terms, I am seeking to answer the question of whether cosplay is a new form of Western cultural imperialism or a form of twenty-first century escapism. From the popularization of Japanese *ukiyo-e* prints in Paris the nineteenth century to attempts at forced Americanization during the Occupation of Japan in the years following World War II, there is a rich historical tradition of appropriation of Eastern identities, subversion of Japanese culture by the West, and transcultural exchange between Japan and the United States. This behavior is by no means new but it is a relatively unexamined one, and through this project, I hope to contribute valuable insight into the analyses of Japanese visual culture and constructions of Orientalism in the modern era.

[6] According to Joseph Nye, soft power is "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies. When our policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, our soft power is enhanced." - Joseph Nye, *Soft Power*

Fandom & Identity

Chapter I

The Rise of Anime Fandom

How did a cute, electric mouse from Japan get his own float in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade? How did a foreign cartoon become a billion dollar industry with millions of fans across the United States? Furthermore, why in the world are people dressing up as these characters? Who are these people? These are the fans of Japanese animation, better known as *anime*, and they are a rapidly growing segment of the United States population. They are voracious consumers of Japanese popular culture and represent a vast cross-section of the population. From entire sections of booksellers like Barnes & Noble's devoted to Japanese comics (*manga*) to a twenty-four television network devoted to airing anime, Japanese popular culture has penetrated American culture deeply and rapidly. Though America's love affair with Japanese culture is long and storied (discussed in great detail in Chapter II), the popularity of Japanese animation is a relatively recent development, historically speaking. Japanese animation made its presence felt in the United States beginning in the 1960s with the animated television series *Astro Boy,* the landmark work from the "god of manga" himself Osamu Tezuka, Despite this initial penetration, America was a "tough market for Japanese animation – largely owing to hidebound American perceptions of animation as children's fare."[7]Anime continued to gain in popularity through the early 1970s as programs like *Speed Racer* "became popular with young American audiences."[8] While cartoons like these gained popularity amongst American youths, many did not even realize what they were watching was originally a Japanese cartoon. Ultimately, this exposure to Japanese animation "[introduced] a generation of American youth to the look and style of Japanese animation," setting the stage for years to come.[9]

[7] Kelts, Roland. Japanamerica, New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2007. pp. 11.
[8] Napier, Susan. Anime From Akira to Princess Mononoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2001. pp. 243.
[9] Ibid, pp. 243.

Even more important to the development and growth of anime's popularity in the United States was the proliferation of anime clubs and, eventually, anime conventions. Initially, anime fans would gather as smaller subsets at science-fiction and fantasy conventions, often meeting in hotel rooms for late-night marathon viewings of Japanese imports. Some fans knew and understood Japanese, and would "shout out summaries and off-the-cuff translations for the rest of the viewers," but the majority came and stayed for the "unusual and sophisticated graphics, rapid pacing, and 'adult' subject matter."[10] Particularly as the evening wore on, the subject matter would become increasingly graphic in terms of violence and sexuality, which undoubtedly influenced the first impressions of both fans and those who were only vaguely aware of the phenomenon. Indeed, it was precisely this "unusualness" that made anime so intrinsically appealing to those clusters of people, gathered around the television in a darkened hotel room, watching until the wee hours of the morning. As the old adage goes, "content is king," and such was the case for Japanese animation, which had a depth to it that simply was not true of American animation; they were "more engaging especially to North American kids raised on the slapstick gags and one-note portrayals…that dominated standard network animation."[11]

Perhaps the most important facet of the anime/manga fandom is that it was uniquely fan-driven and an immensely participatory culture. With the arrival of VCRs, other advanced video recording technologies (DVD, etc.), and the information and file-sharing nexus that is the Internet, a distinctive American anime subculture emerged. Beginning with its roots in the science fiction conventions of the seventies and eighties, fans would often swap videotapes of rare imported programs and make generation upon generation of bootleg versions until the image was barely discernable through the snowy static on the screen. This practice evolved into a

[10] Ibid.
[11] Kelts, Roland. Japanamerica. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. pp. 15.

practice known as "fansubbing," a portmanteau of "fan subtitling," with fans taking it upon themselves to subtitle anime programs that aired in Japan and make them available for free download on the Internet, often mere hours after they hit Japanese airwaves. These now-ubiquitous downloads are almost always prefaced with the announcement "subtitled by fans for fans," which is representative of the participatory nature of the culture, and also illustrative of how fan-driven the industry is on a more microscopic level.

One of the "most salient economic realities in anime's development" is the "increasing domination of the global film market by Hollywood."[12] While Japan still produces many fantastic live-action films, it is forced to compete for an increasingly small market share as Hollywood blockbusters flood the market. According to film writer Stuart Galbraith in 1994, "Today it is common to find seven of the top ten box office attractions in Japan to be American movies, and the number of Japanese made films has gone down to a tiny portion."[13] Consequently, more and more producers are turning to animation as an alternative. Able to be produced for a fraction of the cost, animation has both commercial and creative potential, made evident by cases such as in 1988 when postapocalyptic anime classic *Akira* bested *Return of the Jedi* at the box office to become the number one hit in Japan. Such is not always the case, as in recent years when the Japanese live-action film industry has experienced a resurgence in popularity and output, but this trend in the Japanese film industry during the nineties helped to make anime a truly viable medium.

Apart from economic reasons, why is animation so popular? With live-action cinema, the artist is bound by the certain limitations of the human body, special effects, and filming technology, whereas in anime can transcend those bounds and go to otherwise impossible lengths

[12] Napier, Susan. Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2001, pp. 19
[13] Ibid, pp. 19

in terms of imaginative detail, distinctive style, and unique scenarios. In short, the animator's imagination is the limit for what can be communicated to the audience. In particular, animation's "emphasis on metamorphosis can been seen as the ideal artistic vehicle for expressing the postmodern obsession with fluctuating identity."[14] Animation scholar Paul Wells describes the "primacy of the image and its ability to metamorphose into a completely different image" as a utility of animation which makes it poignant for contemporary viewers.[15]

The paradigm, it seemed, was shifting. Japan had undergone a series of image shifts in the American mind: from the villains of Pearl Harbor to mindless industrial automatons in the eighties to the arbiters of "cool" in all of Asia. When asked about the changing perceptions of Japan in America, Yoshiro Katsuoka, planning director at Marvelous Entertainment, one of the most prolific anime producers in Japan noted that it is "America that has changed, not Japan." He expands upon this further, using the Japanese concepts of *tatemae*, how one presents oneself publicly, and *honne*, how one truly feels, to explain the appeal of anime's intense visuals, comparatively mature subject matter, and overall visceral experience:[16]

> "People say we in Japan are the *tatemae* society, in that everything we say and do is merely on the surface and acts as a screen for our real thoughts and desires. But America is the true *tatemae* society! Puritanism is just *tatemae*. And so is the happy ending."[17]

Indeed, American tastes have undergone a polar shift. Initially, Japanese properties were bent to suit American tastes, neutered and stripped of much of the content that attracts so many of their global fans. However, nowadays "Americans are more avidly cultivating their private fantasies,

[14] Ibid, pp. 12
[15] Ibid, pp. 12
[16] Kelts, Roland. Japanamerica. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. pp. 24.
[17] Ibid.

pursuing their personal obsessions, deepening the divide between their public and their other selves."[18] As Roland Kelts puts it, they are, in short, "becoming American otaku."[19]

Cosplay: The Peak of Participation

"*God has given you one face and you make your selfes another*."
– William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

According to Frenchy Lunning, editor-in-chief of *Mechademia,* the premiere scholarly journal of anime and manga, "there is a peculiar but rapidly proliferating performance-based movement afoot in the global communities of fandom called *cosplay*."[20] As of 2009, at anime conventions across the world, increasing numbers of fans are gathering together to wear intricate, meticulously assembled costumes modeled after their favorite characters. Cosplayers spend massive amounts of time and money on painstakingly "constructing or purchasing costumes, learning signature poses and dialogue, and performing at conventions and parties, as they transform themselves from 'real world' identities into chosen (fictional) characters."[21] Not merely limited to dressing up as a character, the participants will also engage in a variety of activities, from hallway costume contests to masquerades to posing for pictures with other otaku and beyond. It is a vast and varied subculture with a diverse fan base, and it is rapidly gaining acceptance and popularity in the anime fan community.

According to the 2008 Oxford English Dictionary, cosplay is "the action or pastime of dressing up in costume, especially as a character from anime, manga, or video games;

[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Lunning, Frenchy. "Cosplay, Drag, and the Performance of Abjection." Presentation. SLSA Atlanta 2009. Atlanta, GA.
[21] Theresa Winge. "Costuming the Imagination: Origins of Anime and Manga Cosplay." Mechademia 1 (2006): pp. 65. Project MUSE. Tisch Library, Medford, MA. 17 Apr. 2010 <http://muse.jhu.edu/>.

performances involving people dressed in this way."[22] Its origins are somewhat murky, as there are few sources that discuss the history of cosplay. What sources are available are mostly online publications maintained by members of the anime/manga fandom, and are thus tainted by personal bias. As a result, the origins of cosplay are hotly debated amongst members of the fandom, but most agree that the term was coined by Nobuyuki "Nov" Takahashi. As a writer for anime publishing company Studio Hard, Takahashi, "in seeing *Star Wars* cosplayers at the 1984 Los Angeles Science Fiction Worldcon" deemed the term "*kosu-pure,"* in Japanese science fiction magazines. Moreover, inspired by the fans competing in the masquerades, he "encouraged his Japanese readers to incorporate costumes into their anime and manga conventions."[23] Takahashi was forced to develop this new term due to translational difficulties: masquerade, when translated into Japanese, means "an aristocratic costume party," which has much different connotations that those costume contests he saw at conventions.[24] Thus, he coined the new term and the burgeoning subculture had a name for itself.

Cosplay is a "highly social activity that occurs in specific environments," ranging from "anime and manga conventions" to "club meetings" to "karaoke events" and beyond.[25] These events are socially defined sites of play for the cosplayer, where one can find kindred spirits with similar interests, engage in a variety of performative opportunities, and actively participate within the fandom. Conventions hold certain events design specifically for cosplayers: the Masquerade and the Hall Contest. According to Lunning, the Masquerade is:

> "…usually a performance of skits prepared by cosplay groups of anime, manga, or game characters who perform either a parody, a scene that is actual or fictional, or a burlesque

[22] "Cosplay," Oxford English Dictionary Online. December 2008. <http://dictionary.oed.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/cgi/entry/50297435?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=cosplay&first=1&max_to_show=10> Accessed 14 May 2010.
[23] I Theresa Winge. "Costuming the Imagination: Origins of Anime and Manga Cosplay." Mechademia 1 (2006): pp. 67. Project MUSE. Tisch Library, Medford, MA. 17 Apr. 2010 <http://muse.jhu.edu/>.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid, pp. 74.

> of a song, karaoke or other musical performance that has only a passing relation to the narrative indicated. The performance [is] then judged and awards presented by a panel of 'expert's or convention guests, for various categories of costume preparation and performance."[26]

The Masquerade puts the spotlight on the cosplayer, allowing the participant to display their hard work and to embody the character in front of a massive audience. The Hall Contest literally takes place within the hallways of the convention space itself, while cosplayers "hang about performing, posing, and vogueing" while judges wander the hallways awarding prizes for various facets of the costumes and "'performances.'"[27] Beyond these events, the hallways themselves are constant sites of ludic activity, where con-goers and cosplayers intermingle, "performing and posing for photographs, and for each other."[28] It is through events like these that the cosplayer validates his or her identity vis-à-vis performing the character's identity.

One notable difference between American and Japanese cosplayers is the setting in which people will wear their costumes. American cosplayers will "wear their dress in nearly any setting," often leaving the safety of the convention space to ride public transportation or dine at nearby establishments.[29] Many Japanese cosplayers and conventions frown upon cosplayers wearing their costumes in "areas not designated for cosplayers," which arises from Japanese cultural values which place "community above the individual" and views the cosplaying subculture as outside of the acceptable norm.[30] To cosplay outside of these spaces is considered taboo by the Japanese participant, whereas the Western participant has fewer reservations about continuing the performance outside of the predefined boundaries. Some view this experience as liberating as they continue to live the life of their characters outside of the convention space,

[26] Lunning, Frenchy. "Cosplay, Drag, and the Performance of Abjection." Presentation. SLSA Atlanta 2009. Atlanta, GA.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Theresa Winge. "Costuming the Imagination: Origins of Anime and Manga Cosplay." Mechademia 1 (2006): pp. 73 . Project MUSE. Tisch Library, Medford, MA. 17 Apr. 2010 <http://muse.jhu.edu/>.
[30] Ibid.

which can be seen at once as both freeing and limiting. To most though, the spaces provided by cosplayers for cosplayers are the primary venues for the performance as they are considered safe, supportive spaces in which the cosplayer is free to experiment.

Perhaps the most important component of cosplay is what Theresa Winge refers to as "cosplay dress," which includes "all body modifications and supplements, such as hair, makeup, costume, and accessories, including wands, staffs, and swords."[31] Accuracy of portrayal is determined by the cosplayer, and for some it is a painstaking process. The costume must be an exact replica, which can be complicated by the fantastic nature of many anime characters. Many spend enormous amounts of time and money, taking extreme measures to transform their bodies ranging from wearing specialized contact lenses that change eye color to dyeing one's hair to wearing gravity-defying shoes and beyond in order to transform themselves into their chosen character. Others take a more minimalist approach and wear the "bare minimum of dress that communicates their chosen character."[32] For example, a man nicknamed "Sketch," a fixture of Anime Boston's cosplay community, related that he did all of his own leatherworking in order to create an impressive full-length trench coat. Another year, Sketch built a giant robot costume out of foam-core and lined it with home-soldered circuitry in order to make it light up on the exterior. Is such attention to detail and dedication to handcrafting each component essential to communicate the character? Not necessarily, but it illustrates the length to which some fans feel the need to go in order to assume their character's identity.

The cosplayer's connection to the raiment is often runs quite deep, as the majority of cosplay dress is self-created. Some items are purchased, but when combined with other articles of clothing and imbued with the cosplayer's projected identity, it enables the cosplayer to step

[31] Ibid, pp. 72.
[32] Ibid.

into the life of the character. Items like "wigs, cosmetics, and jewelry are often purchased" as they are difficult to construct on one's own and may be less expensive when bought pre-made than to build one from raw materials. Other items, like shoes, are store-bought, but then modified by the cosplayer to suit the character's needs. Regardless of the level of detail, these garments act as a sort of second skin to the cosplayer, enabling him or her to move fluidly from their true identity to that of their chosen character.

The Hidden Allure of Cosplay

> *No work and all play / I don't have to be me til' Monday*"
> - Steve Azar, "I Don't Have to Be Me ('Til Monday)"

What exactly is the appeal of cosplay? Indeed, why do so many people spend hours upon hours laboring over the minutiae of a costume that might only be worn for three days maximum? Simply put, the appeal of dressing up is seemingly encoded in all of us, whether or not we choose to act upon it. According to Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga, "'dressing up' is the most vivid expression of ludic secrecy, interweaving childhood terrors, sheer pleasure, mystic fantasy, and sacred awe."[33] In the act of dressing up, one assumes the essence of another being, and the act has the ability to make the esoteric exoteric. However, as Laurence Senelick notes, dressing up, much like cosplay, "requires an audience for a sense of gratification," which is why the majority of cosplay takes place in a convention atmosphere.[34] The convention space becomes a site of play, a safe space in which members of the fandom are free to try on and disrobe identities as they please. To do so in private can be rewarding, but only to a certain extent; cosplay is an inherently social activity and consequently requires an audience to achieve its full effect.

[33] Senelick, Laurence. The Changing Room. New York: Routledge. 2000. pp. 6
[34] Ibid.

The large cosplay contests at conventions are often referred to as the "Masquerade," a term which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as the act of "[passing] oneself off under a false character or *as* someone else; to have or assume the appearance of something else." In the realm of cosplay, people are indeed assuming the appearance of chosen characters, but moreover, they are assuming the identity of someone else. In this regard, masquerade has a "transgressive power," which it uses to overthrow socially dictated roles, and effects a "form of personal liberation."[35]

The performative environments created "for and by cosplay provide cosplayers with a variety of spaces for social interactions." Winge refers to such sites as "carnivalesque environments," spaces in which cosplay "merges fantasy and reality" to enable individuals to "be someone or something other than themselves.[36] In these environments, "cosplay characters, distinctive from their anime and manga origins, emerge and interact with other cosplay characters."[37] In effect, the simulacrum takes on a life of its own and becomes something new, a hybridization of the character and the human underneath. The enabling power of masquerade allows the participant to mold and reshape their identity, seemingly at will, in a safe, permissive space.

Cosplay is a form of "performative consumption" which one uses clothing and the body itself to metamorphose, in a sense, into a character.[38] Baudrillard called the human body the "finest consumer object, and cosplay seems to be evidence of this fact.[39] Many participants attach themselves physically and emotionally to the identities of their chosen characters. As

[35] Ibid, pp. 4. For more on this, see Terry Castle's works on masquerade in Georgian London.
[36] Theresa Winge. "Costuming the Imagination: Origins of Anime and Manga Cosplay." Mechademia 1 (2006): pp. 75. Project MUSE. Tisch Library, Medford, MA. 17 Apr. 2010 <http://muse.jhu.edu/>.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Hills, Matt. Fan Cultures. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 158
[39] Ibid, pp. 166.

media scholar Matt Hills writes, "the fan's sense of self is realized through the process of attachment."[40] The fact that fans "attempt to relive and embody 'cathartic' moments of emotion, long after the experience of the original emotion has passed, implies some kind of residual-depth psychology" within the fan-object itself.[41] Cosplay is, perhaps, the highest form of popular culture consumption as it requires the fan to invest all aspects of oneself in order to relive these 'cathartic moments.'

Frenchy Lunning writes of cosplayers and anime/manga fans as an inherently abjected population, representing "not only Kristevian abjection[42], but also in the everyday, poignant sense of the word."[43] Within their "abject profile and community," the members have "accumulated a cornucopia of identities that have been imaginatively suggested by anime and manga that mirror the lack of fixed identities." As a result, a true community and cult of desire has developed around the "desire and yearning 'of' and 'for' these popular cultural characters."[44] According to Sharon Kinsella, they represent the "refusal to grow up and take on adult social relations…[and]without social roles, [fans] had no fixed identities, no fixed gender roles, and no fixed sexuality."[45] Cosplay thus becomes a tool through which these people can define identities and ascribe them to themselves in a free-floating environment.

In essence, the cosplayer serves as a "mime of abjection, manifesting their abject status through "their visual morphology in costume." [46] This morphology is derived from the body of

[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid, pp. 42.
[42] Coined by Julia Kristeva, the Kristevian abjection is when the subject is forced to come face to face with the abject, which lies outside of the symbolic order. In this sense, the cosplayer is considered to be outside of the perceived social order and he/she is forced to come to terms with the fact that he/she is the abjected subject and do so through participation in fan activities in order to reaffirm his/her identity.
[43] Lunning, Frenchy. "Cosplay, Drag, and the Performance of Abjection." Presentation. SLSA Atlanta 2009. Atlanta, GA.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.

anime and manga and the bodies represented therein. These bodies are "in no way stabilized, and in no way actual, which makes them well within the purview of the potentially performable identities for the cosplayer.[47] The appeal of cosplay lies within its universality and its accessibility to an already abject population. As Lunning writes, the cosplayer's "'dressing up'" the "fashion of abjected excess, and as such, cosplay accepts and recognizes all body forms."[48] In short, cosplay enables those who feel marginalized or outside of the norm to redefine themselves in a supportive cultural sphere, giving themselves a sense of agency and mastery over their actions and existence.

Fan Culture as Participatory Culture

"*The surest indication of madness is that you want to run a convention*."[49]
- Walter Amos, anime fan and convention organizer.

Cosplay can be considered one of the purest expressions of fandom, but why does fandom matter? The simple, recursive answer is that fandom matters because it matters to those who are fans. Fans project their fears, hopes, and desires on to the fan object and, in a sense, transform it into the Other. The Other is "always a reflection and projection of ourselves" and doing so within the confines of fandom provides the fan with a sense of both security and a target upon which they can focus.[50] Anime and manga fans, many of whom are self-styled "geeks" or "nerds," view themselves as being marginalized by society and thus seek escape and affirmation through participation in fan activities like cosplay which allow them to create an identity for themselves which will enable them to gain the acceptance they seek. Fandom creates a landscape of belonging, a liminal space in which the participant can express one's true nature

[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Napier, Susan. From Impressionism to Anime. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2007. pp. 151
[50] Gray, J. Sandvoss, C., and Harrington, C.L.. Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World. New York: NYU Press. 2007, pp. 3

with other likeminded participants. For example, cosplay is an inherently social activity and thus takes place in spaces like fan conventions. Even if the cosplayer goes to the convention alone, "he or she is immediately brought into the community of cosplayers and begins to act as performer *and* audience."[51]

The twenty-first century has seen the advent of what cultural studies scholar Henry Jenkins calls the "interactive audience," a mass audience which both exists as a marketing concept and a "semiotic democracy."[52] With the rise of advanced communications and media technologies like the Internet, knowledge has been effectively deterritorialized. No longer is knowledge the sole province of experts; rather, the Web has created a participatory culture in which anyone can acquire knowledge of anything from cricket to Japanese animation. Scholars who study cultural trends like political scientist Robert Putnam lament that the increasing reliance on technologies like the internet will lead to "single strand cybercommunities and 'Cyberbalkanization' in which individuals speak only to a circle of 'like-minded intimates.'"[53] Yet, it is precisely the ability to connect with these like-minded intimates that transforms the fandom from isolated pockets of subculture to an interconnected community that supports and reinforces one's identity – both constructed and actual.

The onset of the digital era has changed the marketing landscape. More than ever, people have access to a vast array of transcultural goods and products. The development of global media is marked as a result of the intersection between new technology and the deregulation of national media industries.[54] For example, international satellite delivery systems and distributive Web-

[51] Lunning, Frenchy. "Cosplay, Drag, and the Performance of Abjection." Presentation. SLSA Atlanta 2009. Atlanta, GA.
[52] Jenkins, Henry. Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture. New York: New York UP. 2006. pp. 136.
[53] Susan Napier. "The World of Anime Fandom in America." Mechademia 1 (2006): pp. 48. Project MUSE. Tisch Library, Medford, MA. 17 Apr. 2010 <http://muse.jhu.edu/>.
[54] Crane, Diana. *Global Culture: Media, Arts, Policy, and Globalization.* New York: Routledge. 2002, pp. 4

based technologies (e.g. Bit Torrent, third-party file-hosting sites) made possible the "transnational dissemination of specific media."[55] The internet has played a colossal role in generating interest for anime in the United States: from message boards where one to fan art galleries to on-demand video services, the Internet is enabling a subculture to spread globally. Japanese producers of cultural products understand that participatory culture is the next wave as interconnectivity breeds a voracious appetite for popular culture of all shapes and sizes. Unlike other cultural products, anime's appeal is more visceral and, in some cases, it is entirely possible for the anime fan to enter its world. Roland Kelts elaborates: "fans of *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* can't go to Hogwarts or Middle Earth, but you can book a flight to Tokyo."[56]

However, all of this discussion begs the question: what does global popular media offer to the lonely twenty-first century fan? In the trend of what Harry Jenkins refers to as "pop cosmopolitanism," meaning the act of "[embracing] global popular media" as an "escape route out of the parochialism of [one's] local community."[57] In this case, anime and manga are the global media that fans use as a catalyst for escape, using fandom to exhibit "semiotic solidarity" with others who share their tastes in the global media market.[58] Fandom is in and of itself a participatory culture, which, when combined with "media convergence in a global context," enables fans to create new identities for themselves, granting them a sense of agency over their actions and actively participating in identificatory fantasies.[59] The world of fandom is simultaneously liberating and limiting – "allowing participants to try on new identities within a supportive communal space," such as the Internet or a convention, but only within said spaces.[60]

---

[55] Ibid.
[56] Kelts, Roland. Japanamerica. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2007, pp. 118.
[57] Jenkins, Henry. Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture. New York: New York UP. 2006. pp.152-153.
[58] Ibid, pp. 156.
[59] Ibid. pp. 152-153
[60] Napier, Susan J. From Impressionism To Anime. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. pp. 10

The rapid globalization of popular media has fundamentally altered the "cultural landscapes of belonging," and in doing so "situates national identity and belonging differently and superimposes itself on 'nationality' as a novel frame of reference values and consciousness [leading to a challenging of the] organicism and essentialism of national identities."[61] The era in which we live is fundamentally contradictory: our national and cultural identities are constantly being affirmed and reaffirmed while the ubiquitous transcultural flows of global popular media encourage us to seek out this Otherness from other cultures being piped into our lives. In terms of cosplay, it is the conduit through which millions of people are expressing themselves and constructing a new identity for themselves in the increasingly global market and as it grows and gains acceptance, it unites these otherwise isolated pockets of abject fans.

[61] Ibid, pp. 171

The Cult of Otherness

Chapter II

The Cult of Otherness

"*They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented.*"
– Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

Though cosplay may seem to be a recent phenomenon, it is part and parcel of a long history of Western cultural imperialism. By this, I mean that the West has a long-standing tradition of co-opting and appropriating Eastern cultural identities. Seeking Otherness, by which I mean the latent desire to acquire and become some aspect of another culture, has been an inherent human behavior for centuries, a sort of existential "the grass is always greener on the other side," if you will. In particular, the East has been an object of this "Otherness" since its first encounters with the West, enthralling the hearts and minds of countless Westerners. Famously, British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli once remarked that "the East is a career," meaning that what had once seemed like a grand mystery to the West could now be the object of any number of intellectual, economic, and other pursuits. As the West fixated the East within its colonial crosshairs, Orientalism emerged as a field of study, and, through the writings of men like Edward Said, it became synonymous with the development of an entrenched mode of thought, a self-fulfilling prophecy of Western colonial and, in some cases, cultural dominance.

Before examining the effects of Orientalism on Western culture and interactions with nations like Japan, one must first understand what is meant by the term as it has accrued a variety of connotations since its roots in fourteenth century scholarship. At its essence, Orientalism can be defined as the study of Eastern cultures by the West, yet as one looks deeper, such a definition proves wholly insufficient. According to the Oxford English dictionary, the only similar definition is the "knowledge of the languages, cultures, etc., of the Orient," attributed to Lord Byron in 1811, but this definition is considered to be obsolete and rare, at best. Indeed, how does one define such a broad and dynamic term? Such was the challenge that Palestinian-American

literary theorist Edward Said tackled in his masterwork, *Orientalism*. Said defines Orientalism as "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and 'the Occident.'"[62] In a more practical sense, however, he defines Orientalism as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."[63] In short, Orientalism is an intellectual framework designed to create an image of the 'Orient' based on a series of Western cultural, political, economic and historical imperatives to reinforce Western dominance and subvert Eastern soft power.

To many in both the East and the West, Orientalism is the enabling force for cultural imperialism. More succinctly, through the academic and sociocultural construct of Orientalism, Eastern cultural modes can be subverted, warped, and molded to fit a Western ideal. From approximately 1765 until 1850, the "virtual epidemic of Orientalia" seized every major "poet, essayist, and philosopher of the period," resulting in a deluge of Orientalist scholarship which idealized and romanticized the Orient to the point where they were no longer a people, but something to be collected.[64] For example, during the first part of the twentieth century, Orientalist scholarship was used to reinforce phrenological notions that Asian peoples were racially inferior to Euro-American peoples. Said expanded upon this misguided practice, lamenting that "so far as the West was concerned, during the nineteenth and twentieth century, an assumption had been made that the Orient and everything in it was … patently inferior" to the West. Through its interactions with the East and the cult of Orientalist scholarship that was rapidly emerging, the West embraced its role as "spectator, judge, and jury of every facet of

[62] Said, Edward. *Orientalism.* New York: Random House. 1979. pp. 2
[63] Ibid, pp. 3.
[64] Ibid, pp. 53

Oriental behavior," with Orientalist scholarship serving to reinforce what the West already presumed to be "true."[65]

One cannot discuss Orientalism without the term "cultural imperialism" appearing time and time again. Yet what exactly is meant by the term cultural imperialism? According to Diana Crane, it is "a kind of cultural domination by powerful nations over weaker nations." It has been called a "pervasive" force, reflective of Western (American) values, and a catalyst for the "homogenization of culture." Some have even gone as far as to suggest it is synonymous with "Americanization."[66] Unlike globalism however, which is defined as the "interconnection and interdependency of all global areas," cultural imperialism seeks not only to connect these transnational flows, but to overtake, co-opt, and supplant in some form.[67] With the dawn of the digital age, cultural imperialism has been, to a certain degree, re-conceptualized as media imperialism, which with regard to the United States and Japan certainly seems to be the case.

The dawn of the digital era has created a global media market as a result advanced distribution technologies and the deregulation of national media industries. In an age of cultural globalization, hard power and military posturing have become only half the equation; the other half is what Joseph S. Nye termed "soft power." In his landmark book *Bound to Lead*, Nye defines the now-ubiquitous term as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies. When our policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, our soft power is enhanced." For example, Japan has long been an "object of fantasy in the West" serving as an "object of fantasy" which the United States can compare itself to as a romanticized version of

[65] Ibid, pp. 109.
[66] Crane, Diana. *Global Culture: Media, Arts, Policy, and Globalization.* New York: Routledge. 2002, pp. 3
[67] Ibid, 3

itself. If "fantasy is the mise-en-scene of desire," then the rapid penetration of Japanese culture (particularly anime/manga) in the American market does not come as a surprise.[68]

Japanese Cultural Policy and Western Influence

Japanese cultural policies were established in the Meiji Era (1868-1911) to give "distinction to Japanese society by creating cultural symbols that contributed to national prestige."[69] The Japanese saw Western culture as a reference point for evaluating their own culture. After Commodore Matthew Perry opened Japan to the world with his Black Ships, the previously closed empire proved its own knack for rapid acculturation by assimilating and improving upon many Western innovations. After a rapid industrialization process, Japan instituted cultural policies based on promoting national integration and improving the international reputation of the nation. The creation of new cultural policy resulted in the creation of new public values: unlike the United States, the Japanese supported the "organization of and assistance to art and culture festivals" and the "subsidizing of cultural products" and "artists-in-residence programs."[70]After the Meiji Restoration of 1868, when the modern nation-state was founded, concepts of culture, visual arts, and fine arts were imported to Japan and existing artifacts were re-conceptualized as "art" and "culture."[71] At first, traditional cultures were neglected or devalued as the Japanese tended to make direct comparisons based on a decidedly European aesthetic. For the Meiji government, though, culture and arts were seen as material for building national prestige. Consequently, it employed a combination of national cultural policy that emphasized high culture and private cultural enterprises that respond to consumers' tastes, even to this day. However, one result of all this cultural movement and policy-making is that

[68] Napier, Susan J. From Impressionism To Anime. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. pp. 6
[69] Crane, Diana. *Global Culture: Media, Arts, Policy, and Globalization.* New York: Routledge. 2002, pp 49
[70] Ibid, pp. 50
[71] Ibid, pp. 51

Japan now finds itself in a "soft power conundrum." Popular culture, which is arguably one of their greatest exports and possible avenues of soft power, has never received the same degree of support as Japanese high culture; rather, the Japanese focus on high culture and face difficulties associated with trying to place Japanese culture within the framework of Western concepts of art and culture.[72]One can attempt to understand the role of Japanese visual culture vis-à-vis Foucault's notion of "technologies of the self": in constructing a national body politic within a new globalized order, cultural policy makers also define the role of individual citizens.[73] This issue becomes a particularly sticky one in the "electronic, postmodern world" because as nations like America, a leader in the field of exported television programming, gain increased global marketshare, "stereotypes by which the Orient is viewed" are reinforced. America has been called a cultural imperialist by some.[74] In a phrase, the cultural imperialist view can be summarized as the "domination of one country's system of symbolically producing and reproducing constructed realities over another's production and reproduction of self identity."[75] In the case of Japan, policymakers equated Westernization with modernization, which meant the adoption of Western ideals in order to live up to the constructed expectations and identity that Western participant-observers and colonialism had thrust upon Japan. Now both Japan and the United States (albeit, to a lesser extent than Japan), are caught in the paradox of the modern era – various national and international identities are reaffirmed by the increase of transnational flows which in turn incite openness to different identities—a vicious cycle to be certain.

Corollary to all of this is the theory that Japan produces culturally neutral products for sale, including (and especially) animated film, in which physical, racial, and ethnic differences

[72] Ibid, pp. 59
[73] Ibid, pp. 165
[74] Said, Edward. *Orientalism.* New York: Random House. 1979. pp. 26
[75] Crane, Diana. *Global Culture: Media, Arts, Policy, and Globalization.* New York: Routledge. 2002, pp. 217

have been erased or softened. This new wave of hybrid products are both a combination of the foreign and the indigenous, the familiar and the new – an Orientalist cyborg, if you will. However, it should be noted that this theory, also known as the "mukokuseki" or "statelessness" theory, has been largely discredited by much of the scholarship on anime and manga fan studies. As parts of it are universally applicable, such as the fact that Japanese cultural products like anime are the byproduct of cultural interchanges, it proves too empirically narrow when applied at the individual level. Rather, calling Japanese cultural products the result of "cultural hybdrization" is more appropriate than to deem them "culturally neutral." Indeed, they are local products for a global market. While Japan glocalizes cultural exports, the United States has supported its media empire through clever application of cultural policy.[76] According to Crane, the goals of cultural policy are threefold:

1) Protecting a country's culture from domination by cultural achievements of other countries
2) Creating and maintaining international images.
3) Developing and protecting international markets and venues for country's cultural exports.

The content of global culture is heavily influenced by American media industries, which enjoy a dominance based on economic and technological influences and advantages. Theoretically, this dominance will decline as other nations make advances and catch up to the United States, but for now, one can only see evidence of that in films like *Blade Runner*.[77] In the United States, the private sector dominates the arts and cultural policy initiatives; there is low government involvement, which Crane suggests is perhaps due to the country's puritanical/republican

[76] Glocalize is a portmanteau of globalize and localize emerging from the corporate catch-all slogan of "think globally, act locally." In Japan's case, it creates products for a global market with a local appeal – meaning that they do not appear distinctly Japanese.
[77] In *Blade Runner*, the world of the story is a polyglot society that is very obviously heavily influenced by Japanese culture, hence the use of it in my example.

tradition.[78] Since the inception of the American republic, citizens and policymakers were deeply concerned with preserving a "virtuous republic," epitomized by the struggle to balance virtue with luxury. For example, painter Thomas Cole of the Hudson River School rather succinctly summarized fears in his five-part series, "The Curse of Empire," which depicts a classical republic's rise and fall. Indeed, Americans wanted to believe that their republic was a modern Cincinnatus myth, a virtuous republic created by selfless men, immune to the declension that comes with cultural excess and decadent luxury. As such, too much art was regarded as a luxury, which in turn would lead to decadence and the fall of empire. Consequently, arts patronage has long been perceived as a private responsibility in the United States.[79]

Beginning in 1957, the Ford Foundation began a program to revitalize the arts, an initiative widely perceived as the origin of American public arts patronage. Point of fact, it was not until 1965 that the National Endowment for the Arts was established. Yet, it was this "lack of high culture tradition" and a "broad popular base for cultural activities" that gave the United States such an unyielding appetite to consume popular culture.[80] This appetite for popular culture in tandem with its status as a global cultural hegemony uniquely suits the United States' "conspicuous consumption" of Japanese soft power. America uses the Japanese cultural paradigm as a sort of dark mirror through which it hopes to view an idealized version of itself. Yet, it is precisely this manipulation that ultimately weakens the efficacy of Japanese soft power and its cultural impact abroad. This development, however, is by no means recent; rather, it has been taking place for years and years.

[78] Crane, Diana. *Global Culture: Media, Arts, Policy, and Globalization.* New York: Routledge. 2002, pp., 31
[79] Ibid, 39
[80] Ibid, 42

Dressing the Part: A Proud Tradition

At first glance, the explosion of popularity of Japanese culture may seem like a recent phenomenon, but there is a long historical tradition in the West of not only obsessive Othering of Japanese culture, but also of cosplay itself. Yet, in the years following World War II, this tradition all but disappeared, seemingly vanquished from the nation's collective memory. In the years following World War II, rather than Japanese culture traveling across the pond to America, it was American culture that inundated the Japanese market. During the Occupation of Japan, there was a veritable flood of American popular culture coming into Japan; from jazz to rock n' roll to American television shows like *All In The* Family and beyond, American culture was inescapable. When asked if during his youth he liked American cultural imports, renowned Japanese author Haruki Murakami retorted that "you had no choice. It was everywhere."[81] Throughout the seventies and eighties, the American media showed images of drone-like Japanese workers "singing the company song, doing ridiculous morning calisthenics, and getting into packed trains like lemmings," which created a serious disconnect between popular perception and the reality of Japan.[82] Indeed, America did not always embrace Japanese products in the same way we do today. During the 1980s, the American automobile industry had lost its first-place standing to Japan, and American automakers were outraged. In one particularly memorable instance, Congressmen were shown destroying a Japanese car with sledgehammers on television in a violent, dramatic effort to get consumers to "Buy American." With the prevalence of such imagery and, in some cases, anti-Japanese sentiment, it is understandable that many believe that the boom in popularity of Japanese popular culture is a recent phenomenon.

[81] Kelts, Roland. "Anime, Manga and More: Japanese Pop Culture." Lecture, Anime Boston, Boston, MA, 3 April 2010.
[82] Ibid.

However, such is not the case -- the United States has a long tradition of Japanophilia, dating back to the 1860s.

After Commodore Matthew C. Perry's Black Ships sailed into Edo Bay in 1853, forcibly opening the country to interaction and trade with the West, America and much of Europe became enthralled with the strange new world that Japanese culture represented. For many, Japan was still "too inaccessible and dangerous for all but the most intrepid," but that would change in the years following the American Civil War when nascent American imperialism in tandem with the "inauguration of regular steamship service between San Francisco and Yokohama in 1867 and the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad" resulted in an "unprecedented boom in leisure travel to Japan."[83] Travel for the sake of "self-improvement and education" was a ritual long-sanctioned by American society, and often took the place of a formal education, leading people to travel abroad in droves during the nineteenth century. With the scars of war fresh in their minds, many Americans had become "increasingly attentive to how they might make their own lives more culturally refined." Having been recently opened to tourism and with a general mania for all things Japanese beginning to fulminate, people of means began travel to the far-off land. In an 1865 issue of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine,* Robert Tomes illustrated just how the paradigm had shifted:

> "The American is a migratory animal. He walks the streets of London, Paris, St. Petersburg, Berlin, Vienna, Naples, Rome, Constantinople, Canton, and even the causeways of Japan, with as confident a step as he treads the pavements of Broadway."[84]

Indeed, after years of war, America was ready to turn its gaze out towards the world and experience its myriad delights. During this period travelogues came into vogue and people read them voraciously as a means to experience far-off lands, particularly if they could not afford to do so themselves. These travelogues were "compendia of information about places that also

[83] Guth, Christine. *Longfellow's Tattoos.* Seattle: University of Washington UP. 2004. pp. xi
[84] Ibid, pp. 3

conveyed attitudes and expectations for both those at home and future visitors."[85] In short, American conceptions of places like Japan were filtered through the lens of whoever happened to have written the travelogue. Such was part of the self-fulfilling prophecy of Orientalism: "what the Orientalist does is confirm the Orient in his readers' eyes" and in the process create a Western projection of what the Orient itself is. As Said wrote, it is through processes like these that the "Orient becomes a living tableau of queerness," strange but designed to be palatable for conspicuous consumption by the West.

For centuries, Western travelers to the Far East had believed that "gaining access to these exotic societies required adopting local attire," which would give them a sense of cultural authenticity[86] While the adoption of these costumes suggested a respect for native customs and traditions, the practice was undermined by the Western wearer's evident sense of cultural superiority. Moreover, this cultural mimicry was often employed by Westerners as a tool to reinforce colonial dominance over its subjects. In his landmark essay "Of Mimicry and Man," Homi K. Bhaba writes that mimicry is the "sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power.[87] This reproduction both "challenges and destabilizes the authority of the original," while reinforcing Western superiority. Thus, cosplay, when considered in tandem with the empowering feelings of Otherness, is potent as both a colonial tool and a prominent element of modern fandom because it creates a "space of abjection" on which these subconsciously fetishized "imaginary identities" are supplanted by identities that grant the cosplayer a temporary sense of agency and mastery. Indeed, the cosplayer of modern day and of antiquity does not simply wear the clothing of

[85] Ibid, pp. 8
[86] Ibid, pp. 136.
[87] Bhaba Homi K. "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World,* ed. Cooper, Frederick and Stoler, Anna Laura. Berkley: University of California UP, 1997. pp. 153.

another culture, but rather he "enacts, embodies, and performs identities through a role scripted through the narratives of popular culture and the gender anxieties of fans."[88] By fashioning oneself an identity and donning a different "social skin," one can construct a new self-identity, firmly placing oneself both within and outside of the culture being imitated.[89]

A potent symbol of this newfound interest in Japan and, moreover, someone who can be considered a "prototypical cosplayer" is the international playboy and man of leisure Charley Longfellow, son of renowned poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. A man of means, Charley was able to travel the world and would often dress up in local regalia and have photographs taken of him in order to make carte de visites for personal recollection, and to send home to his family as souvenirs. Intending to remain in Japan for a few months, he was so enthralled that he wound up staying for two years where he built himself a house in Tokyo's Tsukiji district and slowly, but surely began crafting a new identity for himself--getting many iconic Japanese images tattooed on his body, dressing up in various Japanese "costumes", and embracing the performative aspect inherent to this behavior. The process of acquiring these tattoos and wearing traditional Japanese clothing was both a way through which Euro-American visitors could "[claim] Japanese heritage to fashion their self-identity" and a means to construct a new identity for themselves which stand in stark contrast to their own cultural heritage, an early form of Othering which can be seen as a sort of primitive cosplay.[90]

Many Western visitors saw the act of "dressing in Japanese clothing through a prism of romantic primitivism." Appropriating Japanese cultural identity and "exercising the option of dressing in the local manner was an implicit part of the rhetoric of imperialism", a collective

[88] Lunning, Frenchy. "Cosplay, Drag, and the Performance of Abjection." Presentation. SLSA Atlanta 2009. Atlanta, GA.
[89] Guth, Christine. *Longfellow's Tattoos.* Seattle: University of Washington UP. 2004. pp. 125
[90] Ibid, pp. xviii-xx

notion of identifying "us" as Westerners against the non-Western "them."[91] One notable difference from cosplay's present-day incarnation is that "appropriating Japanese clothing from an observational standpoint further implied that it was a cultural artifact that needed to be saved" and that the "observer had the authority and responsibility to carry out this curatorial task." Yet, when those like Longfellow posed for photographs while wearing Japanese raiment it was a form of "narcissistic play-acting," which made use of the "trappings of difference" to rebuff the conventions of his own society while "[endorsing] those of an alternative one."[92] Based on interviews with many cosplayers and active participants of the anime fandom, these reasons are among the most primary these anime fans offered for engaging in cosplay in the first place – the ability to position oneself both within another culture and remain above it.

Many travelers often find themselves remarking how an experience in a new country was not what they had imagined that it would be, meaning that their perceptions of the destination, gleaned from books and word-of-mouth did not match up with the realities of the situation. The Orientalist mode works to both foist an essentialist viewpoint of what a culture should be upon its peoples and reinforces Western notions of what the culture should be as correct or more authentic.[93] In the mid-nineteenth century, for instance, "a craze for Japanese things" took hold in Paris, marking the beginning of the West's passionate love affair with Japanese identity, as Japanese *ukiyo-e* prints began making their way across the globe, discarded as scraps by the Japanese, being used as packaging for other products.[94] The resultant fervor for Japanese curios, a term derived from "curiosity" that emerged during the Victorian era, created a sort of "commoditization of ethnicity" and simultaneously thrust the Japanese culture into the

[91] Ibid, pp. 136.
[92] Ibid, pp. 141
[93] Said elaborates on the concept of essentialism in Orientalism in "The Scope of Orientalism, Ch. IV: Crisis" pp. 92-110.
[94] Napier, Susan J. From Impressionism To Anime. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. pp. 21

international spotlight.[95] Vision is "essential in the apprehension of any exotic country" and in the case of a country like Japan, which has been characterized as a "paradise of curios," the act of collecting (goods, experiences, etc.) was central to creating its image.[96] By opening its doors to tourism and trade, "Japan, like its goods, became a marketable commodity."[97]

The somewhat unintentional global dispersion of ukiyo-e prints resulted in paintings like Monet's *La Japonaise* (1876), a portrait of his wife, a blonde-haired European woman, dressed in a traditional Japanese kimono. Such a painting can be viewed as a sort of "impudent cosplay," a means through which this Western woman is "trying on" a new identity, which, in this case, is an Oriental one.[98] *La Japonaise* was a "brightly colored gauntlet" thrown to the artistic world of nineteenth century Europe. Inspiring mixed reactions from critics, one questioned whether the painted woman could be "a specimen of the future," while others xenophobically belittled it.[99] Though the subject of much controversy at the time, Monet's Japanese influence ultimately proved to be lasting, helping to cement what one might refer to as Japan's first pop culture boom abroad, affecting all realms of society -- everything from influencing Western art to popularizing Japanese fashion.

Indeed, the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was a pivotal era in the advent of Japanese culture gaining popularity on the international stage as men like painter Vincent Van Gogh and writers like Lafcadio Hearn gave words to the struggle many Westerners were silently undergoing. The struggle in question is the trend of Westerners seeking the Otherness of Japan as a sort of asylum from the "disappointing nineteenth-century Western self."[100] A "moving target"

[95] Guth, Christine. *Longfellow's Tattoos.* Seattle: University of Washington UP. 2004. pp. 92
[96] Ibid, pp. xiv-xv
[97] Ibid, pp. xiv
[98] Napier, Susan J. From Impressionism To Anime. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. pp. 21
[99] Ibid, pp. 22
[100] Ibid, pp. 53

inside the "western imagination," men like Lafcadio Hearn sought to collect this Otherness in order to unite with it.[101] Indeed, Hearn can be considered "America's first otaku," in that he, like many other "fans" of Japan, idealized the fan object, creating a "cultural repertoire which 'holds' the interest of the fan and constitutes the subject's symbolic project of self."[102] While Vincent Van Gogh wore the costume of a Japanese priest in order to assume another identity and Charley Longfellow assumed the costume of famous Japanese archetypes and kabuki characters (like the *otokodate*) and nineteenth century Westerners would mimic Oriental modes of dress, "posing with fans and acting in 'Oriental' [living tableaus]," those like Lafcadio Hearn (and in some instances Longfellow) represented the other extreme of "cosplay," going so far as to assume a Japanese name, traditional Japanese dress, and essentially attempting to "transcend [his] national and ethnic identity."[103]

In a sense, "going native" was an "affirmation of identification with otherness" and a form of "conspicuous consumption that served simultaneously to differentiate" one from one's native culture and "draw the attention of the Japanese," in an often vain attempt to fit in culturally. Although Hearn's form of "cultural transvestitism" as some refer to it, could be interpreted as Orientalist behavior, as a "motivation encased in a spirit of domination," such is not necessarily the case; for people like Hearn and Longfellow, this deep need to identify with the Other is more of a "form of intense projection, relating to a basic human need for connection," a desire to escape the drudgery of Western identity and find solace in the mysterious archetype of the Eastern Other.[104]

---

[101] Ibid.
[102] Hills, Matt. Fan Cultures. New York: Routledge. 2002. pp. 109.
[103] Napier, Susan J. From Impressionism To Anime. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. pp. 165
[104] Cosplay exists on a gradient with people dressing up as their favorite characters at fan conventions on one end and those like Lafcadio Hearn and William Adams , who rather than playing a specific character, would don the apparel of the Japanese in an effort to play at belonging to the culture in which they steeped themselves. While it is not as specific as modern cosplay, it is still motivated by many of the same factors and thus warrants mentioning.

Even the fan convention is not a new paradigm; rather, the international expositions of the late nineteenth/early twentieth century can be seen as proto-conventions on a macro scale. At these conventions "performance remained an important key to how [Japan] was perceived," a fact which forced it to conform to Western stereotypes and reaffirmed these images in the Western mind.[105] As Robert Rydell noted, the performance served as an "opportunity to reaffirm [the fairgoers'] collective national identity in an updated synthesis of progress and white supremacy." Taking place during the height of colonialism, events like these international expositions played an important part in developing the Orientalist rhetoric and scholarship. Moreover, these conventions also laid the groundwork for a lasting appreciation and voracious appetite for Japanese cultural goods. Douglas McGray wrote, "Culture flows from American power and American supply creates demand," but likewise the American demand also dictates what international goods must be in supply and since Commodore Perry thrust the proverbial doors open in the 1850s, America has demanded Japanese culture.[106] Such are the historical roots of the cult of Japan and cosplay in the West, though it would not be until the boom of fan culture and the advent of global popular media that this particular fan culture would reemerge, reigniting its spark with science-fiction conventions and continue to manifest itself through the present day, appearing at everything from certain popular movie premieres to conventions like Anime Boston around the nation.

[105] Ibid, pp. 56.
[106] McGray, Douglas. "Japan's Gross National Cool." *Foreign Policy*, June/July 2002. < http://www.douglasmcgray.com/grossnationalcool.html> Accessed 4 April 2010.

Orientalism or Identity Crisis?

Chapter III

Identity Crisis

"*The whole of Japan is pure invention*."
- Oscar Wilde

Cosplay exists within world of a grays – straddling the fine line between Orientalizing the Japanese subject matter and something less aggressive, the fulfillment of the identificatory fantasy, a phenomenon described as a "narcissistic form of identification" through which the fan views the "object of his or her engagement as 'an extension of the fan's very self.'"[107] In its modern form, cosplay is an important medium for the construction of selfhood within a rapidly globalizing media-driven culture. In an increasingly de-territorialized world, people gravitate toward communities of those who share similar tastes in the global media market. Yet, globalization is a double-edged sword – as the world becomes increasingly connected, it simultaneously becomes more isolating. Human interaction is supplanted by messages dancing across electric wires. Media scholar, Henry Jenkins, puts the modern age in appropriately bleak terms: "Fans, like all of us, inhabit a world where traditional forms of community life are disintegrating."[108] However, all is not lost; people also use global popular media as a means to connect with one another to escape the "identity that they find disappointing," and for many, cosplay provides such an escape.[109]

As mentioned in Chapter I, the emergence of a robust anime/manga fandom in the United States and the proliferation of cosplay as a pastime are forms of what Henry Jenkins terms "pop cosmopolitanism." If the anime fan is part of an abject population – many of them are self-styled "geeks" or "nerds" – then cosplay enables them to reaffirm themselves by presenting an opportunity for them to transform themselves into their chosen characters. Within the safety of

[107] Napier, Susan. From Impressionism to Anime. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2007, pp. 165.
[108] Ibid, pp. 154.
[109] Ibid.

the anime fandom, members can try on different identities as they please. This "trying on" stage, or freedom to play or experiment with new identities is a crucial part of cosplay because "to transform oneself is to change one's identity, to become Other if only for a little while." Anime fandom, in effect, provides fans a means for escaping the drudgery of everyday life and a tool to transform themselves. The anime convention grounds, themselves, are liminal spaces that are marked by an atmosphere of, what Meri Davis, chairperson of A-Kon, refers to as "unconditional acceptance and support."[110]

Participation in fandom results in the acquisition of subcultural capital, which is the "knowledge and expertise that one gains about the object of one's enthusiasm that allows one to feel comfortable and gain status among other fans."[111] Anime fandom has always depended heavily upon fan input and fan interaction, and nowhere is this dependence more evident than in cosplay. Cosplay is a highly active form of involvement in which people will spend months and months meticulously laboring over minute details for a costume that they will wear only for a few days. Cosplay is a "form of immersion into an intense state of consciousness."[112] As a form of performative consumption, it enables the participant to surpass the limitations and restrictions of normal society and, as one cosplayer put it, "embrace the challenge of stepping into another character's shoes, a character whom you love and with whom you interact on a daily basis, and become them…even if it's only for a few days."[113] Cosplay, in effect, allows fans to "transcend the limitations of human bodies, to explore new frontiers where the genetic inheritance with which one was born can be cast away."[114]

[110] Ibid, pp. 161
[111] Ibid, pp. 150
[112] Ibid, pp. 162
[113] [Name withheld by request] Interview by author. Voice recording. Boston, MA., 3 April 2010
[114] Napier, Susan. From Impressionism to Anime. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2007, pp. 167

Critics of fandom and fan cultures posit that modern modes, like the "cult of celebrity", have been harmful in our increasingly isolating world. They view fans as "alienated souls" who seek to identify with these celebrity archetypes and icons. One psychologist even went as far as to say that "we've given the losers in life and sex a rare chance to express their dominance."[115] To those who do not understand cosplay, the reasons people choose to participate in such an activity are viewed as the irrational byproducts of an alienated, atomized, and isolated modern society. The "absence of a stable identity is seen as leaving the individual open to irrational appeals," giving the image of the "isolated, 'mass man,' one cut off from friends, family, and community, devoting themselves entirely to this fan object.[116] Such sweeping generalizations though are often predicated on isolated incidents in which one particular fan escalates things too far, which can happen for a number of reasons (psychoses being only one of them).[117] I argue, however that these incidents are too few and far between to posit a strong correlation between fandom and pathological behavior.

As, what some have termed, the "only major non-Western form of global popular culture," anime occupies a very interesting space in the global identificatory consciousness. It presents stories that are universally appealing, and complex, three-dimensional characters, unlike many of the comparably flat characters in Western series, who are often characterized as "too stereotypically good or bad, strong or weak."[118] As a result, many people find something strangely relatable about these Japanese characters that they simply do not see mirrored in their Western counterparts. Helping aid this identification with and desire to unite with the Eastern

[115] Jensen, Joli. "Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Characterization". Popular Culture: Production and Consumption. Medford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001. pp. 301-305
[116] Ibid.
[117] For example, John Hinckley's attempted assassination of President Ronald Reagan in order to get actress Jodie Foster to notice him.
[118] Napier, Susan J. From Impressionism To Anime. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. pp. 172-173

Other is the fact that anime is not only not limited by natural constraints, but also that many of its characters do not appear typically Japanese. That anime characters do not necessarily take on a traditional or stereotypical Japanese appearance -is not to say that they appear Western; rather, they are simply "anime" or "manga style." The fundamentally non-referential nature of anime characters and the "modes and tropes of fantasy" make them particularly suited for becoming the objects of identificatory fantasies, further aided and abetted by the archetypal qualities which many "fantasy" characters exhibit.[119]

Within an identificatory fantasy, characters serve as "idealized role models for the development of a fan's identity," drawing upon sentiments of "nostalgia and wishful thinking."[120] For example, fantasy tropes are full of extraordinary character types, particularly so within anime. Within these hyper-idealized states of being – "metamorphosis, supernatural powers, or apocalypse," all of which can act as effective lenses through which to examine the human condition – people find pieces of themselves, elements of who they are and who they want to become. Consequently, they develop lasting bonds with these characters, who seem more "fleshed out" than their Western foils.[121] Humans are constantly striving to recreate the sensation referred to by Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi as the "phenomenology of enjoyment," in which he posits that there are times in our lives when we feel a sense of *flow*, meaning that we are in control of our actions, causing a deep sense of enjoyment and generating a feeling of agency's over our own lives. Pleasure, in turn, motivates our actions, stimulating new emotional experiences, each of which strives to recreate that feeling of mastery.[122]

[119] Ibid, pp. 177-179.
[120] Ibid., pp. 179
[121] Ibid.
[122] Ibid, pp. 10.

The primary appeal of cosplay is relatively obvious – unlike the appeal of Halloween and scores of collegiate costume parties, cosplay goes beyond being mere dress-up, allowing one to transform, to "change one's identity, [to] become the Other," if only temporarily.[123] From an acting perspective, it is easy to understand the appeal of stepping into a role and bringing it to life, but something about cosplay is different. Within the confines of cosplay, one's identity is not scripted; one is not playing as a character, rather one *becomes* that character. In order to get a broader perspective, I interviewed approximately 150 people at Anime Boston over the course of three years, both in person and digitally, questioning them about the length of their participation in fandom, their reasons for cosplaying, and the types of cosplay they would pursue (Western vs. Eastern), whether or not they spoke Japanese and more.[124] By no means is this study a definitive ethnography or demography of cosplay fandom, but it provides an interesting look, nonetheless, into the psyche of many cosplayers. From their enthusiasm for sewing and costuming to the "escape" provided by assuming these characters' identities to the sense of community that both the cosplayers and fans feel when one is able to literally "become" the shared fan object, it seemed as though cosplay was an almost cathartic experience for the interviewees, one that allowed them to shed the humdrum nature of their everyday personas. One particularly eloquent interviewee summed things up rather nicely: "Someone made a slideshow for [Anime Boston 2008] recently, and there was a song that had a line which truly defined the life of a cosplaying con-goer. 'I don't have to be me til' Monday.'" That's what cosplay is. Being someone that, to

[123] Ibid, pp. 160
[124] For a more comprehensive demography of anime fandom, please read Chapter 5, "The Fifth Look: Western Audiences and Japanese Animation" in Susan Napier's Anime From *Akira* to *Princess Mononoke*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan. 2001, pp. 239-256

the rest of the world, is weird, crazy, and probably out of their mind…but in reality, you're just being yourself."[125]

What's Wrong with the West?

One of the most obvious questions in regards to anime's popularity in the United States is "what's wrong with the West?" Why aren't American youths developing the same deep, emotional connections with American intellectual properties and characters as they are with Japanese ones? Since fandom is not a uniquely Eastern phenomenon (e.g. Western series like *Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter, Star Wars*), why are there so staggeringly few people dressed as Western characters? This lack of "Western cosplay" is particularly intriguing in light of the fact that, according to popular lore, cosplay as it is understood today was inspired by Westerners dressing up as science fiction conventions in the 1970s and 1980s. Occasionally at anime conventions, one will come across an exception to this rule – a person dressed as Captain Jack Sparrow from Disney's *Pirates of the Caribbean,* for instance – but more often than not, one will be surrounded by ninjas from *Naruto,* mechas and pilots from *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, and all manner of girls from any number of series with shocks of iridescent hair. Amongst the interviewees, most of them speak little-to-no Japanese, citing only a "handful," of words acquired from watching subtitled programs, nowhere near even basic fluency. That being said, why was it that these people were making such deep, lasting connections with characters whose primary mode of communication is a language that is mostly unintelligible to the viewer?

One possible reasoning is that Western science fiction and fantasy are, for the most part, "less visual" than their Japanese counterparts. While there is a rich canon of characters from which to cull in franchises like *Star Trek, Star Wars,* and *Lord of the Rings,* they are all bound by the "limitations of live action cinema," whereas anime can transcend those bounds and go to

[125] Gouvisis, Anna. Interview by author. E-mail correspondence. Boston, MA., 1 April 2008.

otherwise impossible lengths in terms of imaginative detail, distinctive style, and unique scenarios, all of which pose both a "challenge and inspiration to [cosplayer's] creativity."[126] This distinction begs the question, how fundamentally different from one another are film and animation? From a narrative standpoint, they can both accomplish the same goals, creating an intensive audio-visual experience for the viewer. However, whereas imagination is limited by technological constraints in live-action cinema, animation is limited only by the artist's creativity, allowing for the creation of these larger than life characters and circumstances.

When asked whether or not they would cosplay as a character from a Western series, respondents were divided. Some replied that there were "no American characters worth cosplaying," while others replied that they had never done so, but would consider doing so if a character proved to be particularly appealing.[127] The accessibility of Japanese characters to American consumers is due, in part, to their "three-dimensional nature," but also to their somewhat amorphous "look." The fact that many anime characters reflect an Eastern image without appearing distinctly Japanese in appearance is very appealing to many fans who do not want to identify with a specific culture. One of the main attractions of anime pop culture is the opportunity it offers fans to experiment with a wide range of identieis, none of which are bound by specific cultural, ethnic, or gendered ties. Furthermore, since these characters are all part of a non-Western society with "fewer cultural connotations (to a Western fan)," there is an added sense of liberation and empowerment that comes with the cosplay experience. It is entirely possible that within this desire to carve out a new identity for themselves within the shared realm

[126] Napier, Susan J. From Impressionism To Anime. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, pp. 165-67

[127] It should also be noted that some respondents seemed to be erring on the side of political correctness, for fear of not wanting to sound shallow or biased. That being said, I doubt the veracity as to whether each of them would actually cosplay as an American/Western character. Hopefully, I will be proven wrong.

of fandom that a dash of Orientalism has been thrown in for good measure, which could potentially explain the virtual absence of Western characters receiving the cosplay treatment.

The Japanese Perspective

Another important facet to consider in this discussion of cosplay is the Japanese perspective of the phenomenon of cosplay in America. Indeed, what do members of the culture that invented the pastime think of its adoption by an international audience? Furthermore, is the reasoning behind cosplay the same for both Japanese and Americans? Does desire translate across time zones and language barriers? To begin with, there is a fundamental difference among basic fandom-specific nomenclature. For example, the term "otaku" in Japan has very different connotations than it does in America. While in America, "otaku" has been transformed into a positive force, an affirmation of fandom and a cry behind which fans can rally, in Japan, it gives off the image of a lonely obsessive person, wholly consumed by their hobby to the point of withdrawing from normal society. Studio GAINAX's *Otaku no Video* illustrates this point quite vividly by providing stark, saddening portraits of so-called "otaku." Primarily men, those featured in the film devoted themselves entirely to this artificial world, "escaping" entirely from the real world into this brightly colored alternate universe. Ultimately, their escape seems to be more damaging than cathartic, giving rise to stereotypes about fandom pathologies like those mentioned by media scholar Joli Jensen, which put forth the notion that all fans are frenzied, obsessed loners, driven solely by a devotion to their fan-object, perpetuating negative stereotypes of fandom as a whole.[128]

[128] Jensen is strongly against those who support these so-called "fandom pathologies," as am I. The evidence that claims to support them is far too thin to support up the weight of the accusations. Yet, when seeing examples like those in *Otaku no Video*, one starts to see what the critics are observing. See Jensen's article in *Popular Culture: Production and Consumption* for more.

Nonetheless, in order to get a better understanding of how Japanese fans view cosplay among Western fans, I interviewed several Japanese people at a cosplay event at the Kyoto International Manga Museum and at Kyoto University -- those with and without cosplay experience. The results were surprisingly varied, particularly in regard to understanding the motivation behind cosplay in the West. Those who had cosplay experience cited reasons like the escapism of "becoming someone else is really fun" and that the Japanese also have a "desire to change themselves," which is evident from the vast and terrifying array of beauty products available in any local pharmacy.[129] Others, however, could not understand the attraction, asking "why don't they like American characters?" Why, indeed? The Japanese reasons for cosplaying "are constantly changing," so it is a "difficult question to answer," replied another interviewee.[130] Perhaps it was the fact that I interviewed primarily university students that accounts for their responses being more on the accepting end of the spectrum, but it seems that the Japanese seem neither to care too much that Americans cosplay, nor understand fully why they themselves do it beyond the shared human emotion of desiring change, all of which indicates that identificatory fantasies can be intra-national as well as international.

Global Realities and Global Misconceptions

The twenty-first century is an era of mass communication and, consequently, mass culture. In the development of modern societies, communications media has been "critical to the emergence of nation-states and conceptions of national identity," a phenomenon that manifests itself in popular consumption of fandoms like that of anime/manga.[131] British sociologist John Thompson defines mass communication as "the institutionalized production and generalized diffusion of symbolic goods via the fixation and transmission of information or symbolic

[129] Interview by author. E-mail correspondence. Kyoto, Japan. 12 December 2008.
[130] Ibid.
[131] Flew, Terry. Understanding Global Media. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2007, pp. 1

content." Japanese soft power is contingent on what Douglas McGray refers to as the "art of transmitting certain kinds of mass culture," a technique used to great effect by the United States government and the juggernaut of popular culture that is Hollywood.[132] Japanese popular culture, in particular anime and manga (and associated peripheral goods), has become a major feature of Japan's market economy. Anime and manga are sold both as commodities and signifiers of Japanese culture. When Westerners consume these goods, it is an affirmation of their symbolic value and generates both financial and subcultural capital for the producer and for Japan. This "commodification of symbolic forms" is a by-product of the modern world, which is dominated by the "corporate form" as the primary "institutional arrangement for the management of media production and institution."[133] In an effort to maximize soft power returns, Japan (and the media industry as a whole) must simultaneously operate in a variety of markets – "formal and informal, monetized, and non-monetized."[134]

How does Japan have such a capacity for "cool"? To explain this phenomenon, one must examine the development of the Japanese semiotic field, which has undergone radical change in the past century. Japan has been called the world's first postapocalyptic society; having survived the destruction and horror of two atomic bombs and a campaign of firebombing that scarred both the earth and collective memory, post-WWII Japan found itself facing an identity crisis. The people felt deceived by the military leaders and, to a certain extent, by the emperor, who was forced to admit his mortality to a nation that regarded him as divine. In the face of such destruction, the meta narrative of Japan as the chosen race of the Eastern hemisphere was shattered. Furthermore, the semiotic field experienced a radical shift, rejecting the stark regimentation of modernity in favor of something that would enable a wounded consciousness to

[132] McGray, Douglas. "Japan's Gross National Cool," *Foreign Policy,* May-June 2002, pp. 48
[133] Flew, Terry. Understanding Global Media. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2007, pp. 1
[134] Ibid, pp. 3

express the ineffable. As a result, animation emerged as the quintessential Japanese art form, uniting the animistic traditions of Shintoism, the capacity to express metamorphosis, and the freedom from realism to do so. Thus, animation can be seen as an affirmation of change for the Japanese people or a continuation of the tradition of Edo-era manga under conditions of relative freedom of speech.

There has been a long-standing tradition of Western infatuation with Japanese popular culture and in recent years, increasing numbers of American youths are demanding Japanese cultural products to sate their cultural appetites. For instance, a survey of American children showed that Mario, Nintendo's ubiquitous Italian plumber (and a Japanese creation) was more famous and recognizable than Mickey Mouse.[135] These children are "non-Japanese fans coalescing around a nondomestic fan product that until recently did not even appear in English."[136] As Japanese intellectual properties are permeating the American marketplace and the American imagination, Japanese soft power increases, generating economic and subcultural capital. However, does this development in the Japanese economy represent a shift from the global trend of Americanization? In certain regards, it is a shift from the so-called Western gaze to a global gaze, a subtle rejection of cultural imperialism. So it would seem, but in a sense, Japan is Orientalizing itself, attempting to appeal to a global market and increasingly cater to American tastes, losing something of its own identity in the process. Roland Kelts offers the possibility that "anime's popularity in the West now threatens the very quality that makes it so attractive." As demand in the West for these Japanese cultural products increases, the producers are seemingly caught unawares and are unable to compensate with increased production, so they

[135] Crane, Diana. *Global Culture: Media, Arts, Policy, and Globalization.* New York: Routledge. 2002, pp. 268.
[136] Napier, Susan. From Impressionism to Anime. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2007. pp. 136.

outsource much of their animation to studios in Korea and China, reducing the quality and further hamstringing themselves.

What has sixteen lines and no mouth? The answer is the heart of a billion-dollar industry – Hello Kitty. Indeed, Hello Kitty is composed of sixteen lines, no mouth, and no shading. The Japanese depth of field is not shown through the European tradition of chiaroscuro shading, but rather through the use of the outline to create power and energy. In a recent lecture, Kelts expanded on the appeal, explaining that Hello Kitty is a "departure from the Western trend of photorealistic detail"[137] The absence of details allows one to use one's imagination to graft emotions and associations on to the subject matter. As a result, intellectual properties like Hello Kitty appeal to a vast array of people both in and outside of Japan. Hello Kitty's inherently non-referential nature represents one such dichotomy, which Douglas McGray explains rather succinctly: "Hello Kitty is Western so she will sell in Japan. She is Japanese, so she will sell in the West."[138] Yet, for some, the question then becomes one of whether it is the character or the *idea* of Hello Kitty that sells. Kelts expands upon this query in his book, *Japanamerica,* positing that Japan may have an "intellectual property problem." By intellectual property (IP), he means that Japan has long been a large-scale exporter of ideas, but only very rarely of pure intellectual properties. Intellectual properties are generally exported in the form of physical consumer products. A classic example of Japan's "IP problem" is the case of bringing Pokémon to America. Looking to sell the mega-popular Pokémon franchise abroad, Nintendo opted to take a lump sum in exchange for the distribution rights of the popular series while American production

[137] Kelts, Roland. "Anime, Manga and More: Japanese Pop Culture." Lecture, Anime Boston, Boston, MA, 3 April 2010.
[138] McGray, Douglas. "Japan's Gross National Cool." *Foreign Policy*, June/July 2002. pp.. 50 <http://www.douglasmcgray.com/grossnationalcool.html>

company 4Kids made millions after the deal. What Japan accrued in soft cultural capital was, in effect, off-set by what it lost in financial capital.

This conundrum is all part and parcel of Koichi Iwabuchi's *mukokuseki* ("statelesness") thesis. Iwabuchi characterizes Japan as a "faceless economic superpower with a disproportionate lack of cultural influence."[139] While Japanese goods are in high demand across the globe, Japan produces what Iwabuchi refers to as "culturally odorless products," meaning that they do not immediately conjure images of the country of origin in consumers' minds.[140] Japan glocalizes its cultural exports, meaning that they produce global goods for local markets, a practice which attempts to market its products across the globe while making them palatable to local markets. As stated earlier in this chapter, in Japanese animation, for example, the characters do not, for the most part, appear Japanese, and nor do they appear Caucasian, but rather, they are simply "anime style," and they posses quality of *mukokuseki*, or "statelessness."[141] Glocalization, in effect, transcends the "vestigial national differences" and creates "standardized global markets, while remaining sensitive to the peculiarities of local markets and differentiated consumer segments."[142] In effect, the "object of yearning" is not the actual Japan, but rather "an animated virtual Japan."[143]

While Iwabuchi's argument is academically sound and a tempting explanation for anime's appeal to Americans, it is too empirically narrow and does not hold true on a personal level. Many of those who I interviewed placed a high value on anime and manga's Japanese origins. It is true that many of the characters in anime look neither Caucasian nor specifically Japanese, but the fact of the matter is that "anime style" is inherently Japanese regardless of

[139] Crane, Diana. *Global Culture: Media, Arts, Policy, and Globalization.* New York: Routledge. 2002, pp. 256.
[140] Ibid, pp. 256.
[141] Ibid, pp. 258.
[142] Ibid, pp. 259.
[143] Ibid, pp. 268

whether the characters are white, Asian, or even nonhuman. For example, anime characters typically have big, round eyes and tiny mouths, a physiological reality not shared by their Japanese creators. Anime has Japanese elements, and for many fans this component is deeply important to them, and as they consider it essential to anime's overall appeal. For many, myself included, early exposure to anime and manga and participation in the fandom led to an increased interest in Japanese culture as a whole. In a 2003 honors thesis at Brown University, Moye Ishimoto sought to answer a similar question: were young American males who watched Japanese animated films "racist and sexist pigs, orientalizing and exploiting Asian women?"[144] Undoubtedly, the larger-than-life proportions of some anime characters as well as the capacity for hyper-sexualized content could give one cause to believe that such might be the case. However, after Ishimoto surveyed approximately one hundred members from twelve different college anime clubs, attended conventions, and viewed copious amounts of anime herself, she discovered that her initial assumptions were not as categorically true as she once thought.

In her research, Ishimoto discovered that it was the very "Japanese-ness" of anime that made it so appealing to her respondents – male and female alike. American popular culture – films and television – simply did not address important or critical issues like the "individual's place in society" in as substantive a manner as did anime.[145] A "significant number of fans identified as Asian-American," a large population within American anime fandom's demography, responded that they used anime, which "often drew on tropes familiar from their

[144] Smulyan, Susan. Popular ideologies: Mass culture at mid-century. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 2007, pp. 157

[145] Ibid. An excellent example of Japanese films addressing issues more candidly and thoroughly than American films is in the works of Hayao Miyazaki, head of Japan's Studio Ghibli. Hailed by many as the "grandmaster of animation," Miyazaki's films address issues of identity, environmentalism, and much more in a very thorough, thought-provoking manner. For more on his works and the massive fandom that has emerged around them, read Susan Napier's "The World of Fandom in America" in *Mechademia*, vol. 1, pp. 47-63.

childhoods, to fashion a pan-Asian racial identity in the United States."[146] Rather than cultural imperialism vis-à-vis American consumption, these respondents saw anime as a reaffirmation of their racial and cultural identities within American society. Similar to my own findings, many of the respondents who identified as white explained that their "attraction to anime led them to a deeper interest in Japan, often to language study, travel, or even career choices that they might not have made without exposure to a different culture."[147]

College students have always comprised a majority of the anime/manga fandom, partly because the emergence of anime clubs within the university setting provides something analogous to the convention environment albeit on a reduced scale. Some scholars like Susan Smulyan reject the notion of popular culture as escape, but recognize that many college students see popular culture "without political expression" and as a form of escapism "because mass culture has won."[148] In other words, with the deterritorialization of global media and increased accessibility of foreign popular cultural products, many fans have radically increased access while refusing to acknowledge products like anime as "popular culture" because what they perceive as popular culture (American films, television, etc.) is superficial, vapid, or unfulfilling in comparison. With the advent of instantly accessible, global media and advanced distributive technologies, many of these students generate their own popular culture – in their weblogs, in their consumption of anime, in their participation in fandom. Extreme performative forms of consumption have yet to be commodified, and thus represent a refuge from the unappealing "popular culture" with which they are bombarded daily. An important concept to bear in mind when considering how media shapes, influences, and interacts with state and non-state actors is

[146] Ibid.
[147] Ibid.
[148] Smulyan, Susan. Popular ideologies: Mass culture at mid-century. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 2007, pp. 156.

textual polysemy, a semiotic theory which argues that "the meaning of a text is never simply given by the intentions of its author, but rather, is subject to a wider social negotiation through structures and systems of interpretation."[149] Such is especially the case in the era of globally disseminated participatory culture like anime fandom, and a plausible explanation for why many view anime as a means of escape from the drudgery of their own culture rather than a politicized import.

According to scholars like Annalee Newitz, the American anime fan's "appropriation of a Japanese cultural product" is at once a "form of revenge on Japanese animation, so heavily influenced by Hollywood that it itself is already 'stolen' from American culture" and a form of adulation for and submission to Japan's dominance in the animation industry. More precisely Newitz argues that such mass appropriation of Japanese culture as evident in the widespread popularity of anime among American fans can be seen as an aggressive act, but it can also be seen as an act of deference, one in which fans place themselves in a "subordinate position in relation to Japan…[by] *rejecting their national culture in favor of another national culture*."[150] While American cinematic techniques certainly inspired men like Osamu Tezuka who went on to help define the genre of anime and manga, to categorically call anime a "stolen" art form seems inadequate and even ill-informed.[151] As Susan Napier points out, many of anime's themes are "as

[149] Flew, Terry, pp. 21
[150] Napier, Susan. Anime: From Akira to Princess Mononoke. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2001. pp 241-242.
[151] Anime's origins owe as much to American visual culture as they do to Japanese tradition and culture. Creator of *Astro Boy*, Osamu Tezuka, revered as the godfather of anime and manga, was heavily influenced by American cinematic technique and, in particular, the work of Walt Disney. He was enthralled by how Disney blended complex narratives, cinematic technique, and beautiful artwork to create a truly engaging animated film. Consequently, he spent hours upon hours copying and replicating the style of Disney's films. Ultimately what emerged was a Japanese adaptation of Disney's style with uniquely Japanese elements and stylistic twists. While it does indeed pay homage to American filmmaking in many regards, anime is very much a Japanese art form and a product of global hybridization resulting from transnational cultural flows. To call it cultural plagiarism is too simplistic and devalues a rich cultural form.

universal as they are specifically American or Japanese."[152] Furthermore, although Hollywood and American animators like Walt Disney influenced anime during its inception, anime has emerged as its own unique body of work with particularly Japanese influences, elements, narrative structure, and cultural values. If anything, it is the byproduct of the hybridization that results from globalization rather than a form of reverse cultural imperialism. The borrowing of influences is a global phenomenon in the modern world; simply to label a massive cultural form "stolen" is academically and socially irresponsible.

Whitewashing the Other

"*[Power Rangers is] an American classic"*
- Haim Saban, U.S. television entrepreneur[153]

In April 1977, American television producer Sandy Frank went to MIP-TV at Cannes, France, an international conference for the television industry. It was here that Frank's future was changed forever after seeing a Japanese cartoon by the name of *Battle of the Planets.* Previously, many Americans, like Frank, held fast to the prevailing notion of animation as mere children's fare, and generally disregarded the animated medium for larger audiences.[154] Although it is a cartoon, *Battle of the Planets'* complex narratives, exciting visuals, and often-mature subject matter (dealing with issues like death, existentialism, and more) excited and delighted Frank. However, the question on Frank's mind, as well as the minds of many executives, was whether the American audience was ready for such mature material in what was considered to be primarily a children's medium. The answer was a resounding "no," which resulted in the editorial gutting of much of the programming's salient content and an overall

[152] Napier, Susan. Anime: From Akira to Princess Mononoke. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2001, pp. 242.
[153] Allison, Anne. "The Japan Fad in Global Youth Culture and Millennial Capitalism." Mechademia 1 (2006): pp. 11. Project MUSE. Tisch Library, Medford, MA. 17 Apr. 2010 <http://muse.jhu.edu/>.
[154] Kelts, Roland, *Japanamerica,* New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2007. pp. 11.

whitewashing of many distinctly Japanese elements and objectionable material, in order to make the series more appealing to American viewers.

In her article "Sailor Moon: Japanese Heroes for Global Girls," cultural anthropologist Anne Allison examines the successes of Sailor Moon and Power Rangers, two of the most successful cultural transplants in the history of television. One of the most prominent parts of her analysis is the role than "Americanization" plays within making a foreign product successful for American markets. Was it a necessary evil? Given the climate of the market and the general American psyche , it seems Americanization is often both necessary and evil, though one that results in a massive devaluing of the products themselves. However, the silver lining to this whitewashed cloud is that by exposing more Americans to animation, altered though it may be, it helped to create interest in anime and inspired generations of Americans to demand, as one fan put it, "the real deal."

A classic example of Americanization of anime is the case of *Sailor Moon*, a television series about a young girl who balances the stresses of everyday life and routinely undergoes a miraculous transformation to fight the forces of evil with her friends. By all accounts, the series was a runaway hit, appealing to a broad spectrum of people – from young girls to middle-aged men. Created in 1992, a new kind of female hero for a "new kind of 1990s Japanese girl," *Sailor Moon* sought to combine ever-popular warrior trope with the increasingly popular *bishojo* ("beautiful girl") heroine while cashing in on the already large female consumer base.[155] Yet, although *Sailor Moon* was the "top-ranking television show for its production company, Toei, outranking all of its programming for boys," it did not enjoy the same success abroad as *Power Rangers* did, prompting many to wonder "why?"[156]

[155] Allison, Anne. "Sailor Moon: Japanese Heroes for Global Girls." pp. 260.
[156] Ibid.

Why, indeed? *Sailor Moon* follows in the footsteps of great heroic archetypes like Superman, after all – combining a "this-worldly and otherworldly persona, … rooted in conventions, values, and lifestyles found in the world inhabited by their audience."[157] Dubbed "fashion-action" by one Mattel executive, *Sailor Moon*, so successful in Japan, seemed destined for similar success in America. In Japan, there was a large pre-existing consumer market of female manga readers, so the creation of a female-centric series seemed, if anything, inevitable. Some chalk up *Sailor Moon's* success to its inherent cross-over appeal as a result of the duality of desire: young girls desiring to identify with the Sailor Scouts and older males desiring to eroticize the scouts as infantilized sex objects. The show played on a girl's desire to be desired and created the archetype of the bishojo senshi (literally, "pretty soldier"), implying that she is a "warrior who retains, rather than revokes her femaleness."[158]

Though it was not an unmitigated flop (note: it has been broadcast in over seventeen countries), it never enjoyed the same degree of success or popularity shared by peer programs like *Power Rangers*. One reason for its lack of success, perhaps, is that there is a weak linkage of the "female hero" to the American psyche. It was not altered to be "culturally appropriate."[159] Apart from a few examples like "Wonder Woman, She-ra, and Xena, Warrior Princess," the role of the superhero has been traditionally relegated to males and has "targeted a predominately male audience."[160] Furthermore, it did not take steps properly to Americanize the narrative itself. Japanese words appeared on the screen, references to traditionally Japanese foods, and uniquely Japanese institutions like cram schools played prominent roles and contributed further to the so-called cultural disconnect that some viewers felt.

[157] Ibid, pp. 260-261
[158] Ibid, pp. 273
[159] Ibid, pp. 274
[160] Ibid.

At somewhat of the opposite end of the spectrum is the now-ubiquitous *Power Rangers*, the series that started the *sentai* ("task") genre in 1975 and launched one million mothers to every toy store across America in the 1990's. *Power Rangers* is a true transcultural success and is the most watched children's television show in history, exported to over eighty countries worldwide. Yet, it did not always enjoy such success; rather, many network executives in America were hesitant to pick it up in its original form, deeming it too "foreign" for American viewers. In order to make it more palatable for an American audience, the network "deemed it necessary to transform the show and reshot all the scenes when the rangers are ordinary (in-the-flesh) teenagers.[161] Spliced around the original Japanese footage of actors in colored suits battling rubber monsters were scenes of a "typical American high school," prompting many to label the show as the "campier, California version of the *Power Rangers*."[162] The repackaging was remarkably successful from a marketing standpoint; in the US, no production credit is given to Toei and there is little to indicate that the show comes from Japan.[163] Indeed, even to this day, many viewers had no idea that Power Rangers was originally a Japanese show.

Though successful, this cultural repackaging is can be a double-edged sword. The show is reworked to be "culturally palatable" to a foreign audience, but often times at the expense of the narrative itself. While people like Haim Saban, the man responsible for bringing *Power Rangers* to the US, see this process as "a cultural bridge between the two countries," others, especially fans, see it as "butchering' their favorite show, and consider it mildly xenophobic. For example, in *Power Rangers*, it was not unusual for characters to die, or for the show to include existential themes, something that is far less common in many mainstream U.S. shows.

---

[161] Allison, Anne. "The Japan Fad in Global Youth Culture and Millennial Capitalism," Mechademia 1 (2006): pp. 14. Project MUSE. Tisch Library, Medford, MA. 17 Apr. 2010 <http://muse.jhu.edu/>.
[162] Allison, Anne. "Sailor Moon: Japanese Heroes for Global Girls." pp. 264
[163] Ibid, pp. 265

Moreover, plot lines in *Power Rangers* were generally deeper and more complex than the often vapid scenes of "typical" American high school life that American audiences were made to watch. Complaints of too much violence in *Power Rangers* resulted in changes like having someone appear at the end of the episode to reiterate the moral of the story for the audience, often in a manner than was little more than patronizing, at best. In the case of *Battle of the Planets*, an R2D2 doppelganger was added both to capitalize on the appeal of *Star Wars* and to reassure American children that "everything was going to be okay."[164] One particularly baffling alteration was from the series *Naruto* in which a character, as a symbol of determination and confronting his fears, dramatically stabs himself in the hand to expel poison out of his body. In the American version, however, the scene of Naruto with a knife through his hand is replaced with him holding a Doraemon lunchbox and an apple, an incongruous image, to say the least (see Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1: *The original Japanese frame on the left was dramatically altered into the frame on the right before it aired on American television.*

In *Sailor Moon* and *Pokémon*, foreign elements were often confusingly re-labeled, such as referring to onigiri ("rice balls") as "jelly-filled donuts" or "chocolate chip muffins," which more often than not left audiences slightly confused (see Figure 1.2). Indeed, while from a marketing

[164] Kelts, Roland. "Anime, Manga and More: Japanese Pop Culture." Lecture, Anime Boston, Boston, MA, 3 April 2010.

standpoint these cultural adaptations make sense, such Americanizations thoroughly hamstring the products that could otherwise help improve the overall quality of American television.

Figure 1.2: *Ash holds an onigiri (rice ball) in the original Japanese version on the right, but it has been altered to look like a large submarine sandwich on the left.*

As mentioned earlier, however, there is an upside to some of these radical and often confusing alterations. A generation of American children grew up watching programs like *Astro Boy*, *Speed Racer*, and *Battle of the Planets*, and their children also grew up watching Japanese imports on American television like *Pokemon, Sailor Moon, Yu-Gi-Oh!*, and the *Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers.* Consequently, anime's cultural stock is growing in the United States, and censorship of certain cultural elements is becoming less prevalent. Indeed, increased consumption of Japanese popular culture and its associated forms in the United States forces Japanese producers to adjust their production accordingly to meet international demand. Consequently, the quality can suffer as they are forced to outsource some of their animation workload in order to keep up with the rapidly expanding fan base. Such is one of the unfortunate economic realities of the increasingly globalized industry, but it is not necessarily cultural imperialism or Orientalism. In its initial interactions with Japanese imports, the media industry in the US felt the need to make it more "culturally palatable" so as not to alienate an American audience that might find anime, a distinctively Japanese product, too abstruse or simply too far

afield of their cultural experience to find anime relevant or captivating. This process of cultural adaptation had the unfortunate side effect of excising much of the content that made anime so exciting to the unfamiliar American in the first place, as many traditional Japanese elements were altered in post-production.

It is notable that the early concerns US media moguls had about Japanese media being too foreign for US audiences have not come to fruition. As American audiences have become increasingly exposed to these Japanese cultural imports, they can sense that something is categorically different about them than their American counterparts. Once their curiosity was piqued, many Americans were prompted to explore Japanese culture further, which in turn led to the formation of myriad fan-communities, which manifested themselves electronically and in the form of clubs across the nation. Arguably, the double-edged sword of globalization has both harmed and helped anime. In general, however, time and statistics suggest that, it has actually significantly aided the growth in popularity of the art form, and, if anything, increased Japanese soft power and its overall global profile. Anime and manga fandom, while characteristically Japanese, is a product of global hybridization rather than cultural imperialism. There is also a global exchange of influences and ideas that affect both anime and new American animated properties. As anime continues to increase in popularity, many American animation producers are taking note and using Japanese influences to make their material more exciting to an American audience. The twenty-first century is one of global media in which culture flows back-and-forth between different countries, influencing and affecting each other in different ways. To categorize the adoption of something like anime as sheer cultural imperialism is far too empirically narrow. While there is evidence supporting both the cultural imperialist and the cultural hybridization argument, the truth is that anime fandom and, consequently, cosplay are

primarily forms of escapism, representing an object of desire around which fans gather and consume voraciously, but one which feels both strangely familiar and radically new.

Weighing the Evidence

Conclusion

Conclusion

Cosplay has long been a subject near and dear to my heart, ever since one Sunday afternoon in 1998 when I was bedridden with the flu and my cousin, who was babysitting, put in a VHS that would shake the foundations of my young world. The tape contained an episode of *Sailor Moon,* a show unlike anything I had ever seen, or so I thought. My father was a lifelong comic book fan, so I had been raised to appreciate the "cartoon" as legitimate form of narrative and I spent countless hours watching programs like *Speed Racer* and *Transformers,* which had much more of a visceral appeal to them than American animated programs like *Looney Tunes*.[165] From the striking visuals to the intense action to the complex narratives, something about shows like *Sailor Moon* seemed categorically different to me, although I could not seem to put my finger on it. As it turned out, they were all Japanese imports, a fact which was central to my appreciation of the medium as well as to the appreciation of myriad other fans.

Although there is a long-standing historical tradition of interplay and transcultural interaction between Japan and the West, the Japanese popular culture boom of the past few decades is particularly notable. For example, anime and manga fandom in America was once the domain of a small subset of fans at science fiction conventions, propelled by the buying, selling, and trading of bootlegged VHS tapes of Japanese animation. Nowadays, however, one can walk large retail bookstores like Barnes & Noble's and find entire sections dedicated to manga, turn on their televisions and watch The Anime Network, a twenty-four hour per day network dedicated to airing the latest Japanese animation, or one can log on to the Internet and download fan-subtitled episodes of anime mere hours after they air in Japan. For a local example of the growth in anime fandom, consider that since its first festival in 2003, Anime Boston quadrupled

[165] An interesting fact about *Transformers* is that although it was written and produced in America, it was animated in Japan, making it prime example of how transcultural flows interact to create global popular cultural products.

in size, attracting 17,236 people in 2010. Such rapid penetration and exponential growth suggests that Americans are consuming Japanese popular culture at an astonishing rate.

As a longtime member of the anime and manga fandom, both as participant and observer, I felt uniquely qualified to examine both the structural framework in which the fandom is operating and to synthesize that with field work, conducted on-site at cosplay events, fan conventions, and in digital fan communities, in order to examine how cosplay is perceived and how it operates on the individual level. From participating in fan-drive electronic filesharing communities to attending fan conventions to even participating in cosplay myself, anime fandom has played a large part in my own intellectual and cultural development, leading to a deep interest in other iterations of Japanese culture amongst other things.

When beginning to research this paper, there were some fundamental questions I sought to answer. Chief among them, why do people, specifically Americans, cosplay? Was it a new development in the storied Western cultural imperialist tradition or was it a form of twenty-first century escapism, playing upon the identificatory fantasy? Is cosplay a recent phenomenon or did it have historical roots in the waves of Japanophilia and *Japonisme* that swept the Western world in the late nineteenth century? Who are cosplayers and what does participation in fandom offer to the modern fan? Why were Americans forming these deep, lasting connections to characters from these Japanese imports and not developing the same kind of connections with Western characters? Is this the result of cultural imperialism or cultural hybridization?

Initially, I hypothesized that American cosplay was a twenty-first century manifestation of Orientalism, the latest iteration in a long-standing tradition of Western cultural imperialism. From a theoretical standpoint, it seemed that American cosplayers were, knowingly or unknowingly, appropriating these Japanese cultural identities and making them their own, taking

a unique form of Japanese soft power and effectively subverting it. This theory was made increasingly salient due to the fact that as media has become increasingly globalized, producers of cultural products are forced to cater to the tastes of a global market. Japanese producers were caught unawares by the explosion of anime and manga's popularity, particularly in the United States. Demand far exceeded supply and the capacity to produce similar works, so many Japanese producers began outsourcing their animation to second-rate studios in Korea and China, resulting in an overall denigration of the high quality which makes it so attractive in the first place. Inevitably, it seemed Japan was being forced to cater to American tastes as American demand for Japanese cultural products increased, but hamstringing itself in the process. Underhanded distribution deals which favored American importers, as in the case of *Pokémon*, debilitated Japanese gains further; whatever soft power Japan accrued was seemingly offset by the financial capital it lost in the process.

The United States has often been accused of cultural imperialism, which in the modern era is often equated with media imperialism. Critics of globalization theory lament the McDonaldization of world culture, which boils down globalization to the "process of large American multinationals overwhelming foreign markets and getting local consumers addicted to special sauce."[166] In this scenario, "culture flows from American power and American supply creates demand." However, in an era of globalized media and advanced distribution systems, the global reach of most mediums enables actors within the media industry to compete in a deterritorialized, global market, which takes much of the wind out this argument's proverbial sails. In the case of anime, Hollywood had a tremendous influence on the evolution of Japanese animation, yet it is the postmodern Japanese consciousness that emerged from the ashes of

[166] McGray, Douglas. "Japan's Gross National Cool." *Foreign Policy*, June/July 2002. <http://www.douglasmcgray.com/grossnationalcool.html> pp. 46

World War II that makes the content of Japanese animation so radically different from its American counterparts.

Two atomic bombs and a brutal campaign of firebombing scarred both the national memory and the land of Japan itself. In the wake of the destruction, however, a new semiotic field emerged and consequently a need to express feelings of apocalypse. During the Occupation of Japan, American culture flooded Japanese society to such a degree that it was inescapable. In particular, Hollywood films were imported in mass quantities as a means of democratizing the Japanese people through Western culture. While that did not prove to be particularly successful, the films did influence men like Osamu Tezuka who adapted the narrative style and cinematic techniques of American cinema and applied them to animation in order to express the apocalyptic, the existential, and the ineffable. Animation is particularly well-suited for expressing difficult themes like these as the visual field is limited only by the artist's imagination, rather than the technological boundaries of live-action film. Truly, anime can be called a global art form, born from American technique and Japanese aesthetic in order to be consumed across the globe.

While the idea of cosplay as an Orientalizing action, a means of taking this uniquely Japanese form of soft power, appropriating it and subverting it is a tempting argument from an abstract, theoretical standpoint, it loses much steam when applied at a personal level. After interviewing countless members of the fandom at conventions, cosplay events, and through the Internet and reading similar research by the likes of Susan Napier and others, I found that most fans placed a high value on anime's Japanese origins. Cultural products like anime simply represented an evolution in animation, as it incorporated American cinematic techniques with Japanese aesthetic and thematic sensibilities in order to create a globally palatable product.

While parts of the Orientalist argument hold true (the Othering of an exotic culture, held in high esteem perhaps *because* of the difference from one's own), it seems that anime fandom in America and, by that token, cosplay in America are the products of an increasing trend towards cultural hybridization rather than imperialistic appropriation. Rather than being a traditional Orientalist construction, these fans find empowerment in a cultural product that has both universal and culturally specific elements with which they can identify on an individual and an aesthetic level.

To play devil's advocate, when imported to the United States, before airing on television, most anime was heavily edited and gutted of much of the content which made it so appealing in the first place. Such actions could potentially contribute to the sense that the West is empowering itself by oppressing the Eastern Other and suppressing their cultural identity. Indeed, many television executives ordered drastic certain programs to be Americanized in order to make them more culturally palatable. Elements deemed too foreign – Japanese writing on signs, traditional Japanese foods, etc. – and elements that were deemed to sexual, violent, or weird were often altered to an extreme degree. However, many fans sensed that something was not quite right and as they grew older would often seek out the source material and follow up on their interest, particularly when they learned such programs were Japanese imports. Indeed, the Japaneseness of anime became one of the most poignant features in attracting American fans. These fans, rather than rejecting the material as too foreign, would often proceed to learn more about the culture from which such products came by taking language courses, studying Japanese culture, and even pursuing employment opportunities that they might not have otherwise pursued. In short, anime's cultural roots were a selling point, if anything and Americans' responses a testament to the increasingly globalized nature of popular culture.

While it would seem that cosplay is a recent phenomenon, its roots date back to the 1860s when, after Commodore Perry's Black Ships opened Japan to the West, men like Charley Longfellow, William Adams, and Lafcadio Hearn traveled to Japan, intending to stay for a brief sojourn, but remaining in the fantasy world of the East much longer. Men like these would often "go native," donning traditional Japanese raiment, adopting Japanese mannerisms, and generally attempt to assimilate themselves into Japanese culture. Although some have denigrated this as "cultural transvestism," it would be more appropriate to categorize it as a primitive form of cosplay, performative consumption of a foreign culture, the appropriation of an Eastern identity in order to reaffirm one's sense of self. For example, some like Longfellow would often dress up as characters like the *otokodate* from the Japanese theatrical tradition and pose for photographs, playing at the character as both a form of ludic activity and fulfilling an identificatory fantasy. Japan was a fantasy land for such men, to be certain, but it fostered a deep appreciation for the culture itself, rather than a desire to subjugate or oppress it. Thus, one can reasonably posit that cosplay is part of a long tradition of Western fulfillment of the identificatory fantasy through interaction with foreign cultures, namely Japan.

Cosplay is a form of performative consumption and as a performance it is an inherently social activity. As mentioned in Chapter I, dressing up is one of the most expressive forms of ludic activity, but in order to acquire that sense of gratification one needs an audience. Thus, the convention space serves as both a refuge for the cosplayer from the parochial nature of their external community and a stage upon which to perform and embody their chosen character. Through hallway costume contests, the Masquerade event, and even simple vogueing for eager fans, the cosplayer is living out an identificatory fantasy, assuming an idealized identity and grafting it on to their own. As one fan explains: "[I feel that people see me as a member of a

group mentality that has rejected its own culture in favor of foreign 'cartoons.' Because so many people from other cultures are able to identify with anime, it suggest to me that some of the structural differences are superficial."[167] The theory of textual polysemy, which argues that the meaning of a text is never given merely by the intentions of the author but rather subject to a complex series of inputs and social structures, can help one to understand cosplay in the context of a global participatory culture. Anime and manga fandom has always been a predominately fan-driven subculture with myriad opportunities for fans to contribute to the culture and shape its evolution. The act of dressing up as a character and then assuming the identity of said character is one such way in which fans interact with the fan-object in a way perhaps not explicitly intended by the creators.

While it is understandable that on a thematic level and aesthetic level many Westerners (and Americans in particular) can relate to anime characters, there was still the question of why American fans were not forging these same connections with Western characters? This is particularly interesting in light of cosplay's purported origins in the science fiction conventions of the seventies when American fans would dress up as characters from *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, and other intellectual properties. Despite the fandom's apparent aversion to cosplaying as Western characters, one must take it with a grain of salt. It is not merely that anime fans are fetishizing the East; rather, if one looks to any high-profile Western science fiction or fantasy movie's opening night there will inevitably be legions of people in their Gryffindor finest or looking as though they just stepped off the Death Star. Western transcultural products are not necessarily inferior; on the contrary, they are simply more specific and archetypal.[168] Anime

[167] Napier, Susan J. From Impressionism to Anime. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2007, pp. 180

[168] By this, I mean that Western series and even many Eastern series that are "naturalized" for an American audience are often times simpler and more prototypical than their Eastern counterparts. A prime example is the difference in storylines between the American and Japanese versions of Power Rangers, with the latter delving into much deeper

stands in contrast to these Western forms of fantasy, as it is restricted only by the imagination of the artist rather than the limitations of live action cinema and special effects technology, which proves particularly useful in expressing the complex, mature themes of anime that one did not find in Western animation.

Whether people realize it or not, fantasy is becoming increasingly important in our society as traditional means of communication are being supplanted by non-physical shared communal spaces vis-à-vis the Internet and other emerging technologies (e.g. Twitter, Bit Torrent, satellite delivery systems). Ironically, technology which is supposed to enhance our communicative capabilities is, in reality, isolating us further. Yet, fans persevere, looking to the constructions of identity and Otherness found in anime, despite the fact that this transcultural product is presented in another language, replete with starkly different cultural connotations. Nevertheless, it is this very Otherness and the medium in which it is presented that makes anime so universally appealing, offering an "entire realm of possibilities," enabling one to "transcend the limitations of the human bodies."[169]

In an increasingly decentralized, delocalized, and deterritorialized world, the self is left out in the cold. Fans appropriate aspects of another culture for purposes of pleasure, integrating them into their own identities, using them to augment rather than replace themselves. Cosplay provides fans with a method for the "fluid postmodern identity" to be freely chosen, escaping the boundaries of genetics.[170] Fandom is a shared communal space in which fans feel safe trying on these different identities and, as such, I hesitate to simply write off this unusual interest in Japanese transcultural products as an Orientalist mode of Western domination through co-opting

---

issues than the former. See Anne Allison's *Sailor Moon – Japanese Superheroes for Global Girls* in *Japan Pop* for more.

[169] Napier, Susan J. From Impressionism to Anime. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, pp. 167

[170] Ibid, pp. 167, 190.

Japanese identity. Rather, these fans "gain agency through discovering and then identifying with a society" which has both "universal and culturally specific aspects."[171] The act of cosplaying itself allows these fans to achieve, even for a weekend, that sense of mastery and pleasure in Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi's phenomenology of enjoyment. As an institution, cosplay generates both "cognitive and discursive conditions" which enable an individual to craft a "sense of social 'self,' by framing situations, defining identities [in relation to the performed identity], and generating meaning out of a repertoire of available discourses."[172] These discourses are created by a meeting of American and Japanese culture, an aesthetic and technical intermingling which, through the filter of a fan-driven, global participatory culture, becomes the product of cultural hybridization, appealing to both American and Japanese fans alike. Cosplay, has, and always will be, a culture a pleasure, a ludic activity, a "site of play," a means through which fans can escape their everyday lives and engage on another on the "most creative of levels."[173] Indeed, Oscar Wilde once said, "The whole of Japan is a pure invention," which is just how we cosplayers like it.

[171] Ibid, pp. 189.
[172] Flew, Terry. Understanding Global Media. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2007, pp. 44
[173] Ibid, pp. 208.

Bibliography

Allison, Anne. “The Japan Fad in Global Youth Culture and Millenial Capitalism,”Mechademia1 (2006): pp. 11-21, Project MUSE. Tisch Library, Medford, MA. 17 Apr. 2010 <http://muse.jhu.edu>

Allison, Anne. “Sailor Moon: Japanese Heroes for Global Girls.” In Japan pop! Inside the world of Japanese popular culture. ed. Craig, Timothy J. New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc. 2000. pp. 259-278

Berry, Chris, Kim, Soyoung, and Spigel, Lynn. Electronic Elsewheres: Media, Technology, and the Experience of Social Space. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2010.

Bhaba Homi K. “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World,* ed. Cooper, Frederick and Stoler, Anna Laura. Berkley: University of California UP, 1997.

Crane, Diana, Kawashima, Nobuko, and Kawasaki, Ken’ichi. Global Culture: Media, Arts, Policy, and Globalization. New York: Routledge. 2002

Curran, James and Morley, David. Media and Cultural Theory. London: Routledge. 2006.

Donahue, Ray T. Japanese Culture and Communcation. Lanham, MD: University Press of America. 1998.

Durham, Meenakshi Gigi and Kellner, Douglas M. Media and Cultural Studies. Malden: Blackwell Publishing. 2006

Flew, Terry. Understaanding Global Media. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2007.

Gans, Herbert J. Popular Culture & High Culture. New York: Basic Books. 1999.

Golding, Peter and Harris, Phil. Beyond Cultural Imperialism: Globalization, communication & the new international order. London: SAGE Publications. 1997.

Guth, Christine. Longfellow’s Tattoos. Seattle: University of Washington UP. 2004.

Gray, J, Sandvoss, C., and Harrington, C.L.. Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World. New York: NYU Press. 2007.

Hebidge, Dick. “The Function of Subculture” in The Cultural Styudies Reader, 2nd edition, ed. During, Simon. London: Routledge. 1993, pp.441-450

Hills, Matt. Fan Cultures. New York: Routledge. 2002.

Holden, T.J.M. Medi@sia: global media/tion in an out of context. New York: Routledge. 2006.

Iwabuchi, Koichi. Recentering globalization: Popular culture and Japanese transnationalism. Durham: Duke University Press. 2002.

Jenkins, Henry. Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture. New York: New York University Press. 2006.

Jenkins, Henry. The Wow Climax: Tracing the Emotional Impact of Popular Culture. New York: New York University Press. 2007.

Jensen, Joli. "Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Characterization" in Popular Culture: Production and Consumption. Medford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001.

Kelts, Roland. Japanamerica, New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2007.

Kelts, Roland. "Anime, Manga and More: Japanese Pop Culture." Lecture, Anime Boston, Boston, MA, 3 April 2010.

Laidlaw, Christina Wallace. Charles Appleton Longfellow: Twenty Months in Japan, 1871-1873. Cambridge, MA: Friends of the Longfellow House. 1998.

Levi, Antonia. Samurai from outer space: understanding Japanese animation. Chicago: Open Court. 1996.

Lunning, Frenchy. "Cosplay, Drag, and the Performance of Abjection." Presentation. SLSA Atlanta 2009. Atlanta, GA.

Napier, Susan J. Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2001.

Napier, Susan J. From Impressionism To Anime. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Napier, Susan J. "The World of Anime Fandom" Mechademia 1 (2006): pp. 47-63, Project MUSE. Tisch Library, Medford, MA. 17 Apr. 2010 <http://muse.jhu.edu/>.

Parker, Andrew and Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. Performativity and Performance. New York: Routledge. 1995.

Powers, Richard Gid, and Kato, Hidetoshi. Handbook of Japanese Popular Culture. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press. 1989.

Said, Edward. Orientalism. New York: Random House. 1979

Sawaragi, Noi. “On the Battlefield of ‘Supreflat’: Subculture and Art in Postwar Japan,” in Little Boy: The Arts of Japan’s Exploding Subculture, trans. Hoaglund, Linda, ed. Murakami, Takashi. New York: Japan Society. 2005.

Senelick, Laurence. The Changing Room. New York: Routledge. 2000.

Smulyan, Susan. Popular ideologies: Mass culture at mid-century. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 2007.

Winge, Theresa. “Costuming the Imagination: Origins of Anime and Manga Cosplay.” Mechademia 1 (2006): pp. 65-76. Project MUSE. Tisch Library, Medford, MA. 17 Apr. 2010 <http://muse.jhu.edu/>

Various interviews. Interviews by author. Voice recording and e-mail and telephone correspondence, Kyoto, Japan. 10 December 2008 through 15 December 2008.

Various interviews. Interviews by author. Voice recording and e-mail correspondence. Boston, MA. 21 March 2008 through 3 April 2010.