Megacities of the 21st century have become contact zones where various cultures meet. These become places where not only commercial exchanges take place, but also where linguistic and cultural traits are translated between one culture and another. It is remarkable how often these sites of cultural translation include the great port cities of the age of colonization—like Lagos, Mumbai and the former capital of the Dutch East Indies, Batavia, present day Jakarta. This just skims the surface of what Professor Knörr has to say, for her book contains much more than the title suggests. Indeed, Knörr basically admits as much in the introduction: "We are concerned here with phenomena that exist in Jakarta and pertain to Jakarta." (p.9) Regions beyond Java are ignored, other cities on Java are glossed over. Then why in heaven's name does the title plainly say "Indonesia"? Perhaps, among the many works of her own that she lists in the bibliography, Professor Knörr includes her book Kreolität und postkoloniale Gesellschaft: Integration und Differenzierung in Betawi, which immediately notices the term "Jakarta" in the title, far more accurate (dare I say honest) than the newer work. But my criticism goes deeper. The work being presently reviewed is, to a large extent, a translation of the earlier German language work. Some chapters are near identical, even using the same maps and illustrations. Yet nowhere, neither in the acknowledgments nor in the small print, do we inform ourselves that this is more than a translation. As a translation, it is new, not a new work but a translation. Had I bought the original German language book, and then bought the present English language book, I would have felt that same feeling as when one arrives home from the department store, having purchased one item, only to discover when checking my receipt that I have been charged twice for the same item. I would feel cheated. Thirdly, Knörr makes her argument with clarity and coherence, but I frequently found myself longing for punctuation. I failed to find a single semi-colon in the entire book; I'm sure there must be one or two. But even commas are used sparingly. The following sentence is an example: "Thus, in the context of the Betawi revival it is above all those who on account of their relatively high social status or because they wanted to maintain or achieve such status used to conceal their Betawi identity who nowadays due to their social status are most likely to gain prominent positions both within the Betawi community and the public sphere more generally." (p.102)
Collaborative creativity

At the heart of Ian Condry’s stimulating exploration of anime’s global success is his attention to how the medium thrives through “collaborative creativity”: various forms of social engagement and energy investment undertaken by individuals who operate on both the production and consumption sides of anime-related industries.

Reviewers: Matthew Fraleigh

Reviewed publication

WHEREAS SEVERAL of the pioneering academic treatments of anime have focused their analyses on the narrative content of specific works, the visual styles of particular directors, or the aesthetic features of the animated medium more generally, Condry is less concerned with a retrospective consideration of finished products than with the dynamic social processes by which they are created and consumed. This ethnographic approach is informed by several periods of fieldwork he carried out in Tokyo animation studios between 2004 and 2010, his interviews with numerous directors, artists, and other animation industry workers, as well as participant observations he undertook at fan conventions held in both Japan and the United States.

Condry begins with an account of the production of director Hosoda Mamoru’s 2009 anime feature film, Summer Wars. He observes that rather than being focused on the actions of a single hero, this film is structured around the collective efforts of its various characters toward a common goal. The film’s wealth of idiosyncratic characters furnishes a diverse range of viewers with multiple potential points of entry into the story: an effect only heightened by the director’s decision to make the characters’ design simple, thereby affording viewers the opportunity to contribute something of their own. Paralleling the inter-character cooperation depicted on screen is thus a process by which the viewers of the film are induced to participate actively as well: developing forms of connection with the work that ultimately produce a sense of “joint ownership.” Moreover, Condry identifies further forms of such creative collaboration taking place on the production side as well: in the discussions among directors, designers, and animators, as well as in the creative staff’s engagement with its source materials. Turning to Hosoda’s earlier film, The Girl Who Leapt Through Time (2006), for example, he notes how Hosoda introduced changes to the 1967 work of fiction by Tetsuo Yuzutaka in the film’s depiction of the open-endedness of time.

Condry’s behind-the-scenes attention to the negotiations occurring among those involved in creating a work of anime continues in his second chapter, which focuses on the production of several animated TV series. Whereas the intricacy of anime narratives is often adduced as the major reason for their popularity, Condry’s real-time observation of the deliberations taking place at these shows’ regular planning sessions leads him to conclude that elaborately-conceived narrative lines may be of secondary or even no great value in guiding a work through the development process than other factors – chiefly the creators’ basic conceptions of the work’s characters and their interconnections. It is not surprising that distinctive characters, rather than narrative arcs, would be the principal factor in some of the very short animated shows Condry considers, but he also offers examples of longer-format series in which a work’s complete narrative has yet to be determined (or even glimpsed), and yet the work begins to take shape around its distinctive characters, premises, and worlds.

An argument that Condry introduces and continues to develop over the remaining chapters of the book is that the anime character can fruitfully be considered a generative platform itself, conducive to migration across diverse media. While much of Condry’s analysis focuses on the production and consumption of anime in the early twenty-first century, he also endeavors to place contemporary Japan’s anime industry in both historical and comparative contexts. In the third chapter, for example, he discusses the postwar development of Japanese anime, focusing especially on the work of Tezuka Osamu. Rejecting accounts of modern Japanese anime that would describe it mainly as an autonomic outgrowth of earlier domestic visual traditions, he identifies various ways in which Japanese animators saw American animated films as both sources of inspiration and targets of rivalry: the Thierry studio, for example, explicitly aimed to become the “Disney of the East.” Attending to the embeddedness of the Japanese anime industry in this larger context, Condry also notes various features of the production process that distinguish American and Japanese animated films. In the fourth chapter as well, Condry adopts a longer chronological view in recounting how Bandai was able to ride the success of consecutive Gundams plastic models in the 1970s and to unexpectedly transform a toy that had prematurely been judged a failure into one of its most popular products. Condry emphasizes the role that small networks of fans and the media that connected them played in achieving this remarkable success.

One of Condry’s most interesting chapters concerns the practice of fansubbing: overseas fans’ cooperative production of subtitled versions of anime works. While such activity is unmistakably prohibited by copyright law, Condry wittily demonstrates how and why fansubs understand themselves to be acting in the service of anime rather than counter to the interests of anime producers. He describes these fansubbers’ meticulousness and attention to detail, showing how they add value, for example, through annotation of supplementary historical or cultural information. Observing that some remove their fanubs from circulation once subtitled commercial versions are available, he argues that a set of ethical principles underlie their efforts.

Throughout The Soul of Anime, Condry shows how the anime production process often opens up various kinds of “empty spaces” that facilitate idiosyncratic forms of creative engagement and consumption. For example, in some of the very short animated shows he examines Condry notes the possibility that characters themselves, for example, explicitly aspired to become the “Disney of the East”. Attending to the embeddedness of the Japanese anime industry in this larger context, Condry also notes various features of the production process that distinguish American and Japanese animated films. In the fourth chapter as well, Condry adopts a longer chronological view in recounting how Bandai was able to ride the success of consecutive Gundams plastic models in the 1970s and to unexpectedly transform a toy that had prematurely been judged a failure into one of its most popular products. Condry emphasizes the role that small networks of fans and the media that connected them played in achieving this remarkable success.

One of Condry’s most interesting chapters concerns the practice of fansubbing: overseas fans’ cooperative production of subtitled versions of anime works. While such activity is unmistakably prohibited by copyright law, Condry wittily demonstrates how and why fansubs understand themselves to be acting in the service of anime rather than counter to the interests of anime producers. He describes these fansubbers’ meticulousness and attention to detail, showing how they add value, for example, through annotation of supplementary historical or cultural information. Observing that some remove their fanubs from circulation once subtitled commercial versions are available, he argues that a set of ethical principles underlie their efforts.

The ongoing success of anime in the early twenty-first century, Condry argues, is an outcome of the strategies outlined in his book. He concludes that the anime industry is itself, conducive to migration across diverse media.

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Explorations of Tibetan book culture

In recent years, the invaluable work of Gene Smith and the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center (www.tbrc.org) has made it possible for Tibetan texts to be reproduced digitally and reprinted endlessly on-demand. However, the TBRc’s work preserves the ideas held within a text and its literary style, and not the text itself. The engaging explorations of Tibetan book culture, however, as presented in The Soul of Anime, celebrate the tactile nature of these artefacts, the physical act of holding and turning the pages, an act that leaves over time the marks of many fingers, the extensive quality control issues in selecting fibres and writing materials for different types of text, the religious and cultural vitality of texts, and the devoted commitment to aesthetics and textual accuracy of the various scribes, wood-carvers, editors and printers.

The decoding of these elements is a vital aspect of a deeper understanding of Tibetan culture, and Helman-Wazy’s research offers a most welcome contribution to this important work.

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References