

Marc Steinberg, **Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan**. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012, 304 pp. \$25.00 (paperback).

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Attend any of the hundreds of comic-cons and anime conventions that dot the United States today and you'll find legions of young people immersed in animated media worlds of Japanese origin. Such worlds range from the refinement of Hayao Miyazaki films to the mass popularity of kids' franchises like *Pokemon*. In between are dozens of fictional worlds, each with its narrative twists and proliferating cast of characters. Comic-cons offer a conspicuous example of what U.S. critics call convergence or synergy, but what is known in Japan as the "media mix"—that is, the leveraging of fictional franchises across multiple media platforms. Though we might associate the rise of such cross-media serialization with digital culture, it has a much longer history. This approach originated in the United States around the time of Richard Outcault's Buster Brown comics and was greatly refined by Walt Disney. Marc Steinberg argues that the modern media mix reached another watershed with the birth of anime in Japan in the early 1960s. In particular, Steinberg focuses on Osamu Tezuka's series *Tetsuwan Atomu* (or *Astro Boy* to U.S. audiences), which spawned the first in a procession of Japanese cyborg characters to captivate kids in both Asia and the West. Steinberg argues that the anime system built around Atomu's image provided a template for character marketing whose influence extended to geographic locales ranging from Hong Kong to Hollywood. In the process, **Anime's Media Mix** situates the emergence of anime in the context of an expanding media environment that signals fundamental economic and cultural transformations.



The book begins with an institutional history of early anime intended to problematize the hierarchy between so-called full and limited animation. Full animation, epitomized by Toei Animation in Japan and Disney in the United States, is characterized by fluid motion and a realist aesthetic. In contrast, the disjointed style of limited animation that grew out of Tezuka's work has often been ridiculed, but Steinberg argues that it not only served organizational imperatives but made for a different sort of dynamism, one that reached across media platforms. When Tezuka started his Mushi Production Studio to move Atomu from print to television, the company's tight weekly schedule and small staff necessitated labor-saving methods. Mushi developed an animation style with a low cel count that made extensive use of still images. Devices such as three-frame shooting (using the same image over several frames), pull-cels (pulling a still image across a moving background), and sectioning (moving only a part of the body) enabled Mushi to get by with about 1,500 distinct drawings per episode, about one-tenth of the number that full animation would have required.

Although this style earned the disdain of full animation partisans, it was effective both aesthetically and financially. Mushi's self-imposed limits on movement forced the studio to develop the lively mix of drawing, voice acting, and narrative that came to characterize anime. This style proved enormously popular, as the *Tetsuwan Atomu* series was received by its young audience not as a degraded version of cinematic movement but as a moving version of the popular *Atomu* manga that was serialized in boys' magazines (early anime series like *Tetsuwan Atomu* were actually known as *terebi manga*, or "TV comics" in Japan). Thus the putatively limited anime grew organically out of manga, with manga serving as a storyboard for the anime episodes, and the anime appearing as a familiar remediation that eased young audiences into the new medium of television. Tezuka also liked to compare his anime to *kamishibai*, a form of street theater popular with children in the 1940s and 1950s in which performers narrated stories accompanied by a series of still images or storyboards. With anime, as with *kamishibai*, Tezuka believed dynamic stories, voices, and visual stills could make the cinematic illusion of movement superfluous.

If early anime referred back to manga and *kamishibai*, it also anticipated an integrated media environment built on character merchandising. To preempt competitors and placate TV networks and sponsors concerned about the cost of anime, Tezuka sold *Tetsuwan Atomu* episodes for a fraction of the production cost and made up the difference through licensing. Atomu was the first Japanese character marked with a copyright sign, and the sale of the character's image provided royalties to sustain anime production. A key to Tezuka's success in leveraging the Atomu character was its visual consistency across media forms. Here Steinberg dwells on a campaign surrounding Atomu stickers included as premiums in packages of candy-coated chocolates sold by Meiji Seika. These wildly popular stickers amounted to a low-tech version of pervasive media that allowed Atomu's young fans to brand their schoolbooks, desks, and clothing with their favorite character. Stickers were traced from cels of both manga and anime and so had a mimetic relationship to earlier manifestations of the character. Certain iconic poses, such as the image of Atomu flying with his arms half extended, were reprised in manga, anime, and stickers. The Atomu image thus settled into a role halfway between character and logo; its very stillness allowed manga, anime, and stickers to communicate not only with the child consumer but with each other.

These poses were also materialized in another sector of the Atomu media empire: character-based toys. Japan gained a foothold in character toys in the 1920s with unlicensed goods based on early manga and became a toy manufacturing powerhouse after World War II with the aid of U.S. outsourcing and Disney character licensing (among the first licensed products was, strangely, a Bambi rifle). With the Atomu craze, the toy industry converged toward anime-based Japanese characters, and children went from *playing* characters (with guns, swords, masks, etc.) to *playing with* character toys (such as dolls and figurines). The toy thus became another means of access to the character's narrative world, while also drawing criticism for further absorbing children in the game of consumption.

The book shifts emphasis in its second part to the institutionalization of the media mix by the conglomerate Kadokawa Books in the 1970s, concluding with a theoretical consideration of the centrality of character marketing in a post-Fordist economy. While valuable, these later chapters depart somewhat from the case study of the book's earlier section. I found myself with questions about early anime's legacy for the evolution of the media mix (questions that, admittedly, may go beyond the purview of Steinberg's analysis). This book might productively be read alongside Anne Allison's *Millennial Monsters*, whose textual

and ethnographic approaches to anime-based characters complement Steinberg's institutional analysis. Between them, one can piece together a history of how anime narratives have positioned their character-brands as well as their audiences in ever more seductive ways.

Atomu is a boy robot who invites identification (visitors to Tezuka's museum in Takarazuka can get stickers with photos of their faces framed by Atomu's familiar two-pointed coiffure) but also can be regarded as a companion or even a surrogate child (he was originally created by a scientist to replace his own child who was killed in an accident). In Atomu's aftermath, anime narratives have refined the way they position viewers to identify with their human characters and relate to their robot/cyborg character-brands: from controller (in *Tetsujin 28-go*, known stateside as *Gigantor*) to companion (in *Doraemon*, the ubiquitous robotic cat from the 1970s anime) and, finally, to collector. In the *Pokemon* anime series and movies, the main character, Satoshi (Ash Ketchum in the United States), inhabits an alternative universe where kids compete by catching and collecting fantasy creatures. This narrative forms the pretext not only for toys and card games but for a video game franchise that has helped sustain Nintendo's line of Game Boy/DS portable consoles for more than 15 years. The *Pokemon* fictional world thus invites kids not just to play or interact with a few characters but to gather and deploy a vast range of knowledge about its periodically released, infinitely extensible series of characters.

While Steinberg doesn't venture into this sort of narrative analysis, his account of anime's contribution to the media mix, highlighted by Atomu's visual development as an image maker, is engaging and thoughtful. The book's consideration of early Atomu marketing is exhaustively researched. In the course of reviewing Meiji Seika's sticker campaign alone, readers get a detailed history of premium campaigns by candy manufacturers, with a digression on chocolate's evolution in postwar Japan from an elite commodity to a token of international reconciliation to a symbol of economic recovery. Steinberg shows an especially impressive fluency with his Japanese sources, both primary materials and scholarly literature. He seems to have spent countless hours in archives of Japanese marketing materials and his translations are consistently illuminating. The book also devotes considerable attention to Japanese scholarship on animation and visual culture that is likely to be new to most English-language readers and parallels Euro-American scholarship in interesting ways. *Anime's Media Mix* thus provides a lively account of the beginnings of the anime character image as both a copyrightable commodity and a nexus of audience desire.