

The UAE's Tryst with Anime: An Evaluation

M.Shuhail and S.Koshy

Abstract—This paper looks at the case of anime in the United Arab Emirates and why anime generally appeals to a global audience. Theories, such as Eiji Otsuka's grand narrative, and Henry Jenkins studies on fandoms have helped formulate discussions about the relationship between anime and anime fans. Both theories suggest that the relationship does not occur on a shallow level of consuming anime for the sake of anime, rather it is a matter of belonging to a world specific to them. Primary interviews with Emiratis interested in the anime culture has added verity to the study. The interviews helped demonstrate that the anime culture in the country is evolving from basic consumption to advanced production. Although the production level is in its baby stages, the demand for it, as my findings conclude, is growing consistently. Finally, the paper explores the possible causes that might have contributed to minimal production of anime in the region.

Index Terms—Anime, Fandoms, Jenkins, Otsuka, UAE

I. INTRODUCTION

ANIME, the Japanese equivalent of animation, (Lu, 2008, p. 169) first appeared in Japan in the 1910's and its exportation to other countries began during the 1990s. (Lu, 2008, p. 170) Disney and Warner Brothers cartoons were two of the Western influences on the founding father of Japanese anime; Tezuka Osamu. Tezuka was inspired by Western animations like Betty Boop and Mickey Mouse to create the large eyes commonly associated with anime. (Brenner, 2007, p. 7) He produced one of the earliest and most popular anime series in Japan *Astro Boy* (1952), which was an adaptation of his original comics (Brenner, 2007, p. 7). Furthermore, there seems to be a universal attachment to anime. Children from all over the world grew up watching dubbed anime, sometimes without even knowing its country of origin. The same is true in the UAE. Rarely do you come across an Emirati household that has not at some point indulged in an anime series. From *Kimba the White Lion*, *The Rose of Versailles* and later to anime we can only get online like *Naruto* and *One Piece*.

II. FEATURE

The number of Emirati anime fans is increasing. The intriguing part is that, unlike other trends, the consumption of anime seems to come with a set of additional interests.

Anime, comics, video games, and cosplay, and associated products (merchandise) are inextricable; it does not matter which one comes first, but once a fan gets into one it hooks him to the rest. What makes it also interesting to look into is the fact that anime lovers come from diverse countries, cultures, and religions. Hence, it is interesting to investigate its occurrence in a country like the United Arab Emirates where, like everywhere else, once anime's definition was limited to childhood cartoons and now it has acquired a whole new perspective. It is also vital to shed light on why anime is welcomed everywhere around the globe. In addition, there is little written on anime originating from or produced in the Arab world despite the fact that there is an adequate number of fans, artists, and animators. There are in fact multiple studios and conventions that cater to the fans but they are either not well known or do not usually take part in international festivals. It is necessary to investigate why locally made anime hardly makes it to the international market.

III. ANIME'S INTERNATIONALIZATION

One of the distinctive features of anime which makes it loved worldwide and accepted by all cultures is its "internationalization". (Lu, 2008, p. 170). Internationalization, as defined by Amy Shirong Lu, refers to its inclusion of non-Japanese elements. (Lu, 2008, p. 170) Her article, *The Many Faces of Internationalization in Japanese Anime*, explores the elements of the internationalization and the cultural politics behind anime's international success. She notes that the context, narrative, plot, as well as the design of characters all constitute the non-Japanese elements of anime. (Lu, 2008, p. 171) For instance, in one of the early anime that appeared in 1979, *The Rose of Versailles*, the narrative talks about the history of the French Revolution only without any mention of Japanese history. (Lu, 2008, p. 171) Even if the story is fictional the elements remain inclusive to all cultures. Like the case of *Gunslinger Girl* which tells the story of little girls trained and hired by the Italian government to kill whoever might pose a threat to the safety or stability of the country. The universal elements extend to the themes of the stories too. They are often centered on love, friendship, death, personal growth, and everything all humans experience. (Lu, 2008, p. 172) Indeed, this diversity in genres and storylines makes anime the more appealing and inviting. (Brenner, 2007, p. xvii)

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IV. A LOOK ON THE OTAKU CULTURE AND ITS FANDOM NEIGHBOR

Another unique feature to anime is that the audience make an integral part of its production. That is where otaku comes into the picture. Otaku, a term coined by Okada Toshio in 1982, denotes fans who consume a lot of manga (comics), anime (animation), computer and video games (Steinberg, 2004, p. 453). It is typically used outside Japan as a neutral term and can be translated as “geeks” or “nerds”. Weeaboo on the other hand, which is an internet slang often contracted as weeb, carries the same meaning but is considered a derogatory term.

It appears that we cannot speak of anime without mentioning otakus (fandoms) as the two seem to go hand in hand. Though the general public may not be aware of it the success of any media franchise depends largely on the fans investments and participation. Sociologists, media scholars, and producers and marketers are aware of the influence fans exert in the media sphere.

Otsuka Eiji, a manga and animation theorist, gives a fresh perspective of the fans culture modes of consumption. He argues in his book, *On the Consumption of Narratives*, that they no longer settle for the products themselves but are rather after the “grand narrative”. The small narrative he describes as the single episode or product, while the grand narrative is related to the whole system or “world view”. In other words: the more these consumers consume products (small narratives) the closer they feel to the (grand narrative), and the more they approach the grand narrative, the more they are able to produce small narratives which are equally parallel to their consumption (Steinberg, 2004, p. 452). Otsuka introduced this theory in his essay, *World and Variation: The Reproduction and Consumption of Narratives*. He begins his essay by referring to the Bikkuriman Chocolates hit which emerged around the year 1987 (Eiji, 2010, p. 104). Each Bikkuriman Chocolate contained a card showing an image of a Bikkuriman character on one side and a description of the character on the back. As Otsuka points out it is not the chocolate nor the stickers themselves that the children are after when they buy the product, rather it’s the “small narratives” they collect that eventually accumulate into the “grand narrative” (Eiji, 2010, p. 106).

For those with little knowledge about Japanese anime culture, the phenomenon might be known to them as fandoms. The two terms are closely related, Henry Jenkins, who is a media scholar and is a part of the fandom culture himself, defines fandoms as “the social structures and cultural practices created by the most passionately engaged consumers of mass media properties” (Jenkins, 2010). In his book, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers*, he talks about the history of fandoms in the US. Back when science fiction came into light and long before the introduction of technologies and social networks, these fandoms relied on exchanging letters and personal publications. Only later did conventions come into the picture to connect fans personally. Additionally, the first fandom convention was organized in North America in 1977 (Lu, 2008, p. 170). He also points out that most of the prominent science fiction authors were once a part of a fandom themselves. Jenkins even refers to them as ‘activists’ as they

have a huge impact on the “commercial distribution of works” and some go as far as to lobby producers to keep shows like *Star Trek* running if they learn it is about to be cancelled (Jenkins, 2006, p. 138).

Similar to Otsuka’s grand narrative is Levy’s “collective intelligence” theory which Jenkins also touches on in his book. Unlike shared knowledge which pertains to anything known to every member in a community, collective intelligence describes “knowledge available to all members of a community” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 139). In the context of fandoms, collective intelligence infers that each fan has limited knowledge, yet each fan knows something that the other does not and this in its role gives them the advantage to exchange and share (Jenkins, 2006, p. 139).

V. CHALLENGES FACING ANIMATORS IN THE ARAB WORLD

So why is this widely known and studied phenomenon rarely seen –if not absent- in the Arab region, especially when it comes to production and participation in festivals. Perhaps the hesitation to pursue anime stems from fear of Western rejection, due to Islamophobia, or due to sensitivities towards producing content that deals with Islam. Tariq Alrimawi tackles this issue in his paper; *Issues of Representation in Arab Animation Cinema: Practice, History and Theory*. He observes that in the pre-production stage the content must be approved by Islamic authorities and in the post-production stage producers worry their work will not be accepted in Western markets because it might contain ideologies opposite to theirs. (Alrimawi, 2014, p.48) Similarly, upon its release, the recently animated movie *Bilal* faced a lot of controversies because some audience felt the story was insulting to Islam and others were skeptical about the depiction of The Prophet’s companion.¹ Countries like Qatar called for its banning from theatres even though the story carries a humanitarian message. This could also explain why anime in the UAE has not yet reached its full potential. On that note, conservative Emirati otakus might also be hesitant to produce content that could go against Islam. Emirati girls might not even feel free to enjoy cosplays at festivals, lest the character they choose to cosplay is dressed modestly.

VI. REFERENCE TO PRACTICE

The otaku culture has been and still is ubiquitous; from the anime cartoons Emiratis watch in homes, the manga volumes on our library shelves, to the video games on our phones. In the UAE for example, channels like Spacetoon - which aired all kinds of Arabic dubbed anime- were a staple in Emirati households. In the beginning though, few Emiratis made the connection between anime and Japan. Not until most had transitioned to watching the original Japanese anime online, which usually happened later on during teenage years. So far that has been Emiratis’ only window to the anime world, but the last five to six years has witnessed a

¹It is prohibited to represent the figures of The Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) along with his following four Sahabah (companions). Bilal is not one of the four Sahabah but the issue of representations remains debatable. (Alrimawi, 2014, p.48)

tremendous growth in the anime culture. Following the inauguration of the *Middle East Film and Comic Con* (MEFCC) in 2013, the UAE successfully marked itself as a hub for fandoms and otakus equally. Though the festival is mainly centered on Marvel and DC superheroes, anime has its significant share amongst participants. During the festival, a number of local attendants took the chance to showcase their fan art, some of them sold it as merchandise too. In addition, for the first time in 2016, the co-founder of MEFCC, Arafat Ali Khan, organized the first ever anime-dedicated festival in the region; *Ani:Me Expo* (2016).

Emirati anime fans who shared their opinion on the distinctiveness of Japanese anime from other Western cartoons stated that anime caters to all age groups and has something to offer to every culture. Meanwhile, Westerners are not as invested in cartoons, and excluding *The Simpsons* and *South Park*, most of their productions target children only. This defies the earlier stereotypes about anime when it was in its budding stages. Previously, as Jenkins recalls, the public were not accustomed to seeing teenagers and adults watching anime. In Poland, non-fans labelled anime as “Chinese cartoon” and the association with anime and children caused great embarrassment to older age groups. This, according to him, is partly due to the “pop cosmopolitanism” which refers to the change in a pop culture when it is exported to other cultures, as anime in Japan was well received amongst all age groups (Jenkins, 2013).

A similar answer came from Fatima AlMehairi, the director of the upcoming cartoon *Emara*. Like most Emiratis, she grew up watching cartoons and she confessed that when she was a child her mother used to buy her dubbed anime for the purpose of improving her classical Arabic. Al Mehairi is a comic artist and she visits Japan annually. She has also taken part in both *Middle East Film and Comic Con* and *Ani:Me*. (AlMehairi, 2016).

Emara is a story about a young Emirati female superhero called Moza. Moza harnesses a special power that she uses to fight crimes across the seven emirates. Besides being the first in house animated series in the country, *Emara* also features a character that Emirati girls can identify with. “Girls like us haven’t been given much of a chance in animation”, she adds. *Emara*’s fighting costume resembles the Emirati culture; her head is covered with a hijab and she wears an Emirati burqa as a mask. The artist has been drawing since she was a child and her early experiments with anime style has helped a great deal in developing her drawing skills later on. She also works on comic storyboards. (AlMehairi, 2016) Other amateur artists interviewed also admitted to implementing anime drawing techniques to sketch their own characters.

VII. FINDINGS

There seems to be a shortage of anime and animation production in the Arab World. What comes out of the region and makes it to international festivals is limited to documentaries, action movies and horror movies (Alrimawi, 2014, p.17). This explains the shortage of published references on animation in the Arab world excluding Mohammed Ghazala’s *Animation in the Arab World*, which offers a glance at the Arabian animated films since 1936. It is

in fact the only book in the market that is written by an Arab about animation in the MENA region (Alrimawi, 2014, p.17). The book was originally a conference paper presented to the Athens’ *Animfest Animation Festival* in 2011 in Greece (Alrimawi, 2014, p.18) . It contains an individually collected number of articles about animation in different parts of the Arab world; the GCC, the Levant and Egypt, in addition to North Africa (Alrimawi, 2014, p.18). In a personal interview conducted by Tariq Alrimawi, Ghazala reasoned:

“There is no systematic approach to producing and educating animation in the Arab region most of the experiments that happened by the Arab animation filmmakers to show their Arabic identity and culture through animation are independent and without serious support from the Arab governments. Most of the high quality animation productions in Arab countries such as Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia and Morocco focus on TV commercials and TV series especially for Ramadan, and don’t have interest in producing artistic films for cinema and festivals.” (Alrimawi, 2014, p.18).

Fatima Al Mehairi shares his sentiments in regard to the limited financial support from the government to anime artists. She founded her own production studio and is hoping to create a thriving industry for regional artists and animators to work in. She is positive that if artists receive the financial support they need they will be better able to commit to their work and even take it to another level. This, she believes, will produce the quality content the industry needs, raise the regional standards, and inevitably push for international recognition (AlMehairi, 2016).

Ghazala, on the other hand, is the founder and director of International Association of Animation Filmmakers (ASIFA) organization. The organization seeks to help aspiring Arab and African animation filmmakers to create, develop, and promote their own work. It also runs workshops to cater to them with the aim of encouraging animators to take part in international festivals (Alrimawi, 2014, p.18).

Despite this shortage the situation shows signs of steady improvement as more and more are taking up animation as a career, or even a hobby. Mohammed Saeed Harib, the animator behind the famous cartoon *Freej* and the director of Khalid Gibran’s *The Prophet* is active in the field. Before the airing of *Freej*, Harib founded an animation studio Lammtara Art Production, which is based in Dubai.

Besides the anime conventions and niche online clubs that constantly pop up -like Dubai Anime Club and Abu Dhabi Anime Club-, there are also special anime movie screenings to cater to fans in the UAE. In summer 2016, *One Piece Film: Gold* premiered in Abu Dhabi’s Emirates Palace eight days before its official release in Japan. The initiative was planned by Ego Punch Entertainment, another animation studio in the capital (Newbould, 2016) . Last year, the *Dubai International Film Festival* (DIFF) also screened *Your Name* which was released the same year and ranked as the second highest grossing anime film in history.

VIII. CONCLUSION

In short, anime’s flexibility makes it an easy medium to tackle diverse themes, and settings for all audience from all

ages. Its internationalization and divergence from politics is a reason for its wide acceptance amongst all cultures. Moreover, it is noted that anime's success is heavily dependent on fans' consumption and participation which arises from their desire to belong to a grand narrative. However, Fans from the Arab world might face restrictions in terms of financial support and religious sensitivities hindering producing certain content. In spite of these restrictions, the UAE is slowly establishing itself as an anime embracing market.

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