

What's So Fascinating about It?

Japanese Popular Culture in Finland

Panel discussion at Cinema Orion on Saturday 20 September 2008

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The aim of the panel was to shed light on the Finnish fan experience and the meanings that fans attach to Japanese popular culture. The organizers had invited three active participants in the scene: anime and manga connoisseur and a student of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Tampere Anna Rantasila, role player and go and shogi aficionado Joni Selinheimo, as well as Katariina Alainen, a promoter of Japanese pop music. The panel was chaired by Annamari Konttinen, lecturer of Contemporary Japanese Society at the Centre for East Asian Studies at the University of Turku.

This account is reconstructed from email interviews with fans. Of the original panel participants, Anna Rantasila and Joni Selinheimo were able to respond. In addition, Mauno Joukamaa, junior editor in chief of *Japan Pop* magazine, answered Annamari's questions.

Annamari: How and when did your interest in Japanese popular culture start? How old were you at the time?

Mauno: I would say it was in the mid-1980s when I was maybe seven or eight years old. That's when I encountered anime tapes published in Finnish for the first time in a video rental shop (it was Leiji Matsumoto's *Starzinger*, Buichi Terasawa's *Cobra*, and I believe I also saw *Uchuu Senkan Yamato* around that time, too). When I grew older, anime was left in the back burner, but when I met enthusiasts at the university, I gravitated again towards a more active inside group.

Anna: I cannot state an exact point in time, but my first encounters with Japanese pop culture were in the beginning of the 1990s when YLE (the Finnish Broadcasting Company) broadcast *Totoro* and *Porco Rosso* on television, quite an act of cultural consequence. They impressed the heart and the mind of a little girl and left me in awe, feeling enthusiasm and fascination. At the time I had no idea, however, that these films were products of Japanese popular culture.

I became more conscious of Japanese pop culture in particular at the beginning of the 2000s when I was about 15 years old. I was in secondary school and spent time going through the comic shelves of my hometown library, so it was inevitable that I bumped into manga as well. In 2003, I joined the local anime and manga association that was unregistered at the time, and then things really took off.

Joni: I believe it was when I was four years old, when my conscious memories begin. My father, my sister and my brother were interested in Japanese pop culture and I inherited it from them. That was in 1990.

Annamari: What kinds of activities/hobbies/jobs/life style choices related to Japanese pop culture do you have now? What sort of a form do they take and how much of your time do they occupy? For example, do you have regular meetings or rehearsals, net communication, events, etc.?

Mauno: As the junior editor in chief of *Japan Pop*, Japanese pop culture is a constant part of my every day. Apart from my actual work assignments I follow the scene, familiarize myself with new products, attend events and engage in other activities that support my work as a journalist. In the past, I have had many different kinds

of roles in associations in this field but lately I have tried to disengage myself from them. Nevertheless, I still participate as a regular member in the community, in weekly parapara dance rehearsals and video nights of the anime association, among others.

Anna: These days, Japanese pop culture and activities related to it are part of my regular everyday life. I watch anime and read manga regularly, and for a year I worked in a research project that focused on how Finns consume and practice Japanese popular culture. In addition to that, my bachelor's thesis, and most likely my future MA thesis, too, will focus on the same topic, although from the point of view of mainstream media.

In addition to anime and manga, I participate, although in a less regular fashion, in cosplay and I also create costumes for my acquaintances. I'm also the information officer of the Desucon event and I remain in almost daily internet contact with other aficionados either regarding issues related to the event or other things.

I have met most of my close friends as well as my domestic partner in the scene, so discussing our joint interests is an essential part of my close relationships. I am no longer a member of any anime or manga association, however, but I remain active in my close circle of friends.

Participating in events (conventions, conferences, etc.) is a part of my hobby but within the constraints posed by money and my other commitments. I still try to attend at least two events annually.

Joni: Playing go and shogi and promoting the games. Enjoying Japanese anime and comics for inspiration, motivation and energy.

Annamari: Because of your hobby, do you feel that you identify with a particular group or subculture?

Mauno: Yes, I feel that I belong to a wide group that could be called "Finnish aficionados of manga and anime" (or "Finnish otaku", if you choose to use that term). The group is defined by its members' preparedness and willingness to invest a bit more in their hobby than the consumers of "market manga" and "youtubeanime". To be more exact, I believe that within that group I belong to the oldest of three generations. I would go as far as to say that I belong to the elite of the scene of Japanese popular culture in Finland, in the Millsian meaning of the term. This might lead us to the question as to what sorts of interaction and power relations actually exist within the world of Finns interested in Japanese popular culture.

Anna: Not as much as I did when I was younger. But I still feel that I am an active member of the community. I would not call myself an otaku, since I don't feel I'm fanatic enough to warrant the term. Rather, I feel like I'm some sort of an elitist as I admit that I snub most manga series translated into English.

Joni: Not really.

Annamari: What do you feel that Japanese pop culture gives to you? Is your experience of it crucially different from e.g. your experience of Western popular culture?

Mauno: Yes it is. What I wrote four and a half years ago still sums up all the essential aspects about this question to me. "To me, the most attractive aspect of anime and manga is how their repertoires of style and expression make it possible to express emotions and convey moods in a far more touching way than Western visual narratives – be they based on animation or live acting – usually are capable of. A factor contributing to my attraction is my fondness of melodrama, something that I seem to share with the Japanese." Despite that, I have gone through a fair share of mediocre material (although the weakest seems to come from Korea, not Japan). Ironically, the way manga and anime production is being geared to the limited audience of manga enthusiasts seems increasingly to go counter to my own preferences in the area.

Anna: Japanese popular culture gives me entertainment and cultural experiences just as Western popular culture does. The biggest differences can be found in the themes and variations of stories being recycled in anime and manga as they are far more variegated than in Western popular culture, especially TV-shows. I have gained a lot of food for thought by reading manga since – as childish as it may seem – I often reflect on my own life and compare it to the stories that I read. In addition to all that, a good manga is just as powerful a reading experience as a good novel, if not more so.

Joni: I feel I have gained a different perspective, different attitudes and inspiration. Japanese popular culture offers transhumanism, Zarathustran superhumanness and motivation for personal development of many kinds.

Annamari: What do you think attracts other people to Japanese popular culture? Who are the most active participants in the scene?

Mauno: The ascendance of Japanese popular culture to a mass phenomenon of present proportions is of course to a great extent based on the same kind of dialectics of differentiation and identification as any fashion or fad (cf. Simmel's *Philosophy of Fashion*). A central factor is the very unique, "mutating" way of assimilating foreign cultural elements typical of Japanese culture. That creates a situation where the products of Japanese popular culture, while at the same time strange and different, are still in a way familiar to the Western consumer. An important factor for anime and manga is also the great market and subculture created in Japan which is unlike

that of any other industrialized country, and the development of skill and know-how without parallel that has been facilitated by this phenomenon (although some skills, especially in the field of animation, are in a danger of deteriorating). I would also want to maintain, at the risk of mystifying the issue, that Japanese culture, popular culture included, possesses “mental resonance” that speaks to us Finns in a special fashion.

People active in the scene are mostly teenagers, although the more organized section of the field in particular still has participants who are a bit older as well. It’s really hard to try to estimate the demographic characteristics of the active crowd offhand, though.

Anna: I believe that the most attractive feature of Japanese popular culture is its difference and exoticism compared to Western culture. It is, however, more approachable to Finns and other citizens of the Northern Hemisphere than e.g. Latin American or African popular culture.

What is particularly fascinating, and on the other hand also very accommodating, in Japanese popular culture is its strong, almost exaggerated audiovisual nature. This attracts people with a visual bent and also encourages people to take up their own projects by e.g. drawing manga or engaging in cosplay.

I think the most active participants in the scene are young people who are fascinated by the exoticism of Japanese popular culture and who at the same time want to distinguish themselves from their peers by engaging in something different. The most visible and impressive examples of this are the followers of different street fashions. Older enthusiasts are maybe more attracted to the narratives and deeper cultural meanings that can be detected beneath the surface of manga and anime releases.

Joni: A foreign world and different attitudes seem to be the “Japan magnets” for many young people. Members of the go clubs tend to be students of math at the university or other university students successfully recruited by the math students. Shogi players are mostly chess players who also share an interest in Japan through anime, film or history.

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