The Bestseller Recipe:
A Natural Explanation for the Global Success of Anime
(a brief summary)

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Lars-Martin Sorensen's presentation at the Imaginary Japan Conference was based on the article *The Bestseller Recipe: A Natural Explanation for the Global Success of Anime*, which is forthcoming in Post Script, Special Issue Honoring Keiko McDonald, *Japanese Popular Culture and Film*, Volume 28, No. 2 (Winter/Spring 2009). With the permission of the editor, we bring a brief summary. For finer grain, please refer to the above journal.

Drawing on cognitive theory, this paper offers an explanation as to why viewers from vastly different cultural spheres, but equipped with the same biological hardware to make meaning with, enjoy watching films, which – at some levels of meaning and in some but not all cases – are not readily accessible to viewers who are uninformed on the Japanese backgrounds.

Animemania – A Natural Explanation

Over the last decade Japanese creative industries have boomed. In 2005, Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO: 3-4) reported that the TV series *Pokémon* was broadcast in 65 countries around the world in 2005, and that more than 60% of the animation broadcast worldwide was made in Japan . Part of the reason for the present success is the magnitude of the anime business in Japan. The domestic market in Japan is huge, and products can thus be exported at favourable prices – in most cases, the profit from the home market has already covered production costs. Additionally, it is an acknowledged fact that the Japanese animation industry is being promoted by the Japanese political and diplomatic establishment. And the extensive marketing of tie-ins (computer games, cartoons, and trading cards for instance) exploiting the characters and worlds of films and TV series undoubtedly boost the consumption of global audiences. Scholars of anime have often fastened upon the stylistic and thematic novelty of anime as an attractive alternative to well-known western, i.e. Disney-style, animation. Here, the alleged complexity of anime characters and the darkness and ambiguity of certain anime series are often favourably compared to the one-dimensional characters and the inevitable happy endings of Disney and Pixar fare. While this may account for especially the fascination of die-hard anime fans, who are attracted to the world of anime partly due to the countercultural capital offered by being opposition to the world and works of Disney, it hardly explains why global mainstream audiences, too, are fascinated by especially the broadcast anime series. Also, one would be hard pressed to argue that plot is pivotal in the most famous series like *Pokémon*, *Dragon Ball Z* or *Naruto*, since the storylines are almost invariably build-ups to a climactic duel in which the hero either prevails, or is, temporarily, knocked out if the episode is to be continued. Thus, audience fascination seems to hinge not on intricacies of story and character but rather, I would argue, on the salience of visual aesthetics and the repeated exposition of the supernatural and the unnatural – traits, which, in concert, have proved their mind grabbing capacity outside the world of anime.

The Supernatural

Telling tales about supernatural entities is and has always been a favourite universal human pastime. Ideas, concepts and stories on the supernatural are – at one level – surprisingly uniform across different cultures, and this facilitates the transmission of tales about the supernatural (cf. Boyer 2001). Among cognitive-evolutionary scholars of religion (Scott Atran, Justin Barrett and Pascal Boyer for instance), there is consensus on the importance of the concept of the 'minimally counterintuitive' to understand the cross-culturally contagious nature of supernatural entities, such as gods: gods are minimally counterintuitive agents. They may walk like humans, but they can also walk on water; they may drink like humans, but also boast the enviable ability to turn water into wine. Minimally counterintuitive agents violate the intuitive ontology that universal mankind is bestowed with, and that is an important part of the explanation why they are salient and cross-culturally transmittable. In extension hereof, animated films could be characterized as a film form that lends itself perfectly to the minimally counterintuitive. The ease with which the physical laws that apply to human existence can be violated in animation has resulted in violations of intuitive ontology being the rule, not the exception. Think of the abundance of flying islands, moving castles, cyborgs, ghosts, gods and spirits at play in anime.

In order for supernatural entities – regardless of whether they are gods or animated characters – to accumulate congregations of believers/fans, the tales about them must possess inferential potential, especially with regards to morality, the rules of engagement in social interaction, and preferably the issues of death and the afterlife, too (cf. Barrett 2001). Needless to say, the issue of death of not just protagonists, but the entire universe, has been dealt with in countless anime. In doing so, the films have often conveyed not just inferential potential, but also heavy-handed messages on how humans should treat nature and each other, especially in the films of Hayao Miyazaki.

The unnatural

If we turn from the supernatural to the unnatural, several features typical of anime stand out. Anime-characters are generally fair skinned and have only slight, if any, racial features. This facilitates their transmission among the peoples of the world. Not just because it deals a pre-emptive strike to racial prejudice, it also makes the characters easier to keep track of for non-Asian viewers, in contrast to the case with, for example, seven distinctly 'Japanese looking' samurai. Moreover, human faces are simplified and stylized. For instance, characters have disproportionately large eyes. This bestows them with an expressive appearance that helps convey emotional shifts, and serves to communicate and evoke emotions in an amplified manner. Due to the enhanced and simplified facial features of anime characters, there is nothing sadder to watch than the sobbing doll face of a disenchanted anime figure like for instance the starving four year old girl, Setsuko, of Isao Takahata's *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988, *Hotaru no haka*). If we take measure of the physical appearance of little Setsuko, we find that both her eyes and her head are unnaturally large compared to her body. This gives her an infant-like frailness, which may evoke strong innate impulses in the spectator to protect and nurture. When the impulses to protect and nurture are refused satisfaction by the narrative, in which the little girl dies from malnutrition, strong negative emotions – sorrow and grief – are evoked in the viewer. And this is one of the qualities that contribute to making *Grave of the Fireflies* a truly moving film.

Stasis and movement

Intermittently character design is un-communicative; i.e. there is too little information for viewers to decide the moods and intentions of the characters because of stasis and simplification. The animation of faces in TV-series like *Naruto*, for example, is often reduced to mechanic mouth-movements to represent speech while other facial features remain static. One might infer that this diminishes our emotional investment, but this need not be the case. Lack of information may trigger our mental agency detection device and our theory-of-mind device, mental tools that detect agents in our environment and probe into their mind – their intentions, goals and desires – until we have sufficient information categorize the input (cf. Barrett 2001).

All the above characteristics are, to some extent, present in live action films, too. But one salient aesthetic feature unique to anime is the prevalence of unnatural motion patterns. As pointed out by Lamarre (2002: 336), Japanese animators tend to move drawings instead of drawing movements. Often the animation of foreground characters is very limited, but in order to amplify the illusion of movement, the background drawings are moved

in the opposite direction of where our figure is heading. This violates intuitive ontology, and may thus appear more attention grabbing to viewers. We normally rest assured that the physical world surrounding our everyday actions stays firmly in place. What happens physiologically when it does not is that our eyes (our visual sense) overrule our ears – the vestibular system that provides input about movement and equilibrium to the brain.[1] The extensive use of moving drawings as opposed to drawing movements utilized in anime, especially in TV series, harbouring no ambitions to look cinematic, is thus an asset as far as evocation of emotional arousal is concerned – it deviates strongly from our everyday experience. It also differs from the way moving backgrounds are normally used in live-action films. Here, moving backgrounds are often seen in two instances: Lamarre points to the back projections of scenes of car travel in old Hollywood B-movies (361). Here, it is often fairly obvious that it is the background seen through the windows that is moving, not the car. These days this experience is easily understood as a result of outdated projection techniques. The other instance is when we as viewers are given access to the subjective experience of characters, which have, for instance, been poisoned, have suffered a blow to the head or the like. Both back projections and subjective scenes, generally speaking, only appear isolated in the overall flow of films. In limited animation, however, the experience of induced movement also pertains to objective scenes, and many an anime is thus saturated with this salient feature, which deviates strongly from everyday experience even when 'normal' conteporary everyday actions are depicted. Additionally, the sight of unrestrained aggression emanating from, say, one of the 'baby-face' combatants in *Dragon Ball Z,* evokes what Grodal (1997: 245 ff.) terms as the strongly emotionally arousing phenomenon of "cognitive dissonance". Cognitive dissonance appears when persons or objects habitually assumed to behave in a specific manner – things or persons that have previously been adequately analyzed and categorized – suddenly act in an entirely novel and unexpected manner. The prevalence of child-like characters in un-childlike capacities in anime plug into precisely this feature.

In sum, the characters, actions and environments of anime come forward as minimally counterintuitive in a multitude of ways and viewers experience that the laws of the physical world do not apply to the universe of the film, even when the scenario taking place is set in what resembles contemporary everyday reality. Dealing with supernatural agents and objects therefore immediately suggests itself, and the structure, agents, and contents of tales about supernatural beings are – as mentioned – surprisingly uniform and highly cross-culturally contagious.

Endnotes

[1] I am indebted to Andreas Gregersen, University of Copenhagen, for the insights on the vestibular system.

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