

Mechademia 1: Emerging Worlds of Anime and Manga

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Anime and manga began as a world apart. Removed from Western culture and the “real world,” saturated with Japanese *exotisme*, they were, nonetheless, often part of American science fiction conventions, where fans garbed as their favorite characters roamed the halls and conducted “masquerades” that, in ingenuity and inventiveness, could rival anything Hollywood had to offer.

Despite obvious boundaries, that world has grown ever closer to “everyday” culture in both film and print—manifest in manga’s surging presence in chain bookstores and anime on TV, in movies, and on DVDs. This publication is yet another step, crossing over as it does into the academic world. The first volume of a planned annual publication, it discusses not only anime and manga, but also “fan arts”—that last including the phenomenon of “cosplay,” in which fans take on the personae of their favorite characters through dress, makeup, jewelry, and even mannerisms. This book’s editor, professor of liberal arts at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, has tackled a field of burgeoning popularity.

Classed together and considered as forming a realm unto itself, anime and manga are thoroughly interrelated. Critical essays examine the new and ongoing scholarly dialogue among critics in the field, academics who study it, and the fans who know its inner landscapes so well. These interrelationships are explored in depth in this volume, along with the ways in which that realm relates to the fans devoted to it.

The essays are insightful, greatly detailed, and footnoted properly for academic study, but the subject matter is as fascinating as any fan might want. The discussion of the werewolf tradition in anime and manga, for instance, not only examines shapeshifting characters within this realm but also compares them to the werewolf tradition in Western literature and culture, analyzing the differences and exploring the development (or lack thereof) in various categories. The essay on “Metamorphosis of the Japanese Girl” looks at the sometimes startlingly innovative behavior of female characters and sexuality within the strictures of (mostly male) conservative editorship. Cosplay is explored as a cultural phenomenon, treated very differently in America and in Japan: “In North America ... fully costumed/dressed cosplayers may leave a convention and eat at a nearby restaurant. In Japan, cosplayers are not welcome in certain areas beyond the convention.”

Also covered are the more technical aspects of anime, such as how programming dilemmas affect gaming software, “superflat,” and multiplanar images. Those less familiar with the field might have preferred the essay on multiplanar images to precede that on superflat. Nonetheless, this is a fascinating glimpse inside the more esoteric aspects of anime/manga, and one that fans and scholars alike will welcome.

MARLENE SATTER (February 8, 2007)

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