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Monstrous Toys of Capitalism

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such as “Do you like cute things?” and “Are you partial to gorgeous things?” a reader moves along a path specific to her or his fashion preferences to an end at a gal subculture destination.

Patrick Macias and Izumi Evers have presented an informative, humorous, and timely take on the global pop culture phenomenon of Japanese gal subcultures and fashions in this book. Kazumi Nonaka’s illustrations complement the text and photographs to create a beneficial field guide to gal subcultures and emerging fashions in Tokyo. This book will be appreciated by a wide and varied audience for its novel and easily accessible presentation of Japanese gal subcultures and related fashions.

Notes

1. *Kamikaze Girls*, dir. Nakashima Tetsuya (Viz Video, 2006).

2. Aoki Shoichi, *Fruits* (New York: Phaidon Press, 2001), and *Fresh Fruits* (New York: Phaidon Press, 2005).

Monstrous Toys of Capitalism

BRENT ALLISON

Anne Allison. *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006. ISBN 0520245652

Anne Allison’s latest book examines Japan’s powerful toy manufacturing industry, a rapidly growing influence on the global toy market. Allison (no relation to the reviewer) introduces her book with its main point—she attributes the global success of Japanese toys to the sense of mastery that they offer children. While this point is not new, children’s ability to disassemble and recombine disparate parts of these toys speak to children who crave “commodity animism” (86) as a result and corrective of life governed by fluctuating postmodern capital. This monstrous political economy of endless consumption results in similarly monstrous

arrangements of living and subjectivities that are shifting, porous, and fragmented (30). This review will offer a brief summary of the book and interrogate issues that Allison discusses.

Japan found its industry and militarist ideology vanquished by the destruction from World War II. Ironically it was from the waste tin left by the occupying American victors that ingenious Japanese restarted an export market of toys, like model U.S. Army jeeps, to circulate back to American children (39). A new nationalist ideology bolstered by hard work and optimism for industrial and consumer technologies manifested itself in two major postwar cultural products. The monstrous reptilian Gojira and the childlike robot Tetsuwan Atomu served as different models of Japan(ese) rebuilt with technology, respectively imbued with anxiety and promise (40–65). Gojira, becoming Godzilla in the United States, had, due to failures of cultural translation and appreciation, also modeled perceived Japanese filmmaking cheesiness for Americans for decades (47).

Japan’s impressive economic recovery was equaled by its thirst for high-tech consumer products and the rise of a fragmented subjectivity wherein the only commonality was the shared reality of an atomized lifestyle (70). This is in large part Allison’s explanation for the social dysfunctions of general stress, *hikikomori* (or reclusive “shut-ins”), and incidents of violence well publicized in a country that perceives itself as lacking in crime. To Allison, this monstrous state of living is one side of the same capitalist coin with the monsters that pervade the Japanese toy market. It is not that toys cause these problems, Allison suggests, but that both are birthed from the same political economy.

This condition prompts Allison to treat the *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* less forgivingly than the other artifacts of Japanese popular culture she discusses. For her, *Power Rangers* is “the embodiment of post-Fordism and a post-modern aesthetics in the realm of children’s mass culture” (97) without being much else.

("Post-Fordism" is another name for a postindustrial economic condition dominated by service industries.) The superheroes are but a model of Japanese (team) workers imbued with "Weberian animist spirits" that combine Shinto cosmological sensibilities with a devoted work ethic and high-tech tools serving the state in new flexible capitalist configurations writ in spandex. *Power Rangers* requires few plausible plot devices and little audience investment in the stories and human characters; information about the tools is much more extensive. As such, it lends itself less to an in-depth examination of its fantasy world and audience reception, and more to classic macroeconomic and macrosexual analyses that she uses here. Allison compares the transnational production of *Power Rangers* with a hybridized U.S.-Japanese auto plant and the camera's gaze on tools, warriors, and robots with the "money shot" found in hardcore pornography. From her observations, the reader may infer that the franchise has all the soul of either.

Sailor Moon is treated somewhat more kindly, but it does not escape some intense criticism. A common complaint about the sexiness of the Sailor Scouts registers with Allison as an overt appeal to older men who fetishize female school students wearing traditional sailor suits. She uses this criticism as an opportunity to segue into an attack on salaryman-student *enjo kousai* ("compensated dating"), a practice on the relative decline. However, given that they are superheroes, Allison acknowledges that it is difficult to categorize the franchise as either wholly sexist or feminist (142). What seems to bother Allison more is the show's idealization of transformational practices (which she codes as consumptive) as a marker of power and femininity desired both by female and even male fans envying the status of the *shōjo* as a cavalier consumer. Less convincing is her sharp dichotomy between boy- and girl-oriented shows in general (e.g. "science, technology, and nationalism" vs. "magic, dreams, and relationships"

[137]). But there are counterexamples: *shōnen* megahits like *Bleach* and *One Piece* have lots of magic, *Gundam Wing* rebukes nationalism, and *Hikaro no Go* is very dreamlike. In these shows, as also in *Dragon Ball* and *Fullmetal Alchemist*, loyal friendship is valued above all else, and those who reject it usually meet a harsh end.

Allison brings up an important general point about *Sailor Moon*, anime, and manga that is disputed by Susan Napier:¹ most of the characters look or at least can pass as Caucasian (146). This notion was critical to Bandai and the U.S. DIC network when the latter imported the show for U.S. broadcast (150). These importers asked themselves how much should the show be Americanized, given that the characters can visually pass as European American? Bandai apparently did not think that the *Sailor Moon* dolls looked "American" enough, so it altered them to look more like Barbie (152). According to Allison, the Japaneseness of the characters did not register on the radar of fans at all, despite her assertion that the dolls carried the "smell" of cultural difference that subverted their ability to build interest in the show (155). However, from my own conversations with fans, it was *because* the U.S. dolls were made to look more Barbie-ish and less like the original Japanese anime characters that fans continue to seek out and buy the original Japanese-made dolls.

The *tamagotchi* as an electronic device shares much with its forerunners, the karaoke machine and Walkman, in reconfiguring body, space, and subjectivity (164). However, it does so through replicating a very mundane activity: the user takes care of a virtual pet. In noting this shift from identifying with heroes to reliving the everyday via prosthetic, dependent, and cybernetic life, Allison takes the reader back to the classical sociology of Émile Durkheim. If the imagination inherent in specialized and stationary rituals and ceremonies reifies the everyday, then using imagination in the everyday with a portable, queer *tomagotchi*—that is, queer in the sense of challenging the traditional

paradigm of keeping animals—is both unstable but also comforting in a lifestyle that is itself in a state of shift and fluctuation (180).

Allison positions *Pokémon* as allowing the consumer both to raise imaginative creatures and to achieve a heroic status (à la *Power Rangers* and *Sailor Moon*) by becoming a Pokémon master. She uses the Foucauldian theorization of knowledge (and, by extension, power) to promote *Pokémon*'s emphasis on knowledge acquisition and creature care over the eye candy fetishization (in the Freudian and Marxist sense) of the *Power Rangers*' and *Sailor Moon*'s "money shot" (103). For Allison, it isn't that *Pokémon* is devoid of fetish but rather that the interactivity inhering in *Pokémon* bequeaths a more empowering, or at least less exploitive, fetishization in children's play. Here Allison makes her boldest franchise-specific assertion: "*Pokémon* capitalism" allows commodities to "double as gifts and companions" (197) by referencing a milieu of premodern animist spiritualism in "New Age" aesthetics. The pocket monsters promote capitalist Japan's ascendancy, but act as the accomplice and corrective of its monstrous exploitation of its people. Curiously, Allison never defines what "New Age" means exactly, nor where this age is taking Japan and North America in terms of capitalist cycles of accumulation, alienation, and healing. The answer, by implication, is not much of anywhere.

Anecdotes of violent incidents perpetuated by persons connected to these pop culture products dot the book, but because Allison stresses the lack of causality between the two, it is unclear what the references accomplish. While she rightly avoids the antifan sentiments of older academic research in this area, Allison assumes that U.S. fans equate Japaneseness with coolness and lack interest in their products' authentic Japaneseness for its own sake. This drives home her point about fan fetishization. However, it overlooks fans' need for authentically Japanese narratives behind the products that can speak to their identities as fans, many of

whom participate in an active pedagogy of Japanese culture to make sense of both of them.

Nevertheless, Allison researched her theoretical tools and her subject matter very well. She makes especially keen insights on hybridity, mutability, and performativity in unexplored contexts of character identity. While postmodern in much of her approach, Allison remains steadfastly critical, even Marxist in her sensibilities toward the likes of Usagi and Pikachu. However, even those who do not occupy any of these critical camps should nonetheless make room on their shelves and in their reading schedules if they are at all interested in these new configurations of production and play.

Note

1. Susan Napier, *Anime: From "Akira" to "Howl's Moving Castle"* (New York: Palgrave, 2005)

If Casshern Doesn't Do It, Who Will?

DEBORAH SHAMOON

Kiriya Kazuaki (director). *Casshern*. 2004.
Momentum Pictures. ASIN B0007Q6RZ4.

Japan may produce more science fiction epic films and television shows than any other country, but except for the Godzilla franchise, nearly all of them are animated; the United States still corners the market on live-action sci-fi. The reason, obviously, is money: the two-hour-plus special-effects extravaganza is prohibitively expensive to produce. But perhaps advances in CGI could change that. Behold, *Casshern*: Kiriya Kazuaki's massive, visually stunning epic. It features live actors performing in front of a green screen, with all the effects and nearly all the backgrounds added digitally. According to its IMDb entry,¹ its budget was a paltry \$6 million, compared to \$200 million for *Spider-Man 2*, released the same year. With a visual aesthetic much closer to anime and Hong Kong action