Productive Fandom

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Pokémon Muffins

In the summer of 2012, I fly to Japan for the first time in my life. For the purpose of this research, I want to attend various fan events. After all, the fan communities of manga and anime are often discussed in this book as a global phenomenon. The uprisings of Japanese fiction have not only changed the Western television and comic culture, but also considerably influenced its different audiences. The subgenres of Japanese pop culture, and the lingua franca of their audiences, shape how Western audiences interpret Sherlock, for instance, and resonate in the fan art that they produce of Glee. Similarly, many of today’s fan practices are inspired by Japanese anime and manga fandom, such as the creation of fan comics or doujinshi.

Anime and manga shape how Western fans of Japanese fiction view the country itself. In fact, many anime fans go to Japan fairly late. They often become acquainted with Japanese pop culture in their teens and only go there as adults years later. For young Western fans, going to Japan is a dream. My first flight to Japan is no different. This media pilgrimage takes me to places that I have only seen in popular culture or heard about from other fans. Japan does not disappoint. Even small things, like eating a Pokémon muffin at the convenience store, or shopping for cosplay wigs at stores in Tokyo’s fashion town Harajuku, make me feel intimately connected to its popular culture, but also aware of its intermediality. Characters and stories are omnipresent in this consumer society.

Japan exports a flow of products that is widely recognizable and hailed by consumers all over the world. Many fan studies rely on the assumption that the Internet has made content and communities globally accessible, when, in fact, they study a small community. Commonly scholars focus on Western fan cultures where English-speaking members converge. In anime and manga fandom, language and cultural differences divide Japanese and Western fans, online as well as offline. Even though Japanese fans pay homage to the same fictional content as Western fans, the two communities exist separately.

Western fans show an interest in Japanese fan activity. They are prone to checking Japanese art sites, such as Pixiv, and buying Japanese products online. This Western “Japanophilia” expresses a longstanding cultural appreciation and even obsession with Japan. However, Japan itself seems less interested in seeing how its market and audiences develop in other countries, which makes the dialogue seem one-sided. The cultural dynamics of manga and anime raise
Figure 6: Photograph of Dutch WCS team by Mario Vargas
many questions that might be answered at fan events themselves. How global are the fan events that Japan offers? What moments of cultural exchange can be observed there? I share my experiences of two fan events: the World Cosplay Summit and Comiket.

**World Cosplay Summit**

The World Cosplay Summit (WCS) is an annual, international cosplay competition in Nagoya. WCS also broadcasts a live show on TV Aichi. This year marks the tenth anniversary of WCS; the Netherlands participates in WCS for the second time this year. The event is held in the rather futuristic Oasis 21, a public venue that also accommodates the bus terminal and shops. Free of charge, cosplayers from the region can watch the event and participate in activities around it. For this international event, cosplayers from different countries are elected at local fan conventions to represent their countries.

At Animecon 2012, Stichting J-Pop nominated the Dutch candidates through an intense competition. The winners were Sophie and Liza, with a performance based on the video game *Kid Icarus* (2012), a game well-known for its references to Greek mythology. Their play made a strong impression in terms of acting and pacing. Their performance showed how Medusa, the villain of the game, captured and nearly killed main character Pit, an Icarus-like angel. Sophie and Liza had clearly invested time in the story, but their costumes and props were also detailed. Medusa’s wand showed great skill and Pit’s wings, which spread out mechanically at the end of the act, even more so. The craftsmanship and acting of the girls led to a well-deserved first place.

I join Stichting J-Pop and the candidates to WCS to document their experiences. When we meet up at the airport, Sophie and Liza are exhausted and nervous. They have been working hard to improve their outfits before the competition. For instance, they had to change their props to make them suitable for the travel to Japan. Medusa’s wand, for instance, had to be cleaved in two to fit in the luggage. The candidates also had to practice for the show and change parts of their act. The script has now been rewritten with a grim ending, in which Medusa triumphs over Pit. With this ending, the cosplayers want to evoke the hybris of the *Icarus* myth. They explain to me that it is also faithful to the game. “Without his magical arrows,” Sophie says, “Pit doesn’t stand a chance against Medusa.”

During the entire trip to Japan, the girls worry about their costumes, but, once we arrive, it turns out that all the parts are still intact. The candidates have to be in Nagoya a week before the official competition starts so that they can
participate in parades, pay official visits to municipalities or TV shows, and practice their cosplay acts. Though the competition is international, the acts have to be in Japanese to make them understandable for the local audience. The WCS uses audio tapes of the performances though, meaning that the candidates only have to record their act and mouth the words on-stage. The Dutch candidates have already translated their act in the Netherlands and received many compliments from the Japanese WCS organization. Their pronunciation is clear and their European accents befit the Greek characters.

Before the competition, the candidates are also judged by the international WCS organization. These judges focus on the craftsmanship of the costumes and props by examining them up close, and the candidates also get some time to explain how they constructed the challenging parts. During the competition itself, the acts are judged by a professional Japanese jury in the categories “performance”, “costume”, and “fidelity” to the original narrative. A special section of the audience can also vote by raising a like or dislike sign.

The morning of the competition, the candidates participate in a red carpet parade through Nagoya’s busiest district, Sakae. The street has been closed off for this event. The parade starts with prominent historical costumes: kimonos, samurai outfits, and even a group of girls performing calligraphy on a large fabric in yukata. This part of the parade, followed by the cosplayers, sums WCS up nicely. Cosplay is welcomed in Nagoya as part of Japan’s cultural heritage and is framed as a contemporary continuation of Japan’s long tradition of dress-up and art. The global cosplayers thus illustrate the wide impact of Japanese popular culture. Dressed up as Zelda, Link, and other characters, the candidates complement Japan’s cultural success.

The live event and competition draw a large audience. Many fans are dressed up but certainly not all. Next to the stage, sponsors of WCS have set up their promotional booths. In general, WCS is sponsored by many tourist and travel companies, which highlights that this event only caters to the non-Japanese. In fact, before the competition, several teams of WCS are also interviewed for the promotional video “Is Japan Cool?” for Nippon Airways. The cosplayers promote the different countries that they are from but also affirm the image of “cool Japan”, a country that foreigners love to visit. The prizes for the competition are flight tickets to Japan, permitting the cosplayers to return to the country for a vacation. Through WCS, Japanese tourist companies boost their visibility.

The competition itself turns out to be a spectacular event that shows the state of the art of cosplay in every country. Though anime and manga fandom is associated with Asian and Western countries, other participants are also included. Brazil, for instance, shows great craftsmanship and so do Singapore and Taiwan. Many countries sport one or more robot “mecha” costumes in their acts.
Others created elaborate dresses, such as Russia and France. The stage props that some teams invented are quite big and range from Australia’s huge puppet spider queen to China’s silhouette painted screen. The acts themselves are often dramatic echoes of the original narratives. Many teams perform battles or reenactments of anime with a strong choreography. The different countries aim to deliver stellar performances that make a strong impression. As a result, there are not many comedy skits. The last acts are broadcasted on television and the breaks are filled with musical intermezzos by pop star May’n.

Ultimately, the winning team is Japan itself with a battle inspired by the franchise *Hakuōki Shinsengumi Kitan*. The second prize goes to Singapore for a beautiful, melodramatic act, while Indonesia wins the third place with an action-packed performance, which included the candidates back-flipping in their foam robot costumes. Sophie and Liza get eleventh place and are very pleased with that. On the second day of WCS, there is no competition, only live music. The program features many “anison” bands that cover songs from popular anime. Many fans and cosplayers listen eagerly or just sit on the grass, socialize, and do casual photo shoots. At the end of the two days, the international participants are called on-stage. They sing along with the opening of one of the most critically acclaimed anime, *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995-1996), which has been broadcasted in many countries all over the world. The song, *Zankoku no Tenshi no Thesis*, echoes through Oasis as Japan’s global siren song.

**Comiket**

From 10 to 12 August, I attend Comiket 82 at “Tokyo Big Sight”, the popular name for Tokyo International Exhibition Centre (*Tokyo Kokusai Tenjijo*). Comiket, an abbreviation of Comic Market, is the world’s largest self-published comic book fair. It is held twice a year in Tokyo, Japan. Comiket primarily functions as a market space for the exchange of self-published comics – or *doujinshi* – and other fan works such as games or art books.

The *doujinshi* that are sold at Comiket are often exclusive since many artist groups or “circles” hardly reprint their material. Though *doujinshi* are nonprofit items, some publications can be found at secondhand stores such as Mandarake or online sites such as the Japanese Amazon. Comiket’s organization explains in its catalogues that the market is a fan space where an artist community is created and supported. Comiket describes the motives of *doujinshi* artists as follows: “For most do[u]jinshi circles, earning profits is not the goal for their activities, but instead they aim to interact with their fellow participants through their own creations” (*History of the Comic Market*, 2012).
Historically, Comiket is the first comic market in Japan and heavily influenced the institutionalization of anime fandom. Comiket was also crucial in the development of the manga medium since many professional artists debuted there. The first Comiket was held on 21 December 1975, with about 32 participating circles and an estimated 700 attendees (History of Comiket, 2012). Half a million visitors attend Comiket each edition. This year, about 35,000 artists sell their self-published works at Comiket. Despite its popularity, Comiket is still run as a nonprofit organization by volunteers, the Comic Market Committee.

For three days, I go to Tokyo Big Sight in a crowded monorail with my colleague Nele Noppe. Women with trolleys and men with shopping bags make their way to the conference center. Japanese security constantly manages the crowd at the stations and at Comiket itself. Many fans immediately go to the sections that are relevant to their interest before the newest doujinshi are sold out. Since the setup of Comiket changes each day, many visitors attend all three days. Together with Nele, I explore the catalogue, which is interesting as an object in itself. It shows the location of all the “circles” or artist groups, genres (e.g., video-game doujinshi), and series (e.g., Final Fantasy VII). In addition, the catalogue features short comics that reflect on the culture of Comiket.

Though observing these fan works is interesting, I am painfully aware of my position as an ethnographer. My position as an outsider has particular implications and challenges. First and foremost, the language barrier is inconvenient and hinders me from doing some of the things that are regular market behavior for most, like skimming through the catalogue easily. I also realize that I am a woman, who sometimes moves through rows of erotic doujinshi admired by men, or who cuts through lines of male photographers. Often, I feel like I should not be at certain places, do certain things, or behave in certain ways because of my gender. Lastly, I am also a European, one of the few gaijin (non-Japanese) attending these venues, who is met with enthusiasm or confusion by artists when examining their doujinshi.

As a gaijin, I am surprised to see many fan creations that are inspired by Western popular culture. About 100 tables sport books inspired by CSI (2000-2015), X-Men First Class (2011), Pirates of the Caribbean, and BBC’s Sherlock (2010-). Many of these are “boy’s love” doujinshi, which cover queer pairings that are also popular in Western slash fan fiction: Will Turner and Jack Sparrow, Professor Xavier and Magneto, but also Holmes and Watson, and Kirk and Spock. There are little to no differences with how the Western fan community has romanticized these narratives. In fact, when I buy a gay Sherlock doujinshi from several girls, they are not only happy that I buy it as a foreigner (who is closer to source text), but that I express interest in John and Sherlock as a couple.
Many products at Comiket seem to suggest that there is a cross-fertilization of our popular cultures. For instance, I buy one English fan photo comic of Tiger and Bunny (2011). This doujinshi exaggerates the style of American superhero comics with blatant comic fonts, sound effects, and colorful balloons. Tiger and Bunny is a series that heavily draws from American superhero comics and this stylistic aspect of the source text is augmented in the doujinshi. In the nonfiction section, I also buy a tourist guide to German fan conventions, written by a Japanese fan. The booklet offers help and information for Japanese fans who want to go abroad and experience Western fandom. He is happy that I buy the product and approaches me in English. A German friend of his is sitting next to him in a cosplay inspired by Sailor Moon.

I admire the booklet and think about the global nature of anime fandom. I am drawn to Japan as a fan, but likewise Japanese fans may go to the West and want to experience fandom there. Fandom connects us. Anime fandom transcends national boundaries because modern citizens travel the world and adapt this cultural capital. That is to say, fandom is a transcultural endeavor: a mix of characters and stories that we can reiterate anew and elsewhere.

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About the author

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