https://doi.org/10.22398/2525-2828.82410-24

Japanese animation and its mark of distinction in the West

A animação japonesa e a sua marca de distinção no Ocidente

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses how Japanese animation acquired a distinctive mark in the West based on a historical construction. Therefore, it is discussed how the understanding of Japanese animation in the West was influenced by the images constructed and propagated from a pre-existing limiting and orientalist vision about Japan, since stereotyped constructions can challenge the way in which populations from different localities interpreted the productions of this country. Then, the trajectory of the reception and distribution of Japanese animation in western contexts is outlined, using the United States as the central point of analysis, which is historically the largest consumer of Japanese animation in the western bloc. With this, we emphasize that the term anime has been consolidated in the West as a label that represents a series of added values related to the notion of difference, but that in recent years, with the increase in animations produced outside Japan that incorporate stylistic schemes that for a long time were related to productions in this country, this notion established around Japanese animation is being strained.

Keywords: Orientalism. Distinction. Japanese animation.

RESUMO

Este artigo aborda o modo como a animação japonesa adquiriu uma marca distintiva no Ocidente a partir de toda uma construção histórica. Assim, é discutido como a compreensão sobre a animação japonesa no Ocidente foi influenciada pelas imagens construídas e propagadas a partir de uma visão limitadora e orientalista preexistente acerca do Japão, uma vez que construções estereotipadas podem interpelar o modo como as populações de diferentes localidades interpretaram as produções desse país. Em seguida, é delineada a trajetória da recepção e da distribuição da animação japonesa em contextos ocidentais, utilizando como ponto central de análise os Estados Unidos, que é historicamente o maior consumidor de animação japonesa do bloco ocidental. Com isso, destacamos que o termo "anime" se consolidou no Ocidente como um rótulo que representa uma série de valores agregados relacionados à noção de diferença, mas que, nos últimos anos, com o aumento de animações produzidas fora do Japão que incorporam esquemas estilísticos que durante muito tempo foram relacionados às produções desse país, essa noção estabelecida em torno da animação japonesa está sendo tensionada.

Palavras-chave: *Orientalismo. Distinção. Animação japonesa.*

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Received on: 06/10/2023. **Accepted on:** 08/29/2023

INTRODUCTION

The construction of a perception about Japan made up of narratives and signs by Westerners can be observed as early as the 16th century, when the first contact between Western and Japanese culture occurred. Written records from that time highlighted the enormous difference between Europeans and Japanese (ORTIZ, 2000). This way of looking at the people of the East in search of differences was an element that was part of the consolidated repertoire of the perspective of Western countries during this period. Because there was an entire literature built on the history of experiences with the Near East and the Far East, composed of a restricted number of typical condensations that constituted lenses through which the East was experienced and that shaped the perception of it (SAID, 2007). This type of image was reinforced in the Western imagination over time through later works, which continued to corroborate the notion of Japanese culture as a culture inverse to European culture (ORTIZ, 2000).

This tradition of thinking and viewing the culture of others was built from a limiting point of view, which reinforces an orientalist view of control and conformity about what can or cannot be considered as part of a given culture. Thus, Western countries normalized the perception of Eastern countries through a lens, configured from a history of stereotypical preconceptions, labeling them as mystical, exotic, among other reductionist markers. In the case of studies about Japan by Westerners, John Whittier Treat comments that an approach called stagnant historicity has become conventional, in which European and American scholars tend to construct the image of Japan as being a cultural counterpart or rival (CONDRY, 2013), maintaining a perspective rooted in the legacy of orientalism.

However, orientalism not only generated stereotypes in the eyes of Westerners, but also in the way Easterners would see themselves. This opposite movement was called westernism, and, unlike orientalism, "it sought not to define the other, but to define itself under the social, political, economic, technological, and cultural paradigm of the West" (HOBO, 2015, p. 173, our translation). In this way, Japan and other Eastern countries built their own image based on stereotypes that Westerners had about them. Therefore, the Western orientalist gaze became a source of identity for non-Western countries, which became subjects in their relations with this gaze (HU, 2010). For the Japanese, positioning themselves in relation to the West became part of the self-affirmation of their own Japaneseness (HOBO, 2015).

This series of pre-established stereotypes about Japan and its culture often plays a mediating role in the way individuals perceive and understand Japanese cultural production as being typically Japanese, which interferes in the way Japanese animation has been approached (FRANÇA, 2022). Furthermore, foreign researchers seem more willing to embrace Japanese animation as a subject worthy of investigation than the Japanese themselves. "Arguably, this points to a sense of auto-orientalism, in which Japanese editors appeal to external authorities for validation of their own research interests in what some might still regard as an unworthy field of study" (CLEMENTS, 2014, p. 14).

Japanese animation was only consolidated as a valid research topic in Japan after the enormous growth of the local animation industry at the beginning of the 21st century, resulting from the expansion of consumption in foreign markets and the qualitative recognition of the country's commercial animation (KOIDE, 2014). However, academic animation research is still in its initial stages, with studies that present little theoretical depth (KOIDE, 2014). This also happens because a relevant part of Japanese researchers who study animation are not interested in the theoretical approach to the object, focusing on the practical side of animation (IKEDA, 2014).

This low adherence to theoretical research on Japanese animation produced in Japan may have contributed to the perception rooted in orientalism, since few counterpoints to this type of approach have been developed. From this tradition of thought, Japanese animation acquired, for many people around the world, a status as a symbol that represents the image of modern Japan, and by representing Japan, Japanese animation also incorporated the fascination, strangeness, and prejudices commonly related to Eastern cultures by Western people, who often label as exotic what is not immediately understood (FRANÇA, 2020). Thus, the specificities of Japanese animation biased the West toward developing a way of looking at this type of production as a genre separate from the universe of animation, constantly related to graphic violence, science fiction and explicit sexual material (LEONG, 2011).

Finally, Japanese animation was treated by many Western writers as a type of production that appeared abruptly at the end of the 1980s, ignoring a history of constant presence of this type of production during previous decades on television in Western countries (CLEMENTS, 2014). By ignoring the participation of Japanese animations on foreign television before the 1990s, the influence of these works in the Western context prior to that period ends up being neglected (DALIOT-BUL, 2014). Thus, approaching the way Japanese animation was received in the West from a historicizing perspective can help us better understand the dynamics surrounding the perception of this type of production over time by Westerners, thus avoiding reductionists and essentialists.

The distinction surrounding Japanese animation in the Western context

Japanese animation has mostly been discussed in the West with a focus on its classification as a distinct animation genre. Japanese animation, popularly known by the term "anime", over time has formed an audience largely different from that formed by North American productions, which since its consolidation, in the 1960s of the 20th century, have targeted children. Japanese cartoons, on the other hand, were not limited to a children's audience, with productions aimed at a variety of audiences, ranging from works for children and adults, to works that have a specific target audience, such as women. Thus, an industry was created that demonstrates a certain diversity in its commercial productions (NOGUEIRA, 2010).

In the West, the idea of animation, especially the cartoon category as a type of artistic and media production often stigmatized as children's production, reinforced a rupture in expectations regarding Japanese animation, as it did not fully adhere to previous schemes of a cartoon aimed at Western children, such as the absence of scenes with explicit graphic violence and the presence of simpler plots focused on humor (LEONG, 2011).

This rupture can be observed in the way the term "anime" was appropriated and used by Westerners. In Japan, this term is used to refer to any global production of the animation genre, regardless of the nationality of origin (NESTERIUK, 2011). However, abroad, especially in the West, the term "anime" has become a specific synonym for animations that present a set of stylistic characteristics defined as Japanese (SATO, 2007).

Such characteristics present in Japanese animations functioned for Western audiences as distinctive features that differentiated Japanese productions from productions frequently broadcast commercially in the West. From the moment Japanese animation became a recognizable category, it was considered a new form of animation outside of Japan (DENISON, 2015). As observed by Bourdieu (2007, p. 11), "the distinctive features are the aesthetic dispositions required by the productions of a field of production that has reached a high degree of autonomy inseparable from a specific cultural competence". In this way, the characteristics of the specific Japanese context, in which Japanese animation is inserted, meant that the animation produced in that country presented characteristics and logic of organization of its materiality that were different from Western productions (BORGES, 2008). If it is possible to say that Japanese cartoons are different from North American ones, it is because they draw on different traditions (ORTIZ, 2000).

The first academic works in the West on Japanese animation, between the 1990s and 2000s, were largely interested in explaining this type of animation through its difference with commercial North American animation, mapping Japanese animation through controversial features, such as the relationship with graphic violence and sexual exposure, and emphasizing distinct types of difference compared to hegemonic Western animation (DENISON, 2015).

Thus, the study of Japanese animation emerged in the West from formal content analyses, neglecting the complexity of the historical context behind these productions (DENISON, 2015). This form of approach conceived a reductionism to anime, as it generalized characteristics that are present in only a few works, failing to encompass the entirety of Japanese animation, thus carrying, in this segregation, an orientalist tendency to relate a different cultural base as strange, focusing on different characteristics and reducing attention to similar ones.

Such stigmatization of Japanese animation originated, in part, from the limited amount of material that reached the West, which represented only a fraction of the enormous volume of production in that animation industry (IZAWA, 2000). The arrival of these animations in the West was mediated by individuals both in distribution companies (initially) and in fansubs (in a second moment), who selected the animations based on the public's supposed taste and on their personal taste.

Regarding this perspective, it is important to note that taste, according to Bourdieu, is the propensity and aptitude for the material or symbolic appropriation of a certain class of objects or classified and classifying practices, being the generating formula that lies at the origin of "style of life" (BOURDIEU, 2007, p. 165). It is through taste that the set of choices that constitute the "lifestyle" acquires meaning and value, based on the properties inscribed in a position, in a system of oppositions and correlations with other conditions and material situations of existence present in the social structure (BOURDIEU, 1996, 2007). In this way, it was through a prescribed taste in a Western context that Japanese animations were selected by those responsible behind the fansubs and distribution companies.

The context of consolidation of the animation consumption market in the United States

The context behind the formation of animation consumption in the United States is noteworthy, since the country will be one of the main mediators in the relationship with Japanese animation in the West. According to Paul Wells, Japanese television animation considered the possibility of a maturing audience, while American television animation aimed its audience as essentially childish, without there being the possibility of transgressing this established notion (WELLS, 2001). In the 1960s, the consolidation of the cartoon block on Saturday mornings on television channels in the United States was responsible for this type of work becoming practically synonymous with children's productions (MITTELL, 2001).

However, until the development of this schedule segment, animations were watched by a more varied audience, as was the case with productions intended for cinema; however, in the 1950s, many of the animated works produced in previous decades were unable to be broadcast in full on television because of a stricter censorship system. Thus, "The censorious practices of the television industry helped redefine the cultural content and associations of the pre-existing film cartoon genre" (WELLS, 2001, p. 37). It is worth highlighting that during the post-Second World War period, mainly in the 1950s, the North American government began a campaign against subversion in all aspects of American life, known as McCarthyism, promoting "American values" and consolidating an official culture of social compliance (KARNAL *et al*., 2007). This government movement that spread throughout social institutions led to greater control over media content, especially that broadcast on television, a growing medium that was becoming the main source of entertainment for North Americans. As a result, based on the discourse surrounding the danger of communism for the "American way of life", ideological homogenization occurred in the country's cultural industries through the promotion of the myth about the family nucleus in popular culture and the reproduction of strong "moral" values (STABILE; HARRISON, 2001).

In Hanna-Barbera's first television works, in the 1950s, the audience for the studio's animations was not yet predominantly children. The animation The Huckleberry Hound Show (1958) had more than 40% of the consumer audience

made up of adults (MITTELL, 2001). Adults were interested in the animation due to the dialogue and verbal humor, while children were attracted to the visuals. However, for reasons of commercial viability, the animations were concentrated on Saturday morning, a cheaper time slot for advertisers of toys and products aimed at children, a segment that was establishing itself during the period. Because of this, animation was consolidated in the United States as a cultural category labeled as something exclusively for children due to the alienation of the adult audience, since adults practically did not watch television on Saturday mornings (MITTELL, 2001). The few attempts to launch animated series in prime time on North American television in the 1960s were not well-accepted commercially, with The Flintstones (1961–1966) being the only one of these animated series that was relatively successful — which reinforced the isolation of cartoons in television programming and its definition as a genre for children from that period onward. It was within this context, of a cartoon market aimed at children through television, that Japanese animation began to have greater visibility in the West.

Japanese animation in the West and the tensions in its trajectory

Due to their connection to children, animations were considered a minor artistic production. Japanese animation experienced even greater marginalization as a result of its production value, considered low, and its national origin (NAPIER, 2005).

Japan, since 1963, with the debut of *Tetsuwan Atomu*, began to present an increasing number of productions in the field of commercial animation due to the rapid expansion of the country's television market (TSUGATA, 2005). Unlike what happened in the United States, the most popular animations in Japan were shown at the beginning of prime time, as in this country it was children who often chose what the family would watch at that time, making Japanese animations, from the beginning, not aimed exclusively at children and to have sponsors who also intended to reach adult audiences through animation (CLEMENTS, 2014). Furthermore, in the same year that *Tetsuwan Atomu* debuted, Fuji Television premiered, at 11:40 pm, the animated series *Sennin Bunraku* (1963), the first erotic Japanese animation series in history, showing that animation in Japan, already in the early years of consolidation of the production field, was perceived as a means that could reach different audiences. And with the aging of the first generation of children who watched anime on television, Japanese producers further expanded the local animation consumer audience, making anime a mainstream phenomenon, allowing the creation of animated works of diverse television genres and subgenres, reaching from young to the aged (DALIOT-BUL, 2014; OTMAZGIN, 2014).

In the 1960s, Japanese animations such as *Tetsuwan Atomu*, renamed Astro Boy, and Kimba (1965) crossed the Pacific Ocean and debuted on North American soil through imports carried out by the syndication market. In this first entry into the North American market, Japanese animation was differentiated from local

productions due to its form, often associated with low-quality animation production, as it was considered limited animation and with stylized drawings considered inferior (LÓPEZ, 2013). Nevertheless, Japanese animation quickly established itself as a cheap product and, therefore, advantageous for some television stations in the United States (NESTERIUK, 2011).

It is because of this last characteristic that Japanese animation also entered other Western television markets, such as the Italian and the French. According to Clements (2014), Japanese animations had their first excursions in Italy in the 1970s, as they filled the schedule of new Italian commercial broadcasters. There, animations produced in Japan were quickly labeled as dangerous works, capable of promoting everything from fascism to violence, with this criticism aimed at animations that fit the stereotypical definition they had of Japanese cartoons, such as animations from the subgenre of giant robots, while other Japanese works, such as *Heidi* (1974), which did not fully fit into Western preconceptions of what constituted a work from Japan, ended up going unnoticed by these same critics who generalized Japanese production (CLEMENTS, 2014). This type of reaction also happened in France, with Japanese animation being associated with negative aspects such as violence and a threat to national culture (CLEMENTS, 2014). Such approaches, focused only on characteristics considered negative in Japanese animation, will be repeated in several Western countries, highlighting how much the legacy of orientalist thought still persists in these locations.

In the case of Brazil, the first Japanese animations broadcast in the country arrived through North American distribution and licensing companies at the end of the 1960s[1], being acquired by national broadcasters because they were cheap (MONTE, 2011). However, as it is home to the largest community of Japanese descendants outside of Japan in the world, several Japanese animations circulated alternatively in Brazil before the popularization of anime in the 1990s. The sending of television material recorded on tapes from Japan to Brazil was a recurring practice, as it was used alongside manga as a way of providing immigrants and their descendants with contact with the Japanese culture of the time. In the 1980s, it was already possible to notice the influence of Japanese cartoons on Japanese-Brazilian artists (LUYTEN, 2012).

Returning to the North American context, despite the circulation on television channels in the country in the 1960s and 1970s, favored by the low acquisition cost, most television networks had a lack of interest in Japanese productions as they considered that Japanese conventions present in these productions were unattractive to North American children, used to "North American values" (ALLISON, 2000). As early as the 1960s "[…] there was a palpable sense that the Japanese animation market did not align with its US counterpart, and that content permissible in Japan was simply unacceptable to US broadcasters" (DENISON, 2015, p 82).

1 According to Sandra Monte (2011), *Eightman* (1963) was the first anime broadcast alone, without being part of a specific block, on Brazilian television, being shown for the first time on September 24th, 1968, at 6 pm, on Globo channel.

In this way, Japanese animations that were broadcast in the United States had elements of their national origin erased, and were often altered by local licensors, reworking them to adapt to the current values of acceptability of children's content for children in that country. country, changing the names of the characters, locations and specific elements of the work (ALLISON, 2006). This occurred because there was a consensus that foreign elements, mainly from the East, did not correspond to the American taste, making it necessary to Americanize such productions, and it was believed that the degree of Americanization was proportional to the success of Japanese animations in the United States (ALLISON, 2000). Thus, the presence of Japanese animation in this context operated by means of transformation through the North American lens, meaning that the public in that country had no real contact with Japanese productions, only with modified versions, which reached the point of mixing several series as if they were one, as in the case of the series *Robotech* (1985), the product of editing, cutting and joining parts of the Japanese animated series *Fang of the Sun Dougram* (1981), *The Super Dimension Fortress Macross* (1982), and *Super Dimension Century Orguss* (1983) (DALIOT-BUL, 2014).

As a result of these changes produced in the United States, Japanese animation, shown on North American soil and in other countries that had contact with the North American edited version, lost easily recognizable Japanese cultural elements in its content, being, in these first decades, clearly distinct from North American animations due to its formal dimension, such as technical characteristics, an example of the dynamics of the scenes caused by a variety of frames and plans used. The animation *Speed Racer* (1967) made an impact in the United States precisely because of these differences in the organization of visual properties and editing, having a language close to that used in action films, thus standing out from other North American cartoons aired in the same period (SATO, 2007).

A more evident distinction in the content of Japanese animation in the United States arose from the attention given to this type of production by an older audience. This greater attention enabled, in two moments, a greater awareness of the differences between Japanese animated productions and North American productions, and, consequently, the establishment of the term "anime" as a distinctive label.

The first moment occurred with the emergence and popularization of fansubs. In the 1970s, Western scholars became interested in studying Japan, seeking to understand how in a short period of time the country had become the third largest economy in the world and the nation with the highest rate of economic growth (HENSHALL, 2017). One of the ways to understand Japan was through studies on the country's artistic and cultural productions. This study model was inspired by the research of anthropologist Ruth Benedict in her book The Chrysanthemum and the Sword (2014). The author carried out her research during the period of the Second World War, studying, from a distance, Japanese society and culture through the artistic and media productions of that nation, with the objective of understanding the way of acting and thinking of the then enemy country. Following the model

stipulated by Benedict, North American students began to study Japan through local cultural products, such as current television programs, which reached Western universities through video tapes for domestic audiences (VHS and Betamax).

Through these videotapes, university students in the United States had access to Japanese animations that were not broadcast on television networks in the country. Without the presence of changes made by local licensors, they were able to visualize the stylistic schemes of Japanese animation in full. It was in this context that student Fred Patten, who had been attracted when he was younger by the different technical characteristics in *Astro Boy* and *Speed Racer*, founded, in 1977, the first club dedicated to Japanese animation in the United States, the *Cartoon/ Fantasy Organization*, which gave rise to the alternative sharing of anime in the West (URBANO, 2013). These clubs and groups dedicated to Japanese animation functioned as a way to store and circulate this type of content that was not found on local television networks. Furthermore, these groups performed an active and collective enterprise, from collecting tapes coming from Japan in an alternative way to the subtitling and consumption process (URBANO, 2013).

The second moment of the evident perception of distinctive characteristics of Japanese animation in the United States was marked at the end of the 1980s, with the release of *Akira* (1988), a Japanese animated film that acquired the status of director Otomo Katsuhiro's masterpiece, becoming revered by established directors in the international film industry (SATO, 2007). *Akira* debuted in Japan in 1988, a time when the country had reached its peak of post-war international influence, and many developed nations felt threatened by the Asian country's emerging superpower status during that period (NAPIER, 2005).

The Japanese became the target of criticism among Western countries, being labeled as economic animals that had no value other than the greed to make money, from their perspective (HENSHALL, 2017). These countries once again attributed comments from an orientalist view, reducing Japan to an incomprehensible nation that is different from other countries considered to be first world. These negative reactions were caused by discomfort related to the threat that Japan represented to the dominant Eurocentric cultural tradition of economic prosperity, denoting a possible rupture in the pre-established models following the rise of the country among the largest economies on the planet. Japan had become, by the end of the 1980s, the second largest economy in the world, and in terms of *per capita* income, the country had the richest population on the globe, and the threat it posed to Western countries was noted in the constitution of its market relations, in which the import of products of North American origin decreased, while the export of Japanese products to the United States market increased (HENSHALL, 2017).

Thus, as in the case that led to the emergence of fansubs a decade earlier, Japan's economic conditions and its position on an international scene helped the dissemination of *Akira* in the West. *Akira* became, in its year of release, the most watched film in the history of Japanese cinemas until then (NAPIER, 2005). The success of the film in its homeland quickly had repercussions in Western countries,

which were observing the events and cultural trends in Japan. Consequently, the animation did not take long to debut in the Western market, and from 1989, in Europe, in the United States and in Canada, the exhibition sparked the emergence of a horde of fans that gave rise to the first generation of *otakus* outside of Japan (SATO, 2007).

Due to this repercussion, *Akira* was able to present to a wider audience the possibility of explicit graphic violence in a cartoon, and, consequently, the glimpse that animations with approaches and themes beyond children's could exist. The film, as it was distributed in a traditional means of communication, movie theaters, reached a larger audience than fansubs, as, during this period, they were still restricted to select groups. *Akira* instantly became a cult phenomenon, hitting the North American video store market in 1989, and the addition of its cyberpunk plot in a Japanese context to the exquisite animation technique immediately gave rise to a cult of Japanese animation in the United States, which led to the creation of a section in rental stores for this type of production (DENISON, 2015). It was at this moment that the term "anime" was introduced and consolidated in the West.

This work also helped to weaken the label of a lower quality product related to Japanese animation, as Akira did not present the technical limitations that were commonly linked to productions of Japanese origin broadcast on television stations, demonstrating precisely the opposite. The popularity of *Akira* in the early 1990s generated a demand in the Western market for works with themes and approaches similar to those of the 1988 film, without the presence of the edits that were the rule in Japanese productions broadcast in the region until then. Thus, these Western anime fans were attracted by a type of fetishism of cultural differences, seeking content different from what was commercially offered on traditional local media channels (JENKINS; GREEN; FORD, 2014).

In the mid-1980s, in Japan, the advent of the original video animation (OVA) market made it possible to produce animated series aimed exclusively at an adult audience (HU, 2010). With the consolidation of a home video market outside the Japanese territory in the early 1990s, the existing demand for animations different from those found on local television in Western countries could be met by these productions aimed at the Japanese OVA market, which already had, at that time, a great number of works produced. Thus, other cyberpunk-themed anime, such as the *Bubblegum Crisis* series (1987) and its sequel *Bubblegum Crash* (1991), were released outside Japan through this new audiovisual production consumer market, legally and without edits. This scenario also made it possible to expand the reach of fansubs, which were no longer restricted to university clubs, as videocassette players became more common in homes in the last decade of the 20th century.

Many of these animations that reached the West, both through fansubs and through distribution by the home video market, had thematic and visual characteristics that differentiated them from North American cartoons, being marked by explicitly adult content and an apparent obsession with science fiction, graphic violence, and sexual appeal (IZAWA, 2000). The presence of elements considered

pornographic in Japanese animations selected for distribution in these countries became a crucial part for this foreign audience to differentiate animes from animations produced commercially in the West.

This selection of works that circulated constructed the stereotypical view of Japanese production, motivated by the attraction to what is different, in part, because fans of this type of production tried to legitimize their taste as being part of an adult dimension, opposing the traditional Western commercial cartoons, which were commonly disseminated as a type of production aimed exclusively at children, or with a focus on humor. Thus, the entrepreneurs who became involved with the distribution of Japanese animation in the 1990s built, through effective marketing, the notion of the term "anime" as a label that symbolized a specific type of animation, a coherent grouping, which operated as opposed to animations aimed at children (DALIOT-BUL, 2014).

However, although Japanese animation works with science fiction and fantasy themes, according to the type of approach mentioned above, dominate the Western market, this did not represent the reality of the Japanese animation market, which displayed a more varied range of offers (LEVI, 2006). Since the 1980s, Japanese animations about everyday life, known as *slice of life*, have become quite popular in Japan (RUSCA, 2016). This type of work, which presents stories that take place in a recognizable, everyday Japanese setting, such as schools, and focuses on the relationships between characters, which may or may not be romantic, was neglected by those responsible for selection and distribution in the West, as well as Japanese sports drama animations, which has been a consolidated genre since the mid-1960s in Japan, presenting several releases per year steadily over the decades.

Furthermore, the perception of the thematic approaches in Japanese animation also included variations between different Western countries, precisely because of the different tastes of those responsible for fan clubs and distribution companies for this type of production in each location. As an example, there is the case of the United Kingdom, in which the interest in works starring "cute" female characters was a predominant element in the selection of works debated and commented on in this region, which differed from the interest seen in the United States: sci-fi works starring male characters (DENISON, 2015). In the United Kingdom, even in science fiction, preference was given to those starring female characters. This happened because fans there realized that, in Japanese animation, there was a constant presence of female protagonists who played heroine roles, and who did not disappoint the male heroes, which was also a characteristic that differentiated Japanese animation from Western animated productions, mostly led, in that period, by male characters and with female characters, mostly, destined for passive or secondary roles.

Therefore, anime, as a category, was understood differently, depending on the region and the productions that fans from each location had contact with, but maintaining the relationship of difference and opposition to commercial Western animated production, mainly based on an inclination toward reject conventions present in Disney animations, such as the happy ending.

Through its broad presence on the global stage, characteristics of Japanese animation entered the international lexicon (CRAIG, 2000). The entrance of Japanese animation and its success in the United States introduced a set of different narrative possibilities in the construction of more complex storyboards that became an integral part of the repertoire of those responsible for creating animations in the country (OTMAZGIN, 2014). Furthermore, this increasing exposure of North American animators and producers to Japanese animation played an important role in changing the perception of cartooning, thus expanding the possibilities surrounding North American commercial animation, which resulted in productions of animated films aimed at an adult audience that escape both the consolidated structure of the sitcom and the focus on humor, as is the case with *Invincible* (2021).

Finally, Western animators, by incorporating elements that were previously considered characteristic of Japanese animation into their practice, ensure that the aspects that differentiated Japanese animation are also present in works from other countries, as can be seen in *Castlevania* (2018), an American production that is categorized as anime by Netflix. Thus, the distinctive notion of the term "anime" ends up transcending the place of origin of production, since works that are not Japanese end up being labeled in this way, depending on the distributor's interest in the marketing involved in promoting the works. At the same time, consumption of Japanese animation is becoming increasingly greater in the West, through the growth of the streaming market, reaching unprecedent levels (HIROMICHI *et al.*, 2022). Due to greater and plural contact with works produced in Japan and the increased popularity of various genres of Japanese animation, such as slice of life and sports dramas in Western countries, the understanding surrounding Japanese commercial animation becomes more broad, which tensions the stereotypical notion linked to the term "anime" in the 1990s, since elements that were intrinsically attributed to Japanese animation can now be perceived as existing in only a fraction of the total commercial animated production in Japan .

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

From this brief historicization of the relationships surrounding Japanese animation in the West, it becomes visible that aspects that popularized the view on anime in the early 1990s, in the United States and other Western countries, were present in only a portion of Japanese productions. However, nowadays, with the facilitated access through the fast and ubiquitous internet, and a wider distribution of content through official streaming and the proliferation of different fansubs, different locations around the world can have a broader and more complete notion of the Japanese animation production field. Furthermore, international fans of this type of production acquired greater informational capital about anime over time from the accumulation of information, enhanced by the advancement of digital technologies, which allowed the sharing of materials about Japanese animation among fans of different countries.

Therefore, when observing Japanese animation productions more broadly, it becomes evident that anime is not restricted to the traditional conception of genre, as Japanese animations deal with a variety of genres, types of narrative and approaches, despite exhibiting recognizable characteristics in most of the works (SUAN, 2017). Some authors such as Rayna Denison will expose the idea that Japanese animation incorporates a variety of pre-existing media genres into its representational system and constantly mixes and hybridizes these categories while creating new ones, reinforcing that animes must be understood more broadly, as a cultural phenomenon whose meanings depend on the context (DENISON, 2015).

Furthermore, authors such as Antônio López (2013) will highlight that anime is something more than a peculiar style of animation, it is mainly a powerful social phenomenon that has rapidly expanded throughout the world. Ian Condry (2013) reinforces this thought by considering that Japanese animation should be understood at a greater level of refinement of detail than just as a specific genre or simply as a reflection of Japan. Instead, he suggests that Japanese animation needs to be studied more broadly, as a communicational cultural form that emerges from social practices and competition.

Furthermore, the fact that Japanese culture generates a certain strangeness in the predisposed eyes of some observers, should not constitute an impediment to a deeper understanding, since different does not mean incomprehensible. From a systematic process of contextualizing the sociocultural, political, economic aspects and historical processes of the place and specific production space, it is possible to understand the other more broadly, their approximations and particularities, in addition to the game of forces in dispute in the imposition of categories of perception. Therefore, it is necessary to expand studies on Japanese animation that aim to break with the orientalist tradition, seeking to avoid an essentialist and reductionist logic. To achieve this, it is necessary to further scrutinize in future studies the competitive dynamics that exist in the social space in which Japanese animations are produced and consumed.

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Conflict of interests: nothing to declare – **Financial support:** Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (CAPES) – Programa de Excelência Acadêmica (PROEX).