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Fusion power

Author: Pop cultures melding in Japan, U.S.

The Daily Yomiuri
Roland Kelts

By Tom Baker
Daily Yomiuri Staff Writer

It's hard to imagine two cultural events more specifically American than the Super Bowl football championship and the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. Yet anyone looking closely at these events may now detect a certain dash of Japanese flavor.

Cultural observer Roland Kelts writes in his new book, *Japanamerica* (Palgrave Macmillan, 238 pp, $24.95), that he was watching the famous New York City parade in 2005 when he spotted a float carrying "Puffy AmiYumi, a Japanese female pop duo who now have legions of young American fans solely because their anime likenesses appear daily in a series on the [cable television] Cartoon Network."

And earlier this month—after the book's publication—the TV ads showcased during the Super Bowl included one in which a motorist uses a car navigation device to transform himself into a giant, Ultraman-style superhero.

Kelts commented in an e-mail that the ad "shows how an icon of Japanese pop culture can be wielded by an American gadget manufacturer to provoke nostalgia and longing across a generation."

It's not an isolated phenomenon. Kelts' book describes how a U.S. car insurance ad used characters from the late 1960s *Speed Racer* cartoon series in "a knowing, insider wink to the U.S. demographic whose first glimpse of anime-style graphics now means that they're in the prime of their car-insurance-buying lives."

But American kids these days don't just glimpse anime, they're fully immersed in it.

In an interview with The Daily Yomiuri last month in Tokyo's anime-saturated Akihabara district, Kelts said the worldwide popularity of Pokemon over the past decade was "a crucial breakthrough" in that change. "This whole generation of kids grew up with an acquaintance of anime style. And they wanted more of it as they got older. They left Pokemon behind, but they wanted more of that style."

A crucial element of that style is minimalism, Kelts said. He described how Eiko Tanaka, founder of anime company Studio4C, made this point to him in one of the many interviews he conducted with industry figures while researching his book. "She very quickly drew a circle with these actually quite brilliant, exquisite points in it, in two or three strokes of the pen. And she said: 'Look. What is that?'"

Despite its extreme simplicity, Kelts recognized the drawing as a cat. He said Tanaka then told him: "You can look at this cat, and imagine so much, see so much of the cat—*your* cat—because I haven't filled everything in, because I haven't identified the details of the cat."

Speaking for himself, Kelts continued: "I think her point there was that so much of anime is successful because of what's left out, whether it is something aesthetic, such as certain lines that are left out, or actually a designation. This is not a rabbit or a fish or a mouse, it's a Pocket Monster...So not only is it minimalistically drawn so that you're leaving out key lines, you don't know what those lines would be because you don't know what the thing is in the first place. So it [offers] so much more freedom, both for the viewer and the artist."

That freedom translates into a more active viewing experience, Kelts said, as manga or anime consumers mentally fill in the gaps, essentially becoming cocreators of whatever it is they see.

Meaningful appreciation of such an experience takes time, and time is something Kelts said Japanese anime films are more generous with than their U.S. counterparts. In his book, he compares the luxurious, mood-filled silences of the film *Tonari no Totoro* (*My Neighbor Totoro*) with the constant jabbering, wisecracks and asides of typical U.S. animation these days.

"It's so annoying!" he reiterated in person. "If you would trust the audience for a minute, we could actually appreciate what these artists have labored over, and [what] these CGI guys have labored over. But it's just zinging at you so fast and the jokes are so annoying...that you just walk out of there feeling like you just saw a particularly bad music video, turned up too loud."

After a pause for breath he added, "That's going to make me sound really old, but..."

Aside from purely aesthetic concerns, he said frenetic pacing and constant chatter "also limit the emotional range, if you never have a moment's pause where you can sit and appreciate the pathos."

But the U.S. entertainment industry is catching on, with a growing number of productions tapping into a Japanese aesthetic. *Afro Samurai*, an animated series now showing on the Spike TV cable channel, is a case in point. Based on a manga by Japanese artist Takashi Okazaki, it features American actor Samuel L. Jackson doing voices for both the hero and the sidekick, with Ron Perlman as the chief villain.

"It didn't feel as tinkered with as I expected," Kelts said of the show. "The startling thing to me was how Japanese it still felt, in the sense of the graphics, the visuals, the violence. And the sense of the story not resolving so tightly."

He attributes that to "some awareness on the American side that, 'You know, the reason kids are into this stuff has to have something to do with its being produced by Japanese people who are doing something different. So if we go in and completely transform the thing into an American production, it's not going to take off. We're going to lose that audience.'"

Kelts said that when he interviewed Okazaki, "I was going to probe him on what Japanese myths or Japanese folktales he was using [as *Afro Samurai*'s inspiration]...I said, 'What was the real root for this story?'

"And he looked up from his desk and said: 'Batman.'" After all, Okazaki explained, the basic story is a kid who sees his father killed, and later grows up to become a career vigilante.

"Oh, it's *Batman*," Kelts quoted himself as responding in a naruhodo, now-I-get-it tone of voice. "And of course he's right. It was one of those moments where I thought, 'Japanamerica, of course.' Here I am talking to somebody in Japan, trying to get at the roots of an idea in Japanese culture, and the guy's way ahead of me...Everybody knows Batman."

One of Kelts' major themes in *Japanamerica* is that the current cool cachet of Japanese pop culture in the United States is not just a one-way flow, but a definite back-and-forth affair. He likens the relationship to a Mobius strip, in which a clear beginning or end is impossible to find.

For instance, a craze for cosplay is taking hold in the United States these days, inspired by the Japanese phenomenon of fans dressing up as their favorite manga or anime characters. But enthusiasts Kelts spoke to here in Japan told him that ultimate credit for the concept must go to the Americans who, decades ago, first gathered at Star Trek fan conventions in Spock ears and homemade Starfleet uniforms.

In another example, many anime fans grumble that the Walt Disney film *The Lion King* borrows shamelessly from Osamu Tezuka's *Janguru Taitei (Kimba the White Lion)*. But Kelts writes that Tezuka himself got started by sitting through multiple showings of Disney's *Bambi* and *Snow White* with a sketch pad in hand, and then selling his drawings without Disney's knowledge.

Although Kelts zeroes in on manga and anime to give his book focus, he also briefly mentions cross-cultural trends in food, such as sushi in U.S. supermarkets, and music, such as rap sung in Japanese.

The Internet has accelerated such exchanges. Net-savvy American teenagers, much like the young Tezuka in the 1950s, pursue the art that appeals to them with more of a fan's ardor than a copyright lawyer's caution. But now it only takes them a few keystrokes to get at what they want—without paying for it.

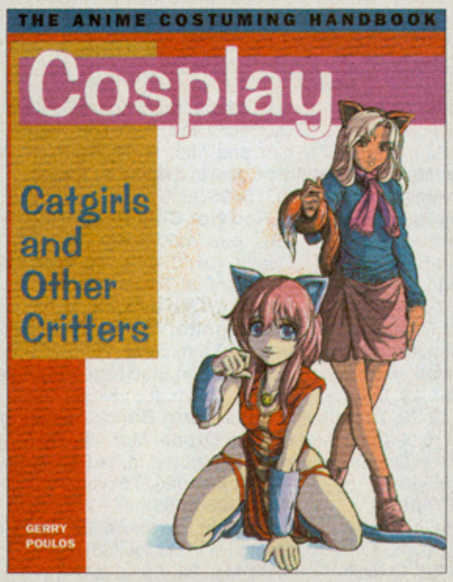
"But what was interesting was that most of the kids I spoke to...really are not doing it in a spirit of ripping off the industry," Kelts said. "And when you explain the connection, the fact that they could be destroying the very industry they love, they're aware of that and they often issue very specific complaints. They say, 'Well, if they released the DVDs here closer to the release date in Japan, I'd buy the DVD.' Or, 'If they would give us the option of having subtitles or voiceovers, I would buy more DVDs.'"

Kelts argues that the Japanese anime industry should make greater efforts to reach out to its American audience.

Anyone who doubts there is money to be made in this advice should take a good look at Macy's parade, which seems to march along Kelts' metaphorical Mobius strip. It has long included a giant balloon in the shape of Snoopy, an American cartoon character loved in Japan. But these days, Snoopy is joined by a parade balloon version Pikachu, a Japanese cartoon character loved in America.

A Japanese-language edition of "Japanamerica" is to be published in April.

Even in Boise, cosplay is the cat's meow



Potato farmers in Boise, Idaho, will get an eyeful next month when space aliens, mythic heroes and various half-human creatures converge on their city for the Anime Oasis fan convention. The colorful beings are cosplayers—manga and anime fans who enjoy dressing up as their favorite characters—and some of them might even be local potato farmers in everyday life.

If Boise isn't the kind of place you would expect this zany aspect of Japanese pop culture to put down roots, take another look. Similar conventions to take place across the fruited plain this year include Anime Detour in Bloomington, Minn.; AniZona in Phoenix, Ariz.; Animarathon in Bowling Green, Ohio; Kawaii Kon in Honolulu; Animazement in Durham, N.C.; San Japan in San Antonio, Texas; and Otaku University in Mesa, Arizona.

According to the fan site www.fansview.com, these are among 94 such events scheduled for 2007 in the United States, with others scattered across Brazil, Canada, Europe and of course Japan.

"You might expect to see a smattering of people dressed as fictional characters at any type of entertainment-based convention—a comic book or science fiction event, for example—but in the world of anime and manga...it's not uncommon to see 25 percent or more of the attendees in costume," writes Gerry Poulos in his new book, *Cosplay: Catgirls and Other Critters* (Stone Bridge Press, 80 pp, $16.95).

Cosplay outfits are almost always homemade. Poulos' book is a how-to, aimed at helping those who may have little previous experience with a needle and thread, yet would prefer not to attend their next convention underdressed.

The basic techniques he presents can be adapted to a variety of costume types, but he illustrates them mainly as they apply to one specific character category—the catgirl.

"The catgirl is a simple and effective tool to illustrate the very concept of cute," he writes. "They are not cats, but humans with catlike traits...Cat ears and tails are used as a signal to the [manga] reader that the character is, in some way, like a cat—energetic, curious, or maybe unable to resist something, just as a cat cannot resist a piece of dangling yarn."

Near the end of the book, Poulos names more than 25 catgirl characters from various Japanese anime and video games, calling his list "a small sampling."

Some cosplayers may don a pair of furry ears or tuck an improvised tail into their belt on the spur of the moment, but the author says that many cosplayers relish the challenge of "duplicating an established character...right down to the last, painstaking detail."

U.S. conventions often include cosplay fashion shows or contests, and the more competitive participants sometimes make their familiar characters stand out by replicating special outfits "that have only appeared once in a series, in a single episode or issue."

While most of Poulos' slim book is given over to step-by-step tailoring techniques, he also gives advice on how to comport oneself in costume and warns against such hazards as getting one's tail caught in an elevator door.

He also explains cosplay's American appeal. "[It] can transform you from a simple attendee and spectator looking in at the world of Japanese pop culture to actually being part of that world."

—Tom Baker