

Minority Interests

Written by Mike Potter

On December 15, an anime program, Pokemon, hospitalized nearly one thousand Japanese children with symptoms ranging from nausea to seizures. How did this come to happen? Unknowing of the consequences, animators unknowingly created a five-second scene where a character's eyes flashed specific colors in a particular sequence and rhythm, triggering this epileptic outbreak. This began a series of overblown exaggerations expressed by the American media. They reported this incident by portraying anime as a threat to Japanese children and a potential menace to their American counterparts.

Meanwhile, otaku--still ebullient over Ghost in the Shell's box office success three years ago--eagerly anticipate Disney's domestic release of Miyazaki's Princess Mononoke, Japan's top grossing film, this summer. Fans see anime as having an increasing presence in American entertainment and culture. However, three things indicate a discrepancy between otaku expectations and public judgment: the inaccuracies and fearmongering in reports on the Pokemon incident, US entertainment industry bias, and popular apprehension of anime as reflected in censorship laws in Nevada.

Two days after the ill-fated episode of Pokemon aired in Japan, an article in USA Today sought to allay the fears of parents that television animation posed a health hazard in the United States. (You can find the full text of this article at <http://www.usatoday.com/life/lids055.htm>) Never mentioning the inadvertent creation of the light patterns in Pokemon, the article stated that American children were safe because no major US television network airs anime. Thus, the writers implied that anime poses a unique danger to public health. They neglected to note that warnings about the effects of stroboscopic light similar to those appearing in the ill-fated Pokeman episode also appear on video game manuals and in the playbills of some theater productions.

This implicit linking of anime with danger introduces several blatant falsehoods in the article. Perhaps the most shocking, because of its obvious incorrectness, is their claim that certain famous anime titles pose no threat because they are not really anime: "The Cartoon Network does air Japan's Speed Racer, made 30 years ago, and [used to air] Voltron, about 10 years old, but neither show is in the style of anime." Before the

Pokemon incident, USA Network aired Sailor Moon and Dragonball Z continues in syndication. All these programs, assuredly anime, have had no adverse effects on the physical health of their viewers.

Having established that American television is safe for children, the article's authors caution that the remaining source for anime in the US is video stores stocked with imported Japanese tapes. Perhaps the authors had heard of the existence of anime sections at Blockbuster or Suncoast Video, but these stores rarely sell even English subtitled titles, let alone raw anime. Finally, the article concludes with the otherwise irrelevant factoid that Pocket Monsters, the Nintendo game on which Pokemon was based, will soon be released in the US in an attempt to extend public hysteria regarding anime beyond television to video games as well. This article uses an unfortunate accident in Japan to instill fear and reinforce cultural xenophobia in the United States.

Beyond yellow journalism, an entertainment industry bias clearly reflects the non-otaku sentiment about anime. A Cartoon Network, a network that features two anime shows, vice-president of programming denies their appeal and quality: "[Anime is] far edgier, adult, and violent. Anime isn't very story-based and is driven by intense moments. The story is hard to follow." Another reflection of industry bias, USA Network seized the opportunity of the Pokemon incident to cancel the much-maligned Sailor Moon whose fans must renew their campaign to "SOS" (Save Our Sailors). In addition, Disney will probably choose to release Princess Mononoke through an alternative distribution channel like Mirimax, exposing an industry belief that anime is, at best, a fascinating but minority interest.

This bias did not start with the Pokeman incident. When reviewing 1995's Ghost in the Shell, film critic Roger Ebert was enthusiastic yet felt compelled to warn that the film was not suitable for children even though animated. The attitude that animation is for children may be anime's largest obstacle to widespread acceptance in the US. Last summer, anime Internet newsgroups were filled with messages about new laws in Nevada which restricted the sale of videos with graphic content to those under 18. Anime, with its sometimes bloody deaths and courtesy breast shots, was a clear target for these laws. Essentially, American society may never accept serious and unrestricted stories told through animation.

When the unfortunate Pokemon accident triggered epileptic symptoms in many Japanese children, US entertainment industry actions and biased journalism revealed

mainstream American culture's underlying fear of foreign values. Even though the otaku subculture appears to be growing, acceptance of anime still remains a minority position and one that is misunderstood by greater society.hair).