Book Review: Tse-Yue G. Hu,

Frames of Anime: Culture and Image-Building

Hong Kong University Press, 2010.
$28 (paperback)

Tse-Yue G. Hu’s *Frames of Anime: Culture and Image-Building* uniquely addresses the post-colonial dimensions of Japan’s illustrated-media industries. Hu’s ultimate goal is twofold: to locate the historical origins of anime style, and to try to arrive at an answer for why the anime industry (as distinct from the Japanese animation industry) has become the dominant model for animation production in East and South-East Asia.

Chapter one poses the question of why Japan, among all nations, should be the one to embrace animation as wholeheartedly as it does. Borrowing from V. N. Volosinov’s interest in the unspoken, non-linguistic components of discourse, Hu advocates an understanding of animation as a fundamentally visual form of communication – one capable of expressing what conventional language cannot. For Hu, it comes as no accident of history that Japan should embrace such a form; citing David Pollack’s *Fracture of Meaning*, she posits that the historical development of the Japanese language resulted in a schizophrenic system of expression.

The *kanji* characters which comprise one of the Japanese language’s three forms of writing (with the other two being the *hiragana* and *katakana* syllabaries) were adapted from the Chinese *hanzi* – an act of linguistic grafting wherein a polysyllabic tongue (Japanese) was forced to express itself through a form of writing designed for a monosyllabic one. The marginality fostered by this predicament found its outlet of expression in what Hu sees as Japan’s enduring fascination with the visual. A selected history of Japan’s visual arts, as viewed through this theoretical lens, forms the bulk of chapter two. In chapter three, Hu outlines how Japan’s dominant religious and philosophical traditions helped to sculpt the particular subject position that would eventually give rise to this system of visual communication.

Chapter four interrogates how the Japanese system of image-making, particularly as incarnated within the country’s animation industry, was appropriated for political ends during the imperial expansion of the 1930s. For Hu, the Japanese animated cinema becomes a stage upon which...
FRAMES OF ANIME BOOK REVIEW

all manner of socio-political dramas play out, including leftist critique of the country’s rising tide of nationalism. The tensions which she discerns in this era come most clearly to the fore in the compelling, if brief, contrast that Hu identifies between Japan’s propagandistic Momotarō umi no shinpei (Momotaro’s Divine Sea Warriors [Mitsuyo Seo, 1945]), often credited as Japan’s first feature-length animated film) and China’s Tie shan gong zhu (Princess Iron Fan [Wan Laiming and Wan Guchan, 1941]). This analysis could very well have served as a chapter unto itself, but instead receives a mere six pages, which hardly does justice to this fascinating topic.

The comparative approach is arguably Hu’s greatest strength, and chapter five adopts it in earnest. Here, Hu documents the industrial interplay between Japanese and Chinese animators during the postwar period (roughly 1945–1967), with particular emphases on the rise of the Toei studio and of cartoonist Osamu Tezuka’s lasting impact on the production and form of Japanese TV animation. Tezuka’s story has been told many times before – most recently in Natsu Onoda Power’s God of Comics: Osamu Tezuka and the Creation of Post–World War II Manga (Mississippi University Press, 2009) – so it is welcome that Hu focuses more on Toei. Even more welcome are accounts of how Toei helped frame the Japanese animation industry in relation to other developing Asian cinemas. These accounts invite comparisons with the colonial policies of the former Japanese empire; the irony being that where once the written language of China was used to tell Japanese tales which it could not authentically represent, now the emerging visual language of Japanese anime is used to awkwardly tell the stories of China.

Hu’s seventh chapter concludes the book in a manner that anticipates promising future scholarship. Her analysis here delves into the postcolonial aspects of Japanese industrial practice – in particular, those concerning the various Southeast Asian countries which Japan once occupied during its pre–World War II imperial expansion. As Japan’s (post-war) animation industry gained worldwide renown, it began outsourcing labor to other east-Asian nations. These nations, in turn, developed animation industries of a sort, but the only visual language known to these industries was that of the Japanese anime they produced as hired hands. Left hanging in the air is the question of what, for example, an authentically Filipino animation language might look like had the Philippines not been a source of cheap labor for Toei.

Not all of the author’s efforts find such success, however. While Hu devotes her sixth chapter to a discussion of Studio Ghibli co-founders Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata, she roots her discussion in a relatively straightforward and uncritical application of auteur theory which feels wildly out of character with the rest of the book. Elsewhere, Hu makes a point of noting that Japanese animation is largely produced by committee, with no room for Cahiers-style auteurs. She certainly establishes Ghibli as being exceptional in that regard, though she tells us precious little of how the studio’s works and practices might contribute to the visual language of anime, or to the language’s political dimensions. Considering that Hu rightly notes television as being the anime industry’s medium of choice, it is curious indeed that she focuses here on the theatrical output of a studio formed “primarily to produce animated feature films” (106). Furthermore, Hu insists on contrasting the directorial styles of Miyazaki and Takahata rather than on situating Ghibli within the context of Asian political/industrial concerns. Ultimately, it is difficult to see how chapter six connects to the larger book.

In the end, this dynamic proves indicative of the book as a whole. Each chapter introduces concepts and employs scholarly approaches which could make for compelling articles on their own, yet in outlining and explaining these concepts and approaches, Hu’s focus seems at times to stray from the larger argument laid out in her first chapter. Much of the scholarship on Japanese animation to date has either focused on its supposed status as a purely Japanese cultural phenomenon (as in the early fan-oriented analyses of Gilles Poitras), the particular history of its fan-reception in the West (Susan Napier, Fred Patten), or on its internal logic of fantasy (Susan Napier again, along with Anne Allison, Patrick Galbraith, Dani Cavallaro, and others).

Yet anime, as an industrial product, does not exist outside the various Frankfurt School political
concerns surrounding the culture industries. In her best passages, Hu forces us to confront this fact and provides us with a roadmap for thinking politically about anime. Yet this is a map only partially completed, one leading into territory yet to be described. *Frames of Anime* is an intriguing book, but also one that raises more questions than it answers, and that, in its best moments, points us in the directions where anime scholarship has yet to go.

Forrest Greenwood recently earned his M.A. in Critical Studies at USC’s School of Cinematic Arts. His research focuses on animation, new media, and contemporary Japanese pop culture.