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POLITICS, ARTS AND POP CULTURE OF JAPAN IN
LOCAL AND GLOBAL CONTEXTS

MUTUAL IMAGES

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FOUNDED BY

AURORE YAMAGATA-MONTOYA, MAXIME DANESIN & MARCO PELLITTERI

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POLITICS, ARTS AND POP CULTURE OF JAPAN IN
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EDITED BY

MARCO PELLITTERI & HERB L. FONDEVILLA

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Paris' Japan Expo 2018 as way to understand what Japanese animation is going to face in Europe and Italy

Exhibition at Parc des Expositions, Paris (France), 5-8 July 2018

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Yesterday's leftist critics did not understand Japanese cartoons and today anime are getting their comeuppance, even without television.

PARIS, 8 July 2018 — I've just got back from the last, intense day of the *Japan Expo*, the Japanese pop culture *kermesse* held every July – this year from July 5th to July 8th – in Paris's Parc des Expositions. Attracting hundreds of thousands of Frenchmen, largely between 15 and 25 years of age, its immense pavilions are capable of housing an army of life-sized Gundams and were teeming with fans. Thomas Sirdey, one of the Expo's three founders, reports that fans usually spend around 200 euros to buy manga, DVDs, gadgets, accessories and Japanese culinary delicacies.

In writing these paragraphs, I begin by noting a series of hard facts, which is why I had to start with the French context: both Italy and Japan are losing a great chance to revive once more what was the great success of Japanese animation and comic books within Italy, much more deeply rooted and wide-reaching than in any other European country, which I documented and analysed from a sociological perspective in the monographs, *The Dragon and the Dazzle* (Tunué 2008, 650 pp.) and *Mazinga Nostalgia* (1999, 2018). Italy's system of media and creative industries seems incapable of mobilising sizeable capital in regard to Japanese animation products. One example is the disappearance of animated series coming from the land of the Rising Sun via Italian free-to-air channels; simultaneously, Japanese companies are sceptical about investing resources in Italy and have also raised their licensing fees, in turn lowering Italian companies' enthusiasm about licensing series which many years ago cost a third or a fourth than US products and now

command roughly the same amount. It is not a coincidence that the European branch of Tōei Animation (the animation studio behind *Grendizer*, *Candy Candy* and *Dragon Ball*) has been set up in Paris, although the amount of Japanese franchises (both animated products and comic books) licensed in Italy from 1978 to 2005 were three times those licensed in France. Since 2005, however, the number of manga titles published annually in France has surpassed the number of manga published annually in Italy, while the gap in terms of number of anime series and films released on television, in theatres, and for the home-video is still much higher in Italy (but we don't know for how long it will be so).

The mainstream popularity of Japanese TV animation, so transversal and inter-classist (the view share of Japanese animation broadcast on Italian State TV and private broadcasters reached every children, ranging from those with holes in their shoes to those whose shoes had brand holes by design), has been subjected to years of indifference, lost in a constellation of nostalgic niche groups of now forty-year-old fans, all gathered in a subculture which feeds on revival concerts and DVD/gadgets collections of old series such as *Kōtetsu Jeeg* but unable to overthrow the stigma which identified *anime* and *manga* as ugly, dangerous, immoral and iconoclastic products when they were in fact the exact opposite, as shown in my research and in Luca Raffaelli's illuminating booklet *Le anime diseguate* (1994, 2019).

Italy's normalisation and partial acceptance of this subculture is not without its merits: first and foremost, the exodus of anime series from TV to internet-based platforms such as Netflix and other similar subscription-based services. This new web-based format, however, is still struggling. The European leader in anime digital delivery, Wakanim, is present all over the continent but not in Italy, where – as reported by Wakanim's founder Olivier Cervantès – local platform VVVVID dominates, albeit with inferior results compared to France or Germany. All in all, the transition from general TV broadcasting to web-based viewing and binge-watching (high-volume audiovisual consumption, typically characterised by watching three, five and even ten episodes back-to-back in a single night) is happening everywhere and is *also* working in the case of Japanese animation. This transition could lead to a new surge in the popularity of old and new Japanese animated series, all thanks to this new mode of consumption. There is also a possible unknown: today's forty-year-olds are galvanised when they see images or jingles from series they first encountered on TV during their childhood. Nowadays, the first contact with anime comes during viewers' adolescence or young

adulthood: thanks for the effort of then-channel director Carlo Freccero, RAI 4 broadcast many quality series in late night slots and built an audience well outside of the age group of children. Will introducing this entertainment product to a different age group produce an audience just as faithful and involved fifteen years from now? Judging from the crowds gathering and the many conventions throughout Italy, such as *Lucca Comics & Games*, we should be able confidently answer “yes”; but we shall see.

In the meantime, a few heroes have been elevated to national-popular status (in the original sense introduced by Antonio Gramsci). They are Japanese, but also hold Italian citizenship. Chief among them is *UFO Robot Grendizer* (*UFO Robot Goldrake* in Italy): libelled by the left-leaning press since 1978 on both sides of the Alps, it is the product of a misunderstanding born out of superficiality. Michele Serra, a journalist from leftist newspaper *L'Unità*, condemned Grendizer in favour of Mickey Mouse in a 1981 article ('Caro, vecchio Topolino fai ancora un Figurone', [My dear old Mickey, you're still looking great]). This inversion, which favoured a US product, was ironically humorous: to criticise the perceived ugliness of Japanese-style industrial entertainment, Serra deployed a symbol of America's slightly bigoted cultural imperialism as his virtuous example.

Today we can safely archive that kind of blasé and prejudiced critique. The paladin of inter-ethnic and interstellar resistance, the pacifist king-philosopher Duke Fleed at the helm of his majestic and arcane UFO-robot – which celebrates its forty years of unending success in the hearts of a generation, the one I have christened the “Grendizer-generation” – is still alive even if he does not fight with us. Instead, he has become a classic, rather like Italo Calvino would suggest: he needs to be re-discovered, as his singular, deeply educational content still has something to teach us.

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