

## Book Review: Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan

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In *Anime's Media Mix*, author **Marc Steinberg** shows that anime is far more than a style of Japanese animation. Engaging with film, animation, and media studies, as well as analysis of consumer culture and theories of capitalism, Steinberg offers the first sustained study of the Japanese mode of convergence that informs global media practices to this day. **Casey Brienza** finds this is a very flawed book but nevertheless, a very good one.

**Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan. Marc Steinberg. University of Minnesota Press. 2012.**

### Find this book:

If you are a child—or the parent of a child—you probably recognize the bright yellow rodent able to shoot lightning bolts at its enemies. It is, of course, Pikachu, the ubiquitous official mascot of the *Pokémon* multimedia franchise, a global juggernaut which includes video games, trading cards, televised cartoons, comic books, plush toys, and much, much more. However, Pikachu is far more than just a poster-child for capitalist accumulation; it is, according to [Marc Steinberg](#), a 'character,' the essential tie binding the disparate parts of the franchise together to each other and to consumers, as well as consumers to each other.

The proliferation of particular creative properties across multiple mediated platforms has been called many things, with 'synergy,' 'convergence,' and 'transmedia' among the most popular in the west. In *Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan*, Steinberg, currently an assistant professor of film studies at Concordia University in Canada, explores the origins and implications of the Japanese variant, the 'media mix.' He argues that the origin of television animation in the Japan of the 1960s and its development into an interconnected 'anime system' of media and commodity forms foreshadows the postmodern shift from product to brand. To understand anime's media mix, therefore, is to understand the conditions and consequences of the twenty-first century's transmedia movements.

The book's five chapters focus on two historical moments of particular importance: 1) the *Tetsuwan Atomu* animated television series (also known as *Astro Boy* in the west), based upon a science fiction manga by [Osamu Tezuka](#) of the same name about a humanoid robot boy, in the 1960s and 2) book and magazine publisher [Kadokawa Shoten's](#) forays into music and movie production in the 1970s. In each of these cases, consumer enjoyment of a particular creative property became detached from any one medium as financial exigency remediated the character across print, screen, soundtrack, and plastic (or tin) toy. Ultimately, the character and its world would become immaterial, and selling the immaterial relationality of the different components of the media mix would become not a side-effect of cultural production but rather, the point.

Steinberg's carefully researched historical accounts of *Tetsuwan Atomu's* transition from television to chocolate and toy and of Kadokawa Shoten's book, movie, and soundtrack triad are this book's greatest strengths. While their importance has been much discussed and debated in Japan, language barriers prevent them from becoming common knowledge among English speakers. Steinberg renders an invaluable







service here by adding them to the common stores of knowledge.

I was less persuaded by Steinberg's placement of the 'anime system' to foreground his analysis of Japan's media mixes. Firstly, his attempted interventions in medium theory are easily the weakest parts of the book; invoking anime's supposed inherent properties as justification is not sufficient. And moreover, two of his key case studies, *Tetsuwan Atomu* and *Haruhi Suzumiya*, were printed matter first, and while the political economy of anime in Japan requires franchising in a way that publishing alone does not, I am not convinced that the historic importance of anime to the media mix justifies Steinberg's elevation of anime—as in the terms 'anime system' and 'anime's media mix'—to centre stage status within the universes of Japan's many contemporary multimedia franchises. Certainly Tezuka and *Haruhi Suzumiya* author Nagaru Tanigawa would not think so! To underscore the importance of anime in this context seems to me to be a purely western conceit. Anime is, after all, the vehicle through which westerners typically encounter Japan's media mixes first, and Steinberg is, after all, from Canada.

Unfortunately, the focus on anime means that *Anime's Media Mix* emphasizes the immaterial relationality between components of a multimedia property at the expense of clear analysis of the contemporary political economy of Japan's culture industries. Categories of print, particularly manga and increasingly light novels, are where so many media mixes originate and they, *not* their animated adaptations, remain, from a Japanese perspective, at the center. The Japanese publishing industry has been ailing since the 1990s, and a failure to recognize its continued importance to the media mix is a failure to recognize how catastrophic its decline is for Japan's larger cultural economy.

This is, in sum, a very flawed book. But it is, nevertheless, a very good one, and I would not hesitate to recommend it to scholars and students of media and popular culture. Steinberg will be an academic in this field to watch, and I look forward to seeing how *Anime's Media Mix* will shape ongoing debates.

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**Casey Brienza** is a PhD candidate in Sociology at the University of Cambridge and member of Trinity College, Cambridge. She received her AB from Mount Holyoke College in 2003 and her MA from New York University's Department of Media, Culture, and Communication in 2009. Her doctoral thesis, fully funded by an External Research Studentship from her College, is being written under the supervision of John Thompson on manga publishing and the transnational production of print culture. Casey also has refereed articles in print or forthcoming in journals such as *The Journal of Popular Culture*, *Publishing Research Quarterly*, *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, and *The International Journal of the Book*. She may be reached through [her website](#). [Read more reviews by Casey](#).