

# Book Review: The Soul of Anime: Collaborative Creativity and Japan's Media Success Story

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In *The Soul of Anime*, **Ian Condry** seeks to explore the emergence of anime as a global cultural phenomenon. Drawing on ethnographic research including interviews with artists at some of Tokyo's leading animation studios – such as Madhouse, Gonzo, Aniplex, and Studio Ghibli – Condry discusses how anime's fictional characters and worlds become platforms for collaborative creativity. **Casey Brienza** finds that this is an excellent work which successfully negotiates that difficult proposition of holding onto the interest of readers who know a lot about anime but not a lot about anthropology as well as readers who know a lot about anthropology but hardly anything at all about anime.

**The Soul of Anime: Collaborative Creativity and Japan's Media Success Story.** Ian Condry. Duke University Press. 2013.

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For a recent episode of *This World*, BBC journalist Anita Rani headed to Japan to investigate the country's rapidly declining birthrate. The programme assigns blame for Japanese failure to reproduce in sufficient numbers, in part, to the otaku, mostly male geeks who are obsessed with comic books, animated cartoons, and computer games. Rani [interviews](#) two self-identified otaku in their late thirties who confessed to preferring virtual two-dimensional teenage girlfriends on the Nintendo DS console game *LovePlus* to three-dimensional women of flesh and blood. On prompting, her informants link otaku culture to the declining birthrate by pointing out that while all countries have cartoons, Japan has cartoons for all ages. The implication is that, in such a media-saturated environment, men can persist in an indefinite state of arrested development of childish consumption and are never forced to become productive, fully-fledged members of society.

Otaku culture as a pervasive social problem, if not outright anti-social public menace, has been a common feature of popular discourse in Japan at least since Tsutomu Miyazaki, dubbed the "Otaku Murderer" for the large collection of pornographic and violent animation found in his flat, was convicted of killing and mutilating four young girls in the late 1980s. The man who prefers two-dimensional fantasy to reality and the man who cannot distinguish between two-dimensional fantasy and reality are but two points on the same troubling continuum, the critics would contend. It is against—both in contrast to and in contest with—such a backdrop that Duke University Press has published *The Soul of Anime: Collaborative Creativity and Japan's Media Success Story* by [Ian Condry](#), a cultural anthropologist and Associate Professor of Comparative Media Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. (Yes, in addition to its formidable reputation in the STEM fields, MIT also supports research and teaching in the humanities and social sciences.)

In this book, Condry argues for a radical reimagining of otaku culture and the production and consumption of

Japanese animated cartoons, typically known as “anime” in the west. Its popularity, both within Japan and overseas, cannot be explained by some sort of cultural “resonance” with, say, Japanese male post-industrial disaffection and isolation. Rather, he asserts, “[C]ollaborative creativity, which operates across media industries and connects official producers to unofficial fan production, is what led to anime’s global success. Put simply, success arises from social dynamics that lead people to put their energy into today’s media worlds.” Where some would see social breakdown, Condry sees new social formations and collaborative opportunities, both between producer and consumer and between different sectors of the global creative industries. This collaboration, in turn, generates and reifies a new form of cultural value which does not depend upon economic success but rather upon the breadth and depth of personal networks. Following Bourdieu, one might call this new form of cultural value “social capital,” though oddly Condry himself never does so. Instead, he terms it “energy” and rather idealistically takes this “energy” as what comprises the “soul” of anime.

The ethnographic research undergirding this book was conducted sporadically from 2004 to 2010, with three and a half months of intensive fieldwork with anime studios in the summer of 2006 a particularly rich source of material. His main field sites were Gonzo, Aniplex, and Madhouse, though he attained various levels of access to several other important companies, such as Studio Ghibli and Bandai, as well. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the content of the book’s seven substantive chapters reflects the long but choppy temporal horizon of Condry’s fieldwork, and they do not tell one coherent story so much as dip in and out of key themes related to anime and collaborative creativity. Topics range from the importance of characters, premises, and worlds, as opposed to straightforward storytelling narratives, for the production of anime titles, to the overseas digital piracy of “fansubbers.” He also provides an overview of his theoretical framework, an in-depth history of the Japanese anime industry, an analysis of merchandising toys and character goods, and an outsider’s glimpse into the everyday workings of an anime studio. A chapter on otaku in Japan brings things full circle and rounds off the book.



Characters at the Anime Contents Expo 2013. Credit: [Danny Choo](#) CC BY-SA 2.0

The great strength of *The Soul of Anime* is how convincingly and decisively it dispenses with the argument that there is something inherent to the anime text itself that makes it so appealing in various contemporary cultural contexts around the world. These sorts of claims have been made by such scholars and cultural commentators as Susan Napier (*From Impressionism to Anime*), Roland Kelts (*Japanamerica*), and Timothy Craig (*Japan Pop!*), to name just a few. Condry calls this “resonance,” and one example of a “resonance” argument would be, following the BBC programme described at the beginning of this review, is that because modern Japanese men have difficulty relating to modern Japanese women they seek refuge in idealized—and completely unrealistic, even infantilized—cartoon girls instead.

Unfortunately, Condry does not quite sustain his position that the collaboration that must be accounted for in his answer to the book’s introductory question, “Who makes anime?”, is more important than the question, “What is anime?” Much of the book does actually consist of textual summary of anime series, accompanied by hermeneutic

literary-style analysis informed by fieldwork data. And although he acknowledges that while collaboration can imply both utopian, horizontal relations of cooperation, it can also imply hierarchy and structures of discipline, in practice Condry clearly favours emphasis of the former. Indeed, despite commenting “that the boundary between fan and producer is fluid and that many of the same motivations operate in both worlds,” he does not explicitly link fansubbers’ egoistic claims to their particular transformations of pirated content, for example, to his rather disappointed discovery that anime industry professionals viewed *themselves* as the audience that mattered, not other fans. All of these collaborative creators are implicated in a particular neoliberal subjectivity with potentially far-reaching implications that Condry, despite occasional gestures in that direction, does not systematically unpack. This is, in my view, a lost opportunity.

Nevertheless, *The Soul of Anime* is an excellent work which successfully negotiates that difficult proposition of holding onto the interest of readers who know a lot about anime but not a lot about anthropology *as well as* readers who know a lot about anthropology but hardly anything at all about anime. Both sets of readers will find something to like here—and plenty to learn. Highly recommended.

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