

A Spanish anime childhood: Early perception of anime in Spain by mainstream audiences

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Abstract

This article presents a qualitative reception study combining photo elicitation and narrative inquiry, where three generations of Spanish adults are asked to share their memories of watching anime in their childhood. Their nostalgic life stories are analyzed to identify a series of topics that point to different kinds of appropriation and identity work. We propose the concept of the "anime dream gaze" to describe the fascination that anime awoke in their audiences, and contrast it to an adult censoring voice that is now critical of the affective attachments of the past.

Keywords: anime, reception, audiences, childhood, nostalgia

*"I have the fondest memories of **Doraemon!** I always hoped that one of his inventions could help me one day, even if it only was the magic door to let me travel from one place to another".*

*"**Cardcaptor Sakura** was extremely meaningful for me as a child. It motivated me to be kind to other people, to fight for justice and it taught me that there was a strength in being loved by everybody, as she was".*

" 'Moon Prism Power, Make Up!', **Sailor Moon** is the series that meant more for me in my pre-teen years. Girls who could fight, and they won not by killing, but by helping or healing their enemies".

These happy reminiscences don't belong to Japanese people, but to Spanish audiences that we have engaged in a collective media memory experiment. Our paper sets out to investigate a unique example of early, mainstream and decontextualized reception of Japanese anime in the West, including how its cultural origin and its cross-cultural nature were perceived by those early spectators in their childhood days on the basis of a shared media context. We present and analyze the results of a story collection in which 351 informants have shared their anime childhood memories with us. In this paper we move away from the more typical focus on fans (and self-identified otakus) to a general audience whose media consumption does not hinge on a current affective relationship with Japanese culture. Methodologically, our study explores the question of what it means to ask adult audiences about their childhood experiences: is it even possible to remember the original reception through the filter of adulthood? Can the child and the adult views be disentangled from each other?

Background for the study: early casual anime viewing

Academic attention to the reception of Japanese media has often been related to its "special" status as an alternative cultural universe (Napier, 2008: 5), uniquely different from the dominant American context. In this kind of studies, audiences are typically very invested fans that make great efforts to consume their favourite products (Ito 2012), and even claim the name *otaku*¹ as an essential part of their identity (Larsen 2018). It is not until around 2000, where a few products like *Pokemon* or Studio Ghibli films become mainstream worldwide (Allison, 2006: 8).

The reception situation we present here is very different, since anime had been broadcast for mainstream audiences in Spain from as early as 1969.² Spectators did not know that these series came from Japan and were not familiar with the complex contexts of production they were embedded in. Nevertheless, the whole country would sit together to watch *Heidi, Girl of the Alps* (1974, *Arupuso no shôjo Haiji*) or *Mazinger Z* in the 70s.³ For a

¹ *Otaku* literally means "your house", but in Japan it is used to refer to people who are obsessed with a specific pastime like a popular culture product, although it can also refer to computer, trains, or even food. In the West, it is used to refer to people who consider themselves dedicated fans of Japanese popular culture.

² *Kimba the White Lion* (1965, *Janguru Taitei*), premiered in TVE (Televisión Española) in 1969. TVE was the national broadcasting corporation and the only television channel in the country until the mid eighties.

³ *Mazinger Z* had a big impact on the history of Spanish media. It premiered in 1978 and remains one of the most "remembered and celebrated" TV animes amongst "nostalgic and 80s pop culture admirers" (Hernández Perez, 2017: 14). Also *Heidi, Girl of the Alps* had a great success in the country amongst young and also adult audiences, owing to its literary origins. Both shows were brought to Spanish stations mainly because buying

couple of decades, several Japanese shows were considered huge successes in the country while “anime” as such remained paradoxically unknown (Ferrera, 2020). Media historians identify three generations of early anime viewing in Spain: one from the 70s, a second one from the 80s,⁴ and a third one from the 90s⁵ (Hernández Pérez, 2017; Madrid and Martínez, 2011). These casual spectators are not fans, do not participate in productive practices like subbing or cosplay, and in fact have probably culturally moved on by the time they reach adulthood. As media researchers, we thought they were interesting as a new kind of audience, in between the ordinariness that anime has for Japanese viewers of all ages and its “othered” status for those who define themselves as *otaku* in the West. Our spectators are the unknowing audiences Lamarre mentions, for whom “the Japaneseness of Japanese animation can sometimes go entirely unnoticed” (Lamarre, 2009: 90). What do they remember from their early engagement with anime? Are they nostalgically attached to these texts in any special way? The positive reactions to social media postings involving anime from the past that we both have witnessed through the years pointed at nostalgia as the right framework for our investigation.

Child fascination and adult nostalgia

Nostalgia, as a “bittersweet longing for former times and spaces” (Niemeyer, 2014: 1) is often mediated, since our personal memories are entangled with snippets and impressions of the media texts that have had the biggest impact on us.⁶ Boym emphasizes the self-deluding power of nostalgia as a “romance with our own fantasy” (Boym 2001: 13), a

Japanese animation was a cheap way to acquire content (Hernández Pérez, 2017: 13). In addition, the lack of strict copyright laws in the country during that time favoured the development of non-official merchandise that helped these shows become media phenomena (Hernández Pérez, 2017: 14).

⁴ The 80s were a turning point with the arrival of regional TV stations (Montero Plata, 2012: 43). In 1989, the Federation of Autonomical Radio and Television Organism (FORTA) acquired a vast amount of foreign content for its affiliates, amongst which was *Dragon Ball*. This anime paved the way for other Japanese productions and brought attention to its Japanese origins, due to its combination of “orientalism and modernity” (Hernández Pérez, 2017: 16). In spite of its limited regional distribution and lack of a marketing campaign or a planned strategy, *Dragon Ball* developed a following that can be seen as an early example of fandom in the country.

⁵ For Ferrera (2020:29), 1990 was the moment when anime reached a stable presence in the whole country, with Telecinco showing anime every day (the first two were *Story of the Alps: My Annette*, and *Grimm’s Fairy Tale Classics*, both shown on the station’s first weekend). After that, anime was on air on a daily basis for the whole decade (Ferrera, 2020: 30). Most of that anime was aired during the morning and within spaces that did not make any distinction between genres or Japanese demographic classifications based on age and gender (*kodomo, shōnen, shōjo, josei and seinen*). Specialized programming started slowly, with pioneering spaces like *Manga* (Canal 33, a Catalan autonomic public broadcaster), where almost the full catalogue of distributor Manga Films was aired at night. Shaped in part around programs like *Manga*, The dedicated anime fans soon brought about a market for manga, a culture of conventions (like the Barcelona “Salón del manga”, since 1995) and even of cosplay (*ibid.*, 19), naturalising manganime as a stable part of popular culture. Casual viewers and dedicated fans have coexisted in every generation, often consuming the same content. With anime “assimilated in Spanish audiovisual culture, its daily presence on Spanish TV contributed to shape the imaginary of its time” (Ferrera, 2020: 34) - we could argue that both for Otaku and the general public.

⁶ There is a growing body of literature about the nostalgic attachment to media of the past, building upon the work of Hutcheon (1998), Boym (2001), or Coontz (2016). Wilson (2005) and Lizardi (2014) are good examples.

criticism strongly echoed by Lizardi, for whom current market practices of relaunching old childhood texts (videogames, music, etc.) are aimed at keeping audiences artificially stuck in a emerging adult position that never evolves into a mature taste (2014: 26).

Our audiences did not seek the old content out of free will, but were rather exposed to it by us. Therefore, we didn't know if they would still have any kind of emotional bonds with the anime series, and were very curious as to how their adult selves would react to revisiting childhood entertainment. Boym has proposed a widely influential division between two kinds of nostalgia: restorative (a conservative longing for an idealized past) and reflective (a speculative alternative to the present), that can be productive for social change. Al-Ghazzi augments this dichotomy with a third understanding of nostalgia as a way of thinking futures, a way to power up imaginative change that unites the personal and collective dimensions (2018). In fact, he investigates this aspect through a study of how Japanese anime from the 80s thematized amateur video protests to criticize Al-Assad's regime. In his research, nostalgia is shown as a catalizator for action, a shared language to defy the system. In order to be able to rally people like this, anime must have made a big impression on the Syrian children of the eighties. In our study, the collective dimension is addressed through the generational segmentation of the remembered animes. However, this collective nostalgia has not been channeled into collaborative political action. Nevertheless, our paper is also as an investigation of the ways in which nostalgia can bridge children and adult identities, even if all that remains are individual fuzzy memories.

In order to interrogate this rather indeterminate affect universe, we turn to research about the role of media in children's fantasy life, where mediated fantasy is conceptualized as a platform to wonder: "In the process of developing an identity, the child plays with these inner pictures as a way of processing experiences, struggling with challenges, and developing a self-image" (Götz, 2005: 23). The media reception process is thus an appropriation in which the mediated content is integrated with child's inner world. It would even seem that visual media fuels this process in an even more powerful manner "thus leaving stronger imprints on children's fantasies" (Götz, 2005: 215). The question for us here is perhaps how durable this image is, what traces (if any) of the mediated fantasy worlds are still to be seen in adulthood. And, maybe even more importantly, if the eventual affective traces can be attributed to the children as new spectators in the time of their identity formation or to the nostalgic adults of the present. We hypothesized that it would be difficult to disentangle children and adult views, so we decided to let ourselves be inspired by Nina Mikkelsen's work in relation to children's response to fantasy texts. She has proposed eight literacies to describe the many different ways in which children make sense of these texts in situated ways (Mikkelsen, 2005: 3). For her, reading is a multidimensional activity with different kinds of discoveries. Her summary of these dimensions is worth citing in full:

"use literature to help children make meaning generally (*generative* literacy); make discriminations about their own feelings (*personal/empathetic* literacy); make

connections between life and literature (*sociocultural* literacy); become lost in a book (*aesthetic* literacy); walk around the story as insiders, telling their own stories about the story (*narrative* literacy); resist the text for any number of reasons (*critical* literacy); or uncover narrative patterns and details for greater meaning-making (*literary* literacy) (...) reading skills and *print* literacy" (Mikkelsen, 2005: 107)

She is of course talking about literature, but we argue that these dimensions also can help us nuance our informants response to anime films, giving us an indication of the kinds of things to be on the lookout for. For instance, a statement that expresses how the fantasy world helped a person make sense of their feelings (personal/empathetic literacy) might be an indication that the encounter with the text was indeed formative. In this case, any affect expressed would not only be a product of a sentimental expression of nostalgia, romantic but ultimately empty, but a more reflected position where the adult can now recognize what the text did for them in the past.

Method: personal story collection

To investigate this early reception of anime, we had a challenge. Since anime audiences in Spain were mainstream for many years, this meant that potentially anybody could be engaged in conversation. At the same time, maybe the people we asked wouldn't have anything in particular to say about an experience that didn't necessarily mark them deeply. Unlike in reception studies involving expert fans, mainstream audiences wouldn't necessarily react positively about being invited to in-depth interviews or detailed surveys.

Because we were interested in their subjective experience of viewing, we decided that the empirical collection should be centered around memories: did they have any and what were they? We wanted to communicate that these memories, no matter how vague or inaccurate, were something worth collecting. We reasoned also that we should give informants the opportunity of self-selecting themselves, that is, remembering something about the old animes was a precondition for participation (while having continued to watch anime was a disqualifying condition, as we wanted to avoid fans). Lastly, we figured that a way to make people want to take part in our study was to shape it in an entertaining way, so participation was formed as a visual prompt "game", where we offered five images⁷ and asked them to freely associate to them, writing about any memories the images might trigger.

Images have a viscosity that can awaken connections and memories. Our hope was that informants would feel something when confronted with the media of their childhood, and that it would be easier to express themselves through storytelling, rather than a rigid

⁷ Each of the three generations received 5 different image prompts. They are all included at the end of this essay.

question and answer format. The method can thus be said to be a combination of photo-elicitation⁸ and narrative inquiry.⁹ Photo elicitation usually refers to the use of photographs in research interviews as triggers for conversation. In this case, there wasn't an interview, but only the story collection, and the images were selected by us and not the subjects. The idea was that the iconic images should connect the individual to a common (generational) experience, but also that they would help establish a link with the past that might otherwise have been temporarily lost in memory. As Bagnoli points out, visual methods "allow us to access and represent different levels of experience" (Bagnoli, 2009: 547), often incorporating an emotional dimension. Asking people to tell stories is part of the toolbox of narrative inquiry, an umbrella term that covers a series of methods that rely on storytelling at different stages of the research (data collection, analysis or dissemination), coined by Connelly and Clandinin (1990). In our data collection, we asked specifically for stories, not facts (like titles of animes, details about the plot or names of characters). We were interested in our informants sharing their memories, hoping that these stories would connect their reception experiences to their own lives, thus revealing if (and how) the animes had any remarkable impact. We didn't expect so much coherent narratives as impressionistic fragments, and a mix of children and adult voices, which we would then analyze looking for the different dimensions of the reception of anime texts inspired by Mikkelsen's literacies.

As for the practical implementation of the method, we recruited informants exploiting the outreach opportunity offered by social media. We posted a link on our Facebook and Twitter accounts, where it was shared by our extensive network of people (who were children in Spain during one of the three decades). We asked them to share the link in their own networks, so that it snowballed and could reach people whom we didn't know. The invitation specifically asked possible participants to refrain from taking part in the experiment if they now considered themselves fans of anime or were still engaged in its regular consumption. We explicitly stated that we were looking for mainstream audiences who felt a strong enough pull of nostalgia in their heartstrings to use ten minutes of their time to reminisce about their childhood media consumption. This can of course have pushed them too much in a nostalgic direction, but we believe that it only had a motivating effect and couldn't have falsified their response.

⁸ Douglas Harper, "Talking about pictures: a case for photo elicitation". *Visual Studies*, Vol. 17, No.1, 2002. Annette Kuhn, "Photography and Cultural Memory: A Methodological Exploration." *Visual Studies* 22, no. 3 (2007): 283-92. Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies, an Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*. (London, UK Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2016).

⁹ Kim, Jeong-Hee. *Understanding Narrative Inquiry: the Crafting and Analysis of Stories as Research*. Los Angeles: SAGE, 2016. Dominique Robert, & Shaul Shenhav, "Fundamental Assumptions in Narrative Analysis: Mapping the Field". *The Qualitative Report*, 19 (38), (2014): 1–17. Arthur W. Frank, "Why Study People's Stories? The Dialogical Ethics of Narrative Analysis." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 1, no. 1 (2002): 109-17. Donald E. Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences*. SUNY Series in Philosophy of the Social Sciences. (Albany, N.Y: State University of New York Press, 1988).

In less than two weeks, we had collected 351 full responses (59 percent, men; 38 percent, women; 3 percent, other) and had to close the survey as the data was already extremely rich.

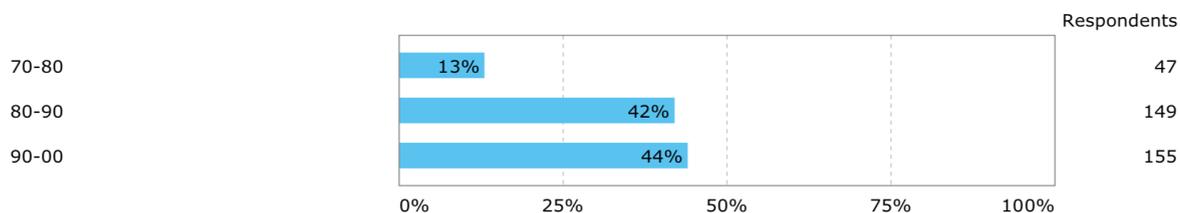


Fig 1. Table with distribution of participants according to generation

Before engaging with the visual prompts, participants had to answer one fixed choice question (where they had to tick all the anime series they remembered from a list), and an open text field where we asked them to write titles of other anime series which we had not provided in the list but they had fond memories of. We also collected information about their gender and the generation they belonged to. The generational information was especially important, since it would define which five image prompts they would get. The anime screenshots were not labelled in any way, and the informants were asked to write about the memories that came to their mind in relation to the images, both about what they remembered and their emotional reaction. The five images assigned to each generation were selected amongst the most successful animes of each decade, according to audience numbers from the time where they were broadcast in Spain:

I grew up in the...	Anime series visual prompts
70s/80s	3000 Leagues in Search of Mother; Heidi, Girl of the Alps; Candy Candy, Science Ninja Team Gatchaman, Mazinger Z.
80s/90s	Ranma ½, Dragon Ball, Saint Seiya, Captain Tsubasa, Sailor Moon
90s/00s	Doraemon, Pokemon, Crayon Shin-chan, Rurōni Kenshin, Neon Genesis Evangelion

Fig 2. Table with the anime series where the image prompts came from

These three generations are relevant not only in relation to the visual prompts, but also as to the pre-made list of anime series which we asked them to tick at the beginning. This list is a selection of the titles that could be said to be most mainstream because of sheer spectator numbers, as well as circulation of merchandise and nostalgic objects.¹⁰

¹⁰ Most of these titles are recurrent in the literature about the topic. Hernández Pérez also refers to the three generations of viewers in terms of their most iconic animes: the *Mazinger Z* one (70s), the *Dragon Ball* one (80s) and the *Pokemon* one (90s) (Hernández Pérez, 2017: 19). We also limited our sample to shows that were aired nationally and not only on autonomic broadcasters, which leaves out popular programs like *Muscle Man*, aired in Spain at Catalan station Canal 33 and at Valencian station Canal 9, but never distributed nationally or dubbed into Spanish.

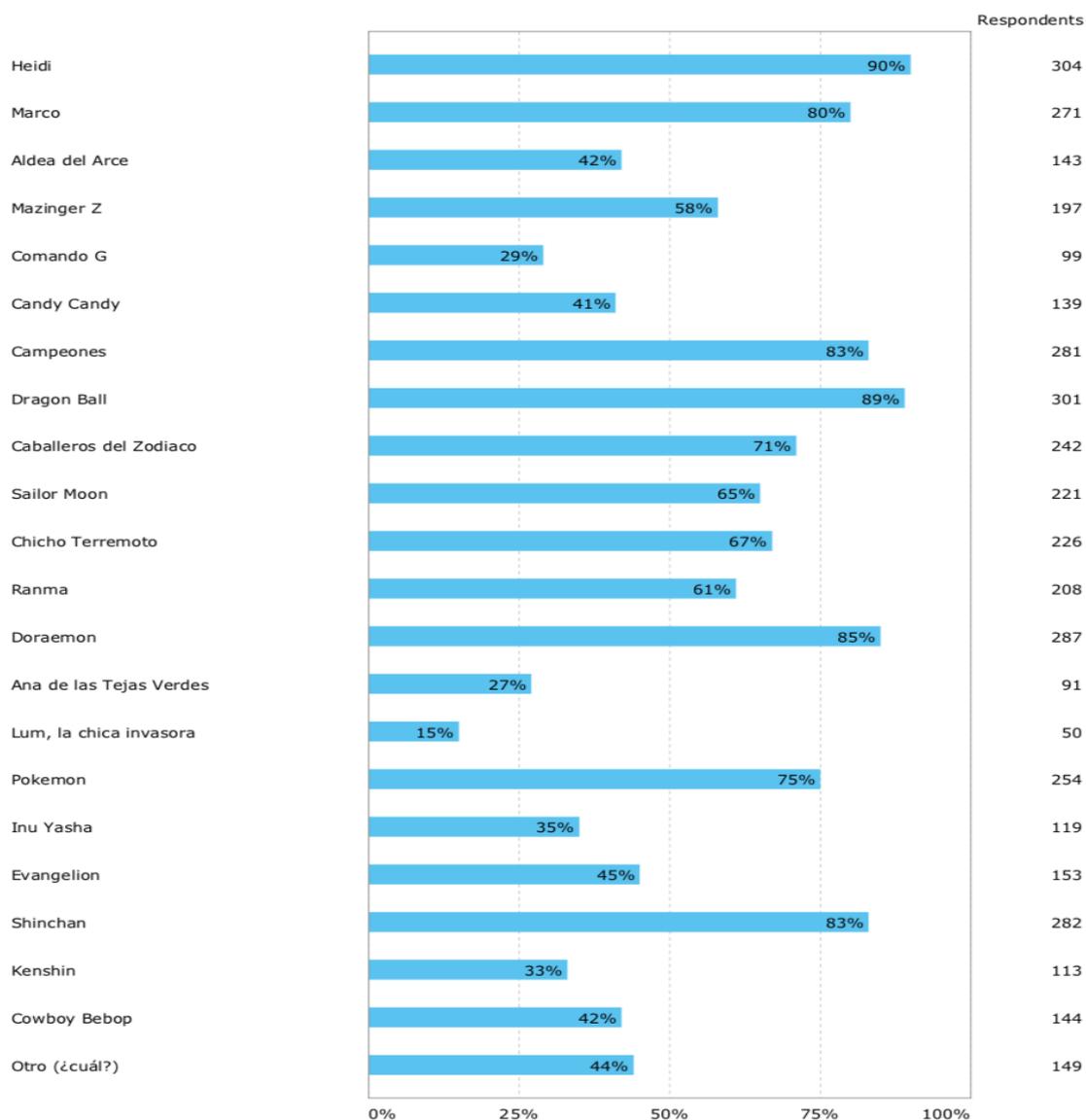


Fig 3. How many informants recognized the titles in our list (anime titles in Spanish)

In our approach, we didn't separate the anime series by any kind of genre division, since they were not marketed that way in Spain. At the time, an unsophisticated view of Japanese animation by broadcasters meant that everything was bundled together as "dibujos animados" (animated drawings or cartoons), not considering that they might originally have had different target audiences. This caused a loose approach to scheduling, not completely gender or age blind, but much broader than it is original conception.¹¹

¹¹ There was a predominance of *shōnen* (content for boys) that was seen by girls, and even some *shōjo* (content for girls) that was seen by boys. After a long period of experimentation in the 70s and 80s, almost everything was bundled together in the mornings in the 90s, "within weekend and working days programs, aimed at accompanying children during their breakfasts before school (Ferrera, 2020: 34). There were also series with content aimed at relatively older audiences, like *Ranma ½*, or even the *seinen* *Lupin*, being shown in young children's timeslots, which resulted in many a controversy, like a 1994 headline in *El País*, a national newspaper, which read "The Japanese export to the whole world the cartoons they forbid their children to see" (Ferrera, 2020: 32).

After ticking this list, respondents got an open text field where they could add any significant anime that had not been listed. They added more than 100 other titles which we hadn't considered, pointing out to a wider range of tastes and genres that we had anticipated.¹²

Interestingly, as anticipated by Hernández Pérez, each of the three generations clusters around a particular series (that gets longer qualitative comments than the others). The most beloved ones are series are: *Mazinger Z*, *Captain Tsubasa* (1983, *Kyaputen Tsubasa*) in a close tie with, *Dragon Ball* (1986, *Doragon Bôru*) in a close tie and *Pokémon* (1997, *Pokemon*). There is a clear pattern here, with shows that were already popular in Japan, and internationally, becoming popular in Spain as well. The original Japanese “generational bundles” are more or less maintained, with, for instance, *Mazinger Z* preceding *Dragon Ball*, but the 1990 anime boom caused some slight rearrangements to them: in the early 90s, Spanish children could watch in the same day shows from the 80s (*Dragon Ball*, *Dr. Slump*), the 70s (*Lupin*, *Ashita no Jô*) and even the 60s (*Ribon no Kishi*), all of them aired for the first time in the country and presented as new releases.¹³

Analysis of the stories

The richest part of our data is of course the brief narrations that informants have written in relation to each of the five image prompts that they were shown. Some are short and dry, especially when we ask about a series which they didn't particularly like or don't recognize. But others are very lively vignettes where the memory of the fictions gets entangled with personal details about the childhood of the recipient, firmly attached through threads of affect and emotion. Here, for example, a recipient remembers watching the last episode of *3000 Leagues in Search of Mother* (1976, *Haha wo tazunete sanzenri*):¹⁴

¹² Part of this diversity can be explained by the fact that, although FORTA often bought content for all its affiliates, the different regional channels still had their own programming strategies and broadcasted different series. This brought us back to regional differences and filled the blank, we consider, in a much more natural way than if we had included these region-specific shows in the list. Many informants also wrote why they thought their additions were important, already revealing thoughts about the kinds of elements that caused the biggest impression.

¹³ In this regard, Spanish TV was “catching up” to Japan and other countries, but the lack of information normally made this unclear. Contemporary productions were rare and even by the end of the decade that delay was frequent: *La familia crece* (*Marmalade Boy*) premiered on TVE2 in 1998. By the time of the release of *Pokemon* (M. Hidaka, TV Tokyo: 1997-2002), that delay was considerably shorter and international information was more widely available, but the show still needed two years to reach the country, airing first at Telecinco on the 20th of December 1999, not without the by then usual controversy. A headline in national newspaper *El Mundo* at the moment read: “Hurricane «Pokémon» arrives. Tele 5 broadcasts the controversial series that has caused aggressions among US children”.

¹⁴ *Haha wo tazunete sanzenri*, dir. Takahata Isao (1976); broadcast in Spain as *De los Apeninos a los Andes*.

"In the chapter in which Marco finally is to meet again with his mother, he walks towards a hut with smoke coming out of its chimney. I turned towards the friend I was watching it with and said: "and now you'll see, they have probably burned his mother". I guess that my feeling there, even though I was trying to sound grownup, must have been fear".

This vivid recollection shows that this person had followed the series with great trepidation, frustrated and afraid for the constant absence of Marco's mother, who was always one step ahead of him. This series unsettled many of our informants, who were very young at the time. It also shows that they were trying to appear tough in front of a friend, in order to counteract the anxious feelings that the scene was provoking. Other informants echo these feelings of "loneliness and fear" or "anxiety because Marco was apart from his mother". One even says that the series was "torture" and should have been banned. The strong negative feelings were associated with a sense of tragedy that was virtually completely unknown in the children programs broadcasted until that point, so this is one of the animes which our informants react more strongly too, as a sort of awakening.



Fig. 4. Visual prompt for 3000 Leagues in Search of Mother

Generally, the most dominant feeling when confronted with the anime images is, by far, that of nostalgia, which many informants mention explicitly. The first encounter with anime is a magical moment cherished by these recipients, as one puts it, "I would like to be a child again". Many informants express happiness at having been asked to participate in the survey, and their responses are filled with emotional exclamations and positive affect words ("I am so excited", "the most fantastic thing ever"). The second most remembered sensation is of how watching the anime series was "fascinating", which for many also points to something that was not entirely understood, but could nevertheless spellbind them emotionally and aesthetically.

As for generational differences between the three selected groups, they have to do with the different media contexts and how old the memories are. The oldest informants (children in the 70-80s) are less precise about details like the weekday their favourite program was shown, or even the titles. Theirs is a more mythical, far away space of lazy

summer afternoons and chocolate snacks. There are a lot of mentions to roleplaying of the series at school, and of how the whole family was addicted to the viewing. The middle generation (children in the 80-90s) are more specific about broadcasting details, often mention using video to record and re-watch episodes, and are more conscious of genres as well as keener on comparing between anime series. The youngest generation (children in the 90s-00s) are our most sophisticated spectators; they remember many more details and mention computer games, the Internet and even more "fannish" activity like drawing fan art or dressing up. The growing awareness of anime as media in the country is visible in these developments.

We subjected all the short narrations in response to the pictures to two rounds of coding. The first round was open and yielded a great number of diverse codes, which we then ran through the material again so we could condense the diversity down to thirteen second order codes. They are summarized here:

1. **Generation.** Informants identify a particular anime as "representative for our generation", and name specific topics that cause generation clashes (with parents or siblings). Parents dislike many of the series in the list, usually because they think the content is inappropriate: "my parents hated *Pokemon* and I had to hide to watch it", "I wasn't allowed to watch *Mazinger Z*", "It felt even kinky. My parents didn't want me to watch *Saint Seiya* and I had to get up silently, turn the tv with super low volume and sit glued to the screen so they wouldn't catch me."
2. **Complexity.** There are many comments about how the plots, universes or characters in anime are more complex and interesting than in the other media products that the viewers were used to, since a lot of children television at the time was only centered around positive, simple messages. For example, in relation to *3000 Leagues in Search of Mother*: "I was afraid of losing my mother and cried a lot watching this, but I wouldn't miss an episode for the world". Or about *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995, *Shin Seiki Evangerion*):¹⁵ "It was overwhelming, incomprehensible, unfathomable. It was so complex I couldn't assimilate it".
3. **Dreams.** For many informants, the new fictional universes are something that they dream themselves a part of, "I wanted to pilot a robot like Mazinger", as desirable alternatives to the real world. Like here in relation to *Sailor Moon* (1992, *Bishôjo Senshi Sêrâ Mûn*):¹⁶ "at school we had our favourite sailors and we fantasized with meeting cats that would talk to us so we could go on adventures and come out of the monotonous school life: be special, different." Or here, remembering *Captain Tsubasa*: "we made a

¹⁵ *Shin Seiki Evangerion*, dir. Anno Hideaki (1995-1996); broadcast in Spain as *Evangelion*.

¹⁶ *Bishôjo Senshi Sêrâ Mûn*, dir. Sato Junichi, Ikuhara Kunihiko & Igarashi Takuya (1992-1997); broadcast in Spain as *Sailor Moon*.

girl football team and we played every afternoon. I remember how happy and important I felt playing with my girlfriends. I can nearly still smell those summer afternoons".

4. **Humour.** Humour is identified as a particularly attractive feature of anime series. Some of the popular animes partake of an irreverent nature that attract young viewers, tired of being talked down to. They discover a new "meta" position that was new to them: "before we watched *Ranma 1/2* (1989, *Ranma Nibun no ichi*)¹⁷ and *Dash Kappei* (1979, *Dashu Kappei*),¹⁸ there were no politically incorrect series." This is sometimes linked to comments about the caricature violence, which can be extremely exaggerated but where nobody dies anyway.
5. **Characters.** This is one of the most emotionally laden categories, as viewers have many opinions and feelings about their favourite characters: "Seiya is the most boring character for such a good series. I much rather preferred the others: Hyôga with his nostalgic loneliness, Shiryû with his deep relation with his master, Shun trying to get out of the shadow of his brother..." (*Saint Seiya*). They are interested in depth, contradictions and paradoxes, for example about *Ranma 1/2*: "Akane showed how she wasn't a stereotypical tomboy. She liked to fight but she also wanted to be treated with consideration and delicacy. Her parents had arranged a marriage for her, she was against but in the end she liked him."
6. **Incomprehensible.** Quite a number of comments are about how "I didn't understand a thing" about particular series or plot developments. Usually this is linked to an increased fascination with the unknown.
7. **Values.** The viewers identify the moral values present in the works, and they elaborate on what kind of feelings they elicited, usually reflecting on how they relate to the viewer's own worldview. Topics like friendship, harmony, family values, self-conquest, etc.: "I still remember how someone that was so powerful could also be kind and forgiving" (*Dragon Ball*)
8. **Liminal.** There are also a good number of recollections about situations where the viewers change status, for example growing up from childhood into adolescence, or adolescence into adulthood, moments where something is finally understood, for instance sexual innuendos. "I was conscious that the series didn't treat us as stupid kids" (*Digimon*, 1999, *Dejimon*).¹⁹ "*Ranma 1/2* was exciting and sexy, I wasn't sure why, but it sort of awoke something".

¹⁷ *Ranma Nibun no ichi*, dir. Mochizuki Tomomi et.al. (1989-1992); broadcast in Spain as *Ranma 1/2*.

¹⁸ *Dashu Kappei*, dir. Hayashi Mayasuki & Hara Seitarô (1981-1982); broadcast in Spain as *Chicho Terremoto*.

¹⁹ *Dejimon*, dir. Kakudo Hiroyuki (1999-2000); broadcast in Spain as *Digimon*.

9. **Transmedia.** Many mention engagement with the fictional world in other formats, such as videogames, trading cards, figurines... This includes also the derivative products made by the viewers themselves, a sort of private fan art, such as drawings or games. "I love the fantastic universe of *Pokemon* and to live in it through videogames."
10. **Localization.** Our informants commented upon how the series were translated to the various languages of Spain, where the informants remember particular turns of phrase and in general admire the translators' work. "I will always remember *Crayon Shin-Chan's* (1992, *Kureyon Shin-chan*)²⁰ fantastic translation into Galician". Some still remember the "ridiculous dialogues", for example, in *Saint Seiya*: "we will tie you up like a sideral sausage". Others couldn't access the programs in their regional languages, and were ready to take up another language just to follow them: "I had to see *Dragon Ball* in Euskera, because they didn't buy it in Cantabria TV" (so he didn't understand it, but watched anyway).
11. **Aesthetics.** Spectators were struck by the beauty of the visual art, the characters, or the music. They elaborate upon other aesthetic considerations, related to the themes of the series, such as the stylized violence of *Dragon Ball* or *Saint Seiya's* combats. "I loved the music, the transformations and the super romantic vision of Tokyo that the backgrounds depict" (*Sailor Moon*). *Neon Genesis Evangelion* "has the most beautiful opening scene in the world (except for *Cowboy Bebop*, 1998, *Kaubôï Bibappul*,²¹ of course)"
12. **Love.** Some of the informants, both men and women, admit to having fallen in love with certain characters. "The first boy I ever loved was Inuyasha". "I was just so attracted to Mark Lenders, and suffered for Benji's heart" (*Captain Tsubasa*). "Andromeda, love love love him! And everybody bullied him because his armor was pink!" (*Saint Seiya*), "I was in love with the girls of *Sailor Moon*."
13. **Gender.** There are plenty of comments about some anime series being either "for girls", "chauvinistic", or ambiguous about gender. "It was difficult to identify with something so girly, but I saw the whole three series and even bought the manga" (*Sailor Moon*). "I was allergic to *Candy Candy's* (1976, *Kyandi Kyandi*)²² ideal of femininity already as a child". *Crayon Shin-chan*: "the white panties, oh my god!" "I hated how women were objects in *Dragon Ball*". "I was really confused by the androgynous characters in *Saint Seiya*."

²⁰ *Kureyon Shin-chan*, dir. Hongo Mitsuru, Hara Keiichi & Muto Yuji (1992-now); broadcast in Spain as *Shinchan*.

²¹ *Kaubôï Bibappu*, dir. Watanabe Shinichiro (1998-1999); broadcast in Spain as *Cowboy Bebop*.

²² *Kyandi Kyandi*, dir. Shidara Hiroshi (1976-1979); broadcast in Spain as *Candy Candy*.

Although these codes refer to the encounter of a child with different fantastic worlds, they are mostly focused on what we could call learning experiences. In this way, our idea of examining these codes through the lens of Nina Mikkelsen's eight literacies introduced above proved itself useful. In fact, there is a striking correspondence between her literacies and our own codes, which we can map across each other: generation (critical), complexity (generative, literary), dreams (narrative, personal), humour (aesthetic, sociocultural), characters (personal, sociocultural), incomprehensible (generative, literary), values (sociocultural), liminal (personal), transmedia (literary), localization (sociocultural), aesthetic (aesthetic), love (personal) and gender (sociocultural, critical). If we think of these literacies as actively constituted, we can see that maybe the encounter with the anime worlds was so memorable because a lot of these literacies were still in the making. For Mikkelsen, children's preference for fantasy universes can be explained because this kind of fictions have a lot of gaps that can be filled using their own fantasy. Gaps here does not only refer to fantastic plots, but also to the many unexplained elements connected to the real world. It also becomes obvious that life and art are interwoven with each other, making for a very active reception experience.

Interestingly, the adult informants acts as sort of mediator, looking back at a far away time and trying to make sense of it. A sort of explanative modality arises in many of the stories we collected, also with a time dimension allowing for the adult reflection to become part of the memory: "I now think that is because...", "probably I was feeling...", "I then realized", "I don't really get why I..." But how to dig deeper in the reflective quality of the memory making? In a double-themed discussion, we will explain and interpret these findings articulating them around the two axes of childhood fascination and adult nostalgia proposed at the onset of the paper.

Identity formation: from amazed to critical

A very strong theme across all the proposed codes was the fascination that our spectators report having felt when confronted with different aspects of the anime. In fact, their memories seem to point at similar experiences of a life phase that is equally constitutive for most people, in accordance with Mikkelsen observation about childhood being the period where we are open for configurations. This fascination is very intense in relation to their earliest memories, and then stands in strong contrast to later memories, where respondents realize how bad the shows really were.

A good illustration of the amazement phase is the identity work that our spectators perform in relation to gender. As already noted, there is in our corpus of anime series a strong overrepresentation of shōnen works, due to the preference of the tv stations for this genre. In a way, shōnen becomes the standard, and all else a deviation. Therefore, the comments to the series of *Sailor Moon* and *Candy Candy* are full of reflections about them being excessively "girly", by our male informants. Some of them mention shame and guilt

about being engaged with them: "It was supposed to be for girls but we all liked it, even though some boys wouldn't admit to it because of the shame. But I loved it!" Shôjo becomes thus a monster that requires some soul searching by our informants on how it was possible to relate to it as a male. At this point, they might not be exactly sure of how they are supposed to perform their gender, but they can feel that these animes challenge the usual assumptions. By contrast, our female informants report feeling empowered by shônen productions like *Mazinger Z*, or wanting to play football with *Captain Tsubasa*. In relation to the shôjo works, it is only women who report a special kind of pleasure in the "negative emotions" of sadness when for example *Candy Candy's* beloved tragically dies. They bond with their girlfriends over "fantastic bouts of crying" still fondly remembered today, and are identified as constitutive of what it means to be a girl, and a friend. Heartbreak was accepted as a part of anime, even as something that added to their appeal by adding "complexity". The idea of "suffering for love" was socially coded as feminine at the moment in a wider sense. In any case, boys didn't report to get any enjoyment out of this kind of catharsis. Finally, both boys and girls report feelings of love and sexual attraction directed towards fictional characters, mostly of the opposite sex. However, the androgynous protagonists of some of the series have also made the spectators confused as to their own sexuality, since they were attracted to someone they were not supposed to. In this way, the old animes act as gender laboratories perhaps ahead of their time.

It is interesting that many of our respondents also can report the moment when their initial amazement was lost. In her work about film adaptation of children's books, Sarah Annunziato identifies the age of 9 as a decisive moment in the development of a media conscience. At that age, children are already "able to view characters as unconscious analogues of their own lives. As children pass into adolescence, they acquire the ability to understand and begin interpreting a text's deeper meaning." (Annunziato, 2013: 264) Some of our informants are aware of the moment in which their favourite series lost their appeal. Specific titles become attached to awakenings of various kinds, for example sexual, as with *Ranma 1/2* and *Saint Seiya*, or aesthetic, in relation to *Neon Genesis Evangelion* and *Cowboy Bebop*, which are both identified as products that are worthy of being revisited, even though most admit they didn't really understand them on first viewing.

Many of our informants have written about the moment where their notions of taste and aesthetic judgement develop in relation to anime. They criticise unbelievable plot twists, slow pace, repetitive characterization or sexist ideas. For example in the case of *Crayon Shin-chan*, whose coarse jokes they enjoyed as young children, but which they later "know are wrong". The previously beloved shows are left behind as "childish things". Moreover, we perceive, in certain informants, an anxiety to demonstrate that their taste has become sophisticated.

Appropriation and nostalgia

We started this article referring to Boym and her definition of nostalgia as a lost country. In order to fully understand the attachment that our respondents feel for these products of their childhood, it is relevant to first consider how they made anime to their own country. Besides the interior processes described in the previous section, there was also a cultural appropriation where anime became Spanish, a part of the social reality of their mundane lives. Japanese products are globally distributed, but their reception becomes very local, as our audiences demonstrate. Many did not even know that these products were made in Japan. Like the informant who says that *Dragon Ball* reminds her of the very dry summers in Spain because the main character "fights to find water for his people". Feixa & Nilan emphasize that young people are immersed in economical and political relations that are always situated, and their relationship to cultural practices is determined by their "habitus"; income, religion, language, class, gender, ethnicity" (Feixa & Nilan, 2009: 81).

One essential part of this localization is of course the language, as several of our informants have noted. The translation of the Japanese original into both Spanish and the other regional languages, Catalan, Euskera and Galician, gave a local flavour to the anime series that immediately made them closer to the viewers, nearly intimate. In Spain, minority languages have in the past had to fight for recognition against the prevalence of Spanish, so when the regional channels appeared at the beginning of the 80s, it was a political decision to broadcast content in the minority languages. This justified the investment required to dub children content like anime shows, and resulted in a paratextual net that brought different shows together due to the use of the same (limited) group of regional voice actors. Although not enjoying as massive popularity as Japanese seiyuu, regional voice actors were equally recognisable.²³

Other than the language, the Spanish narratives of watching anime include children that go to their grandmother house after school (a common practice in a country where working hours are not adapted to family life), eat a *bocadillo* (a baguette sandwich) in the afternoon and pretty much take possession of the television set in a more lenient atmosphere than they would have at their own parents house. Grandmothers don't censor a lot, some of them even sit with their grandkids and watch *Heidi*, *Girl of the Alps* or *3000 Leagues in Search of Mother*, handkerchief in hand, looking forward to a good cry. In fact, some of the informants compare the convoluted plots of certain anime series with the South American telenovelas (soap operas) that were the rage in Spain in those days. Also, the children's preferred schoolyard entertainment is roleplaying the anime series, where they get to incarnate their favourite roles and replay the important plot points again and again. The worlds of anime fiction become playgrounds that enable a collective performance, a

²³ For instance, actress Maria Moscardó could be heard in *Dragon Ball*, *Conan*, *the Boy in Future*, *Urusei Yatsura*, *Ranma 1/2*, *Crayon Shin-chan*, *Saint Seiya* and *Neon Genesis Evangelion*.

ritual that has to be carried out daily. A lot of the vignettes written by our informants are filled with sights, sounds and smells, all elements of pleasure that are attached to a particular anime series. That is, nostalgia is always embodied, and the remembered situations awaken the child's body that still lives within the adult of today.

For most, being asked about their childhood viewing of anime was a pleasant surprise, as they have long ago moved away from that world of fantasy and into more grown-up tastes. In this sense, they don't fit the negative image of nostalgic fans that Lizardi described. As explained in the previous section, our subjects become very critical and can say things like "I realize it cannot bear a second viewing now", "I used to like it but now I can see how problematic its gender politics are". While this is probably a sign of maturity, both aesthetic and moral, we observed that it doesn't kill the joy that our interview subjects felt on their first viewing, as they still fondly remember their fascination and the "lost innocence".

In our research, nostalgia has also proven itself to have a collective dimension, as many of the subjects recall an entire generation fascinated by the same products. They report how even today, the mention of an old series, character name or iconic sentence will create a strong feeling of community, of belonging together, which is more difficult to attain in the fragmented media landscape of our time. Media nostalgia is the glue that holds friends and generations together.

Nevertheless, there is also an ambivalent discourse about anime series constituting a "guilty pleasure", where the nostalgic feeling becomes both a thrill and a stain. We can only speculate why this is. Maybe remembering these shows today makes the informants aware of the general "ugliness" of past times (with tropes seen as neutral there and now acknowledged as "wrong"), or just that their attitudes reflect general conceptions of "growing up", but one thing remains clear: their current aesthetic enjoyment of these productions is strongly linked to the remembrance of their original consumption and their personal history, even if they now would reject these shows as cultural products.

A note on method: can the children and adult voices be disentangled?

In the process of analyzing our empirical materials we found that the exercise of digging for memories of reception is inevitably accompanied by an adult "voiceover" that tries to understand the remembered child, to rationalize behaviours or to establish a distance with the innocent perceptions of the past. Thus, a double articulation of voices in each and same person is established: a fascinated child and an adult censor. Many of the received narratives reveal this dichotomy, which can be seen as a paradox, but also as a natural result of the recipients having "moved on". However, it is important to note that it is not the same kind of censoring voice that their own parents had when they saw the animes for the first time. Their parents were against "those new violent and ambiguous cartoons", in a common kind of moral panics reaction, while their own censoring voice is centered around media literacy,

as explained above. Their present-time adult self looks back and reflects about their own fascination with the anime series, trying to discern what was it that was so interesting. As some of the examples above have shown, some "hidden meanings" emerge only *a posteriori*, as the adult selves reflect over the plots of the series or the aesthetic qualities they were not aware of in their first viewing. It is here we get the judgements of value like "I think the plots are ridiculous", "the football matches went so slowly that it is a pain to watch it", the series inspires me both "nostalgia and tedium". The dichotomy is already apparent in the language, they are ridiculous now, but they weren't then; they feel nostalgia for the kid they were, even though they would think the anime boring now. In the same sentence, informants can effusively display enthusiasm about how cool some superpower is, only to quickly add that the whole thing is of course, preposterous. The adult selves don't have the "clean gaze" anymore, so they become more critical. In relation to Mikkelsen's literacies, we could say that the adult viewers are not willing to let their life and the artworks be entangled in quite the same way. Once the different literacies have been established, they seem to lose their permeability and acquire a more rigid set of walls. This point is, we think, crucial to understanding how the same kind of aesthetic appreciation can, in childhood, inspire wonder and reflection, while it doesn't move the adult at all. Nostalgia, is, however, very much alive.

Conclusion: the "anime dream gaze"

As it hopefully has become clear after our analysis and discussion, a big part of the fascination of these three generations with the anime series is due to the mystery that surrounded them, both at the semantic level but also in terms of the unknown context. There are elements in our results that link these shows to a reality the participants could grasp as kids (characters, humour, localization) but there is also an appreciation for the weirder or more unknown elements, which were not only taken at face value but celebrated. The adult's censoring voice, also, seems to be trying to rationalize this appreciation through moral and aesthetic acquired tastes, as well as their current knowledge and opinion of Japanese media products (which was zero at the time of reception). When viewing anime in their childhood, the participants found it strange and natural at the same time, a space of their own where they could reflect on values, love, gendering, and aesthetics.

The transnational character of anime, based on the idea of "mukokuseki" or "without nationality" (Iwabuchi, 2002: 28), offers an explanation for this familiarity with the different. The (relatively) complex worlds, characters and narratives of anime provided these participants with aspirational models and rewarding hermeneutic exercises. Through these, they seemed to have found escapes (or, at least, complementary alternatives) from the adult rationales and closed logic systems they were just starting to comprehend. For children, the lack of understanding stimulates the imagination in powerful ways, and the impressionistic

force of the new aesthetics became forever imprinted in their minds, in agreement with Götz's view on media as images to feed identity work.

Anime produced, by happenstance, what we can call a specific "anime dream gaze" that helped form their habits, cultural references and social interactions, and that is fondly remembered today, in a somehow critical and aesthetically detached, but even more dreamlike manner. In this regard, early mainstream decentralized reception is revealed as a valuable moment in intercultural histories, not only of interest for the students of the media industry or subcultures, but for a general public that looks back on its own histories of reception. It is important to insist on the fact that, for our participants, anime was not attached to an idea of Japaneseness, their attachment is strictly limited to their personal contexts of reception in the Spain of their past, and the pleasures of remembering themselves watching the shows for the first time. That is, the transmedial and paratextual networks of these texts are irrelevant for their appreciation. Our subjects recognise different types of impact these shows had in their childhood, but for most, they are a sort of skin to be shed, and not a path to be walked when they start their adult life. But maybe that is exactly the point, for nostalgia is only activated when the land of the past has been lost. The anime dream gaze is a warm (fuzzy) anchor that keeps people grounded.

Dedication

This article is dedicated to Martin Barker, who helped us see this through.

Biographical Note

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Appendix: Prompt images divided after generation

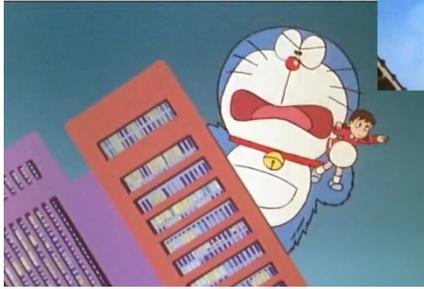


1970s-80s



1980s-90s





1990s-00s

