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# Beyond Subcultural Community: A Sociological Analysis of Japanese Animation Fans and Fandoms

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Beyond Subcultural Community: A Sociological Analysis of Japanese Animation Fans and  
Fandoms

by

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## **Abstract**

The study of media fandom has emphasized the subcultural nature of fans' practices and relationships. The work of Henry Jenkins (2013) was especially influential in this regard. Proposing that media fans constituted both a subculture and an interpretive community, Jenkins reified fandoms as bounded, subcultural groups composed of nomadic readers. The current dissertation constitutes a powerful critique of this traditional approach to the study of media fandom. Through ethnographic research on Japanese animation fans in Mexico and Canada and a theoretical framework informed by the oeuvre of Pierre Bourdieu, I propose that Japanese animation fandom is not a bounded group, but rather a field of consumption, that is, a space of consumer positions articulated around particular tastes relating to Japanese animation and its associated texts and characters. While some of these positions correspond to local and trans-local communities, individual media consumers occupy others. From this perspective, in a similar manner to Bourdieu's "field of cultural production", Japanese animation fandom is much more complex and fluid than implied by the fandom-as-community paradigm. To approach this complexity, this dissertation explores knowledges, practices, localities and objects that are appropriated and deployed by Japanese animation fans in order to be closer to their favorite narratives and characters. In doing so, fans' tastes and consumption practices become the core of a new approach to the study of media fandom.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

*It is a rainy morning at the University of British Columbia. Despite the fact that the FIFA football World Cup is taking place at the same time, none of the Japanese animation<sup>1</sup> fans walking around the vendors' hall of Northwest Fanfest 2014, an anime convention, seem to care about this very popular sporting event. Instead, they seem to be enjoying their own fandom, centered as it is in Japanese animation and related media and merchandise. The vendors' hall is located in the student union building and is constituted by small booths that sell Japanese animation, related merchandise and even objects from other fandoms. Especially notorious among the fans walking through the booths are the cosplayers, individuals that dress as their favorite anime characters. There are many of them looking at the products on sale and others are just talking with each other.*

*In the walkway that separates a large stall that sells sword replicas and two smaller booths, one that has on display figurines of female anime and videogame characters and another one that offers "kawaii"<sup>2</sup> Japanese products such as bags, keychains and coin purses, there are two young women dressed as Haruhi and Mikuru, two characters from the popular anime *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya*. They appear to be in their early twenties and are still getting their costumes, bunny suits that these characters wear in the original narrative, ready for the convention. Once these costumes are almost finished, these anime fans begin to look at the booth named "Kawaii Boku", the place in which the kawaii Japanese products are on display. After looking for a little while, they do not buy anything and simply leave to continue working on their costumes.*

*A little farther away from the booths than before, these white young women are then approached by other fans that want to take their picture. The young women pose for the cameras and while being photographed, a male cosplayer dressed as Jesus also approaches them and asks for a picture. After he gets a photograph of the female cosplayers, this white male fan remains talking with them. He appears to be in his early thirties and after chatting a while with the cosplayers dressed as Haruhi and Mikuru, begins to take many pictures of them. It is almost as if these fans are taking part in a photoshoot as the young women perform different poses for the Jesus cosplayer and he changes the angles of the camera as if photographing models.*

*A young man approaches the photoshoot and also takes pictures of the female cosplayers, then more fans with cameras do the same. Eventually, the cosplayer dressed as Jesus begins to*



*pose with the cosplayers dressed as Haruhi and Mikuru for the young man that approached their photoshoot. At the side of the surreal image of Jesus posing with two anime characters, the vendor of the booth that is selling sword replicas, a white bearded man in his late twenties, shows his weapons to a couple of persons that are close to his stall. He talks to them solemnly, in what seems to be an explanation of the qualities of the replicas that were the result of his craftsmanship as a blacksmith.*

This brief vignette of a Japanese animation convention illustrates the complex world of fans as it has emerged from the consumption of certain popular texts. In the particular case of anime fans, this world is based upon the numerous interactions that an active audience establishes with Japanese animation and its related media and goods. In contrast to the fans described by Henry Jenkins (2013), these interactions are not limited to the creative appropriation of texts but, as can be appreciated in the vignette above, are also characterized by practices of consumption and economic exchange. In this sense, the world of anime fans is not disjointed from consumer culture but in fact, constitutes part of this social field centered on consumption. The gendered practices mobilized by the cosplayers in the excerpt above attest to the deep relationship that fans have with this mundane space of consumption. While female cosplayers are photographed, male fans are the ones taking pictures. Again in contrast to Jenkins (2013), the “weekend-only world” of fans is not a refusal of the values and relationships of consumer culture but instead constitutes, much like popular culture as depicted by Hall (1982), neither complete resistance nor absolute subjugation. It is in this sense that the objective of my dissertation is to explore the ways in which Japanese animation fans mobilize consumption and production to create a cultural space that neither refuses nor completely accepts the values and relationships that constitute mundane society.

### **Towards a Fluid Depiction of Fandom**

As a popular form of entertainment, anime and closely-related media products such as manga and Japanese videogames have captured the imagination of a multitude of individuals around the globe. It is important to remember, however, that these and other media products’ popularity is a function of the actions of individual producers and consumers of media. According to Susan Napier, “anime and manga and the fan culture that they engendered have had the most penetrating impact on a global cultural scale” (2007: 125). While true in a sense, this claim reifies anime and manga as media that exist independently from human agency, obscuring the fact that the impact of these

media in the contemporary cultural milieu is a result of the actions of producers, consumers and many others. The fan culture associated with anime and manga has been created through the labor of many enthusiasts. It did not emerge naturally from anime and manga. It is a complex social movement structured by a web of interactions, institutions and cultural practices. In his seminal book, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, Henry Jenkins (2013) refers to this and other fan cultures as “fandoms”, that is, groups of fans of a particular media product. According to him, fandoms possess particular cultural preferences and styles of consumption. From this perspective, they can be seen as identifiable subcultures. Pursuing this argument, Jenkins presents an image of fans as a unitary community with a high degree of consensus.

The following chapters contest the idea of fans as a unitary community where consensus and understanding are the norm. As Matt Hills (2002) asserts, Jenkins’ academic agenda, which sought to break with negative stereotypes associated with the figure of the fan, paired with his allegiance to the academic tradition of cultural studies, resulted in a polemic depiction of fandom as a utopian community of intellectuals and artists. Lost in his arguments was “a sense of fandom’s competitive, argumentative and factional possibilities” (Hills, 2002: 1). Also missing from his account is the power of fascination that media texts often exert over fans. Just as Napier’s quote above gives too much power to Japanese media products, Jenkins attaches too much independence to fan cultures vis-à-vis media texts, going as far as claiming that “fans tend to focus their social and cultural activity around programs with the potential of being accepted by sizeable numbers of other fans” (Jenkins, 2013: 91).

Jenkins does not ask why these programs attracted a large number of fans in the first place. Following Michel de Certeau’s (2007) idea of “nomadic readers”, Jenkins proposes that fans constantly move towards new texts, creating new meanings in the process. For him, media fan culture “may be understood not in terms of an exclusive interest in any one series or genre; rather, media fans take pleasure in making intertextual connection across a broad range of media texts.” (Jenkins, 2013: 36). While my own research with fans of Japanese animation suggests that some fans belong indeed to a number of different fandoms, this situation does not result in a sort of pan-media fan culture where every or even most fans move freely among media texts. Some of my interviewees stated that they liked only anime, or that they preferred to watch stories within the fantasy genre. Some fans were even critical of certain fandoms.

Just as fans are on occasion nomadic readers, they are at other times “settlers” that defend the media texts they love with passion. Jenkins’ effort to break with the stereotype of the fan obsessed with certain media texts has the unfortunate side effect of also doing away with an important aspect of the fan experience: “Fandom has been curiously emptied of the dimensions which, I would suggest, most clearly define it: dimensions of affect, attachment, and even passion” (Hills, 2002: 65). Fans can be very attached to particular media texts. The visceral reactions to the *Ghostbusters* (2016) remake or to *The Last Jedi* (2017) shed light on the fact that often times fans are not cultural nomads who appropriate a broad range of texts from the dominant culture (Jenkins, 2013) but cultists who zealously defend inspirational texts (Hills, 2002).

Although this idea of fan cultures as cult fandom advanced by Hills (2002) recovers the dimensions of affective play and emotional attachment that characterize the relation between fans and their preferred texts, it does not properly address fandom’s factional possibilities or its internal complexity. Despite his critique of Jenkins, Hills still presents cult fandoms as unitary groups of individuals, attached to particular texts because within their individual biographies, these cultural products have functioned as proper transitional objects, in the sense of D. W. Winnicott (Hills, 2002). Also, just as Jenkins, Hills takes fans out of the stream of everyday life. He presents the cult fan as a more or less stable identity: “To claim the identity of a ‘fan’ remains, in some sense, to claim an ‘improper’ identity, a cultural identity based on one’s commitment to something as seemingly unimportant and ‘trivial’ as a film or TV series” (Hills, 2002: xii). Fan identity becomes a unitary cultural identity that is more or less disjointed from other personal identifications. The complex labor of becoming and being a fan is reduced in this way to claiming an identity and joining an interpretive community that draws on discourses of religiosity and aesthetics (Hills, 2002). Reducing individuals with fannish interests to cultists is no better than reducing them to intellectuals.

Even whilst he criticizes decisionist approaches within social sciences that police fan cultures, Hills (2002) takes fan identity and fan cultures for granted, in a similar way to Jenkins (2013). For both authors, fans and fandom are an empirical reality which exists outside of academic discourse. Fans have been either properly depicted or misrepresented by academics but they are still ascribed a stable social identity. Fandom is an interpretive community with particular practices and discourses. This conceptualization of subcultural members and subcultural communities as clearly bounded entities is one of the more extended criticisms directed toward the work on

subcultures of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (Weinzierl & Muggleton, 2003). Using the lens of Cultural Studies, fans and fandoms have been reified as a bounded group, a “subculture”: “The battle to place fandom on the cultural studies agenda has long been won. In this sense Henry Jenkins’s ‘tactical’ portrayal of fandom in *Textual Poachers* has been eminently successful, but in its wake it leaves new battles and questions, which focus on the roles of ‘rationality’ and ‘religiosity’ in both fan and academic activities” (Hills, 2002: 183).

The new battles, I would argue, are not to question the roles of rationality or religiosity within fan cultures but to question the construction of fandom as a bounded social group and of fans as bearers of a reified collective identity. If fandom has become part of the cultural studies agenda, it has to be criticized with the same rigour as other depictions of subcultures. The essentialist approach used by both Jenkins and Hills has to give way to a more fluid and permeable understanding of both fans and fandom. The following chapters address this “flight from fixity” in cultural studies (Weinzierl and Muggleton, 2003) through the study of a group of fans and the field of consumption that they have created, that is, Japanese animation fandom. I intend to move away from monolithic theorizations of fandom as an interpretive community and illustrate the fact that the unifying principles of this field are not the nomadic practices and textual poaching of some of its members nor the media texts themselves. Instead, I propose that members of anime fandom are connected by practices of appropriation of a particular class of texts and objects, Japanese animation and its related cultural products, which in turn have generated a sense of belonging centered on narratives, characters, knowledges, spaces and objects.

### **Taste, Distinction and Consumption**

The work of Pierre Bourdieu guides this conceptualization of anime fandom and constitutes the theoretical core of this dissertation. In particular, I follow his notion of field of consumption, as introduced in *Distinction* (1984). While he understands this field as a site where different classes and class fractions struggle for the control of material and consumer goods, I have employed his later work regarding the concept of field, as it appears for example in *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993) to incorporate to the field of consumption other types of social dispositions<sup>3</sup>. Indeed, as I will illustrate in this work, other factors such as gender and age play an important role within the field of consumption associated with Japanese animation.

As Bourdieu explains, the field is not constituted directly by class dispositions but instead is a space that includes all the available positions, a space of possibilities defined by the relationship between the different positions that constitute the field at any given point in time. These positions are activated and mobilized only by the subjective schemes of perception and appreciation of those entering the field. It is precisely these schemes that act as mediators between positions and the dispositions of the agents. As such, neither the former nor the latter are the exclusive determinants of the social trajectories that agents take within the field. The same dispositions can result, at different moments within the field, in distinct and even contrasting position-takings, practical and symbolic manifestations enacted by the social agents involved in the field (Bourdieu, 1993).

As I hope to prove in this dissertation, conceptualizing the field of consumption in a manner similar to the field of cultural production can renew the insights regarding the social generation of taste that *Distinction* introduced almost forty years ago. In order to bring forward this renewed conceptualization of the field of consumption, I propose to use the notion of “taste culture” as it was created by Sarah Thornton through an initial incorporation of Bourdieu’s ideas into subcultural studies. Useful as it is to understand the important place that taste and cultural capital play within subcultural formations, I would argue that it requires a reworking in order to be better aligned with Bourdieu’s work. In particular, her conclusion that “[c]ommunications media create subcultures in the process of naming them and draw boundaries around them in the act of describing them” (Thornton, 1996: 162) follows labelling theory much more closely than Bourdieu’s notions regarding taste and distinction. Lost in her analysis of club cultures are the practices that create this type of youth formation. The complex field of practical positions in which clubbers enact their life-style is reduced to having or not the right type of cultural knowledge, termed by Thornton “subcultural capital”.

For Bourdieu, taste is not cultural but practical knowledge, a generator of practices that taken together, constitute a life-style. Taste is based on the conditions of existence of an individual and can be understood as “the propensity and capacity to appropriate (materially or symbolically) a given class of classified, classifying objects or practices” (Bourdieu, 1984: 169). From this perspective, it becomes possible to move away from a definition of taste culture that stresses exclusively its associated knowledge, meanings and values, that is, its subcultural capital and incorporates the centrality that the appropriation of objects and practices has for its members. Taste

culture becomes in this way, not “a world of meanings and values” (Thornton, 1996: 4) but a world of consumption where its members mobilize productive practices of appropriation.

In other words, taste cultures are created through a productive act: consumption understood as an appropriation of objects and practices guided by taste. This consumption in turn, takes place within a field of consumption, that is, a space of positions articulated by a distinctive taste. Applied to the topic of research, Japanese animation fans, this conceptualization opens the door to a more fluid understanding of these media consumers and their associated field of consumption. It also offers the possibility of reaching an alternative explanation regarding media than the one elaborated by Thornton. Instead of media labelling youth and thus creating the boundaries that define them as a taste culture, the focus can be on the ways in which agents participating in this type of grouping appropriate media and use them to create identifications and symbolic boundaries.

The appropriation of media texts is at the center of every fandom. Even the notion of “textual poaching” of Jenkins can be framed as a particular way of appropriating narratives, mobilized by some but not all fans. Indeed, as will be shown in the following chapters, the consumption of Japanese animation texts is the first and on occasions only, requisite for becoming an anime fan. A series of appropriations further construct and solidify membership into Japanese animation fandom and its associated taste cultures. The appropriation of characters, knowledge, spaces and objects consolidates a life-style articulated around anime.

### **From “Subcultures” to “Field of Consumption”**

This approach to anime fandom, grounded in the work of Bourdieu, advances understandings regarding media fandoms that challenge current approaches to the study of these taste cultures. Indeed, most research regarding fandom remains influenced by Jenkins (2013) and his depiction of media fandom as a “subculture”. Close (2016), for example, explores masculinities within the anime music video fandom through the conceptual framework developed in *Textual Poachers*. As a result, she conceptualizes anime music video fandom as a “subcultural group” and thinks of herself as an “aca-fan<sup>4</sup>”. This influence of Jenkins is also present among scholars researching other areas within Japanese animation. *Fandom Unbound: Otaku Culture in a Connected World*, the most comprehensive book published to date regarding anime fans, is deeply indebted to Jenkins’ theoretical framework. In chapter four, for example, Lawrence Eng (2012) describes himself as an

“aca-otaku” and Mizuko Ito (2012) talks about “fannish cultural logics” and “participatory engagement” with popular culture as the core of what he terms “otaku culture”.

This influence of Jenkins reaches also authors that do not quote him explicitly. In his paper about Brony<sup>5</sup> fandom, Miller (2018) describes this fandom as both a “fan community” and a “subculture”, even when Jenkins is not included in the references. This fact reveals that the reification of fandom as a community, first introduced in *Textual Poachers*, has become a taken-for-granted notion among those researching fans. The power of this reification is such that even authors that have adopted concepts inspired by the work of Bourdieu, remain trapped within the fandom-as-community paradigm. Schules (2014), for example, uses the notion of “subcultural capital” to analyze fansubs. While he can discuss in this manner the decentralized and in flux nature of these groupings of fans, he still refers to fandom as a community and addresses the “anime subculture”.

While presenting a more advanced use of Bourdieu, recent work by Hills (2015, 2017) refuses to leave behind his notion of “cult fandom” as a reified community that he calls at one point “cult subculture” (Hills, 2015). Paired with his use of Thornton’s classic notion of subcultural capital that he defines as “detailed fan knowledge” (Hills, 2017: 81), this conceptual framework leads Hills to remain rooted in the fandom-as-community paradigm. If at one point he challenges Thornton’s assumption of a singular community that clearly recognizes what counts as subcultural capital (Hills, 2015), he does not recognize the possibility that fandom can be something else than a community or that subcultural capital can include more than fan knowledge.

These questions are at the center of the present work. Challenging the fandom-as-community paradigm, this dissertation presents a very different understanding of fandom that sees in it a field of consumption. Under this novel paradigm, subcultural capital is not limited to knowledge but, articulated around narrative and character consumption, becomes a practical endeavour. As a powerful critique, grounded in the theoretical framework of Bourdieu, to existing approaches to the study of fandom, my work offers new avenues for the research of media fandom that do not reify this field of consumption either as a community or as a subculture. Integral to this approach is my ethnographic research on Japanese animation fans and their worlds.

To my knowledge, this dissertation presents the most comprehensive ethnography regarding anime fans to date. While the details of my ethnographic work will be discussed at depth in chapter three, the fact that it was conducted in Mexico and Canada and included visits to five

conventions in the first country and to four in the other, as well as twenty interviews with Mexican fans and twenty-one with Canadian fans, sets it apart from other ethnographies of its kind. Yamato's (2018) ethnographic research on anime fans in Malaysia, for example, included questionnaires and observations at four conventions and interviews with nine fans. Okabe and Ishida (2012) conducted fieldwork observations and twelve interviews with single women in Japan that were interested in yaoi<sup>6</sup>. Besides performing a qualitative media analysis, Williams and Xiang Xi Ho (2016) conducted participant observation in Korea and three weeks of field observations and ten interviews in Singapore as part of their research about K-pop fans.

The result of this extensive research is a nuanced and rich ethnography of the social world of anime fans that puts into question Jenkins' construction of fandom as a bounded community. Indeed, what my ethnographic work has emphasized is instead the flexibility of anime fandom and the need to understand it through theoretical lenses that account for its continually changing structure. Through the fans that I encountered in my fieldwork and those that talked to me during the interviews I discovered that my initial approach to anime fandom (Robles Bastida, 2011; 2012), close as it was to Jenkins (2013) was indeed misleading. In this sense, leaving behind the fandom-as-community paradigm, is first and foremost a result of my ethnographic research that was subsequently elaborated into a Bourdieu-inspired paradigm that has at its center the notion of field of consumption.

It is in this sense that this work proposes that anime fandom is a field of consumption that has been constituted by the consumption of Japanese animation, enacted by an always changing number of media consumers; while some of these consumers perform individualistic practices of consumption, others congregate to create local and trans-local taste cultures. These taste cultures center on particular cultural hierarchies of taste through which fan hierarchies are created. Essential to these cultural hierarchies of taste is the role of subcultural capital, understood as knowledge and practices that connect members of the taste culture and yield a profit in distinction.

Instead of being a community or a subculture, anime fandom can be understood as a field of consumption, that is, a space of possibilities in which media consumers advance their own understandings regarding anime, try to obtain distinction and appropriate legitimate practices, localities and objects of consumption. This field is guided by a particular taste, a propensity and capacity to appropriate Japanese animation and its related media and merchandise. There is nothing specifically subcultural about this field of consumption and there is no limit to the sub-



fandoms that can be created in its interior. Once a group of fans, or even an individual fan, construct a hierarchy of taste that does not have anime at its center but particular anime texts or characters, a sub-fandom begins to exist. “Anime is great” becomes in this way, “anime text 1 is great” or “character 1 is amazing”, a fact that often results in “anime text 2 is terrible” or “character 2 is the worst”.

Local and trans-local taste cultures emerge from anime taste, its cultural hierarchies and fandoms. Narrative and character consumption, the emotional appropriation of texts and characters, guide these taste cultures as they emerge from the love that fans have toward Japanese animation and its related media. Anime clubs and Japanese animation conventions emerge from the desire of fans to display their passion for anime and its associated narratives and characters. As Thornton (1996) explains, people tend to seek people with similar tastes and in doing so they create taste cultures. It is at the point where fans interact with other fans that fandom can become a subcultural formation. This is so because consumption leaves the sphere of private consumption and instead becomes the core of a being-together that facilitates the creation of subcultural capital. As knowledge and practices born in the interaction between fans, subcultural capital offers the possibility of gaining a profit in distinction that does not follow the cultural hierarchies of taste of conventional society.

In other words, it is through subcultural capital that taste cultures create their own hierarchies of taste and distinction. Japanese animation becomes in this way not just another media to be consumed but the center of alternative knowledges and practices that yield a profit in distinction to those that participate in the taste culture. While fandom is a space to appropriate certain texts and characters, local and trans-local taste cultures resignify these texts and characters to create hierarchies of taste that are not always aligned with those of mainstream society. In this context, a figurine of a given character can yield a profit in distinction that outsiders to the taste culture cannot grasp. In this sense, the analytical distinction between anime fandom and anime taste culture(s) has the objective of differentiating between the many actors that participate in the process of commoditization of Japanese animation and related media, texts and characters and the groupings of fans that not only appropriate anime but create in the process collective hierarchies of taste that yield to members a profit in distinction. While the former includes producers, vendors, individual consumers, sub-fandoms, scenes, et cetera, the latter corresponds to a local or trans-

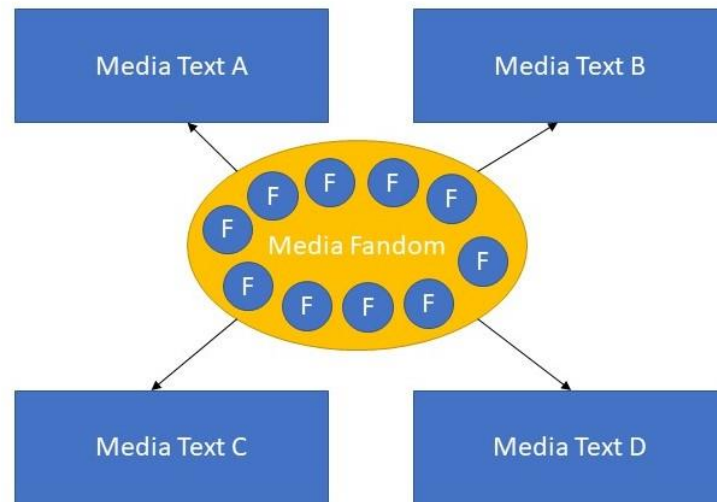
local congregation of fans that possess certain forms of subcultural capital that are continually mobilized as legitimate practices and discourses.

Taste cultures can be subcultural formations and communities. This, however, does not mean that taste cultures are free of conflict. Quite the contrary, these groupings are sites of symbolic struggle where fans confront each other to gain a profit in distinction or advance different cultural hierarchies of taste regarding Japanese animation. The anime convention is the place where this struggle becomes most evident. Within these local congregations of fans, the complex relationships between field of consumption, taste cultures and individual anime consumers can be grasped in a unique way. These spaces of consumption and play allow fans to mobilize subcultural capital, gain distinction and participate in the struggle for the cultural hierarchies of taste that legitimate certain aspects of anime fandom.

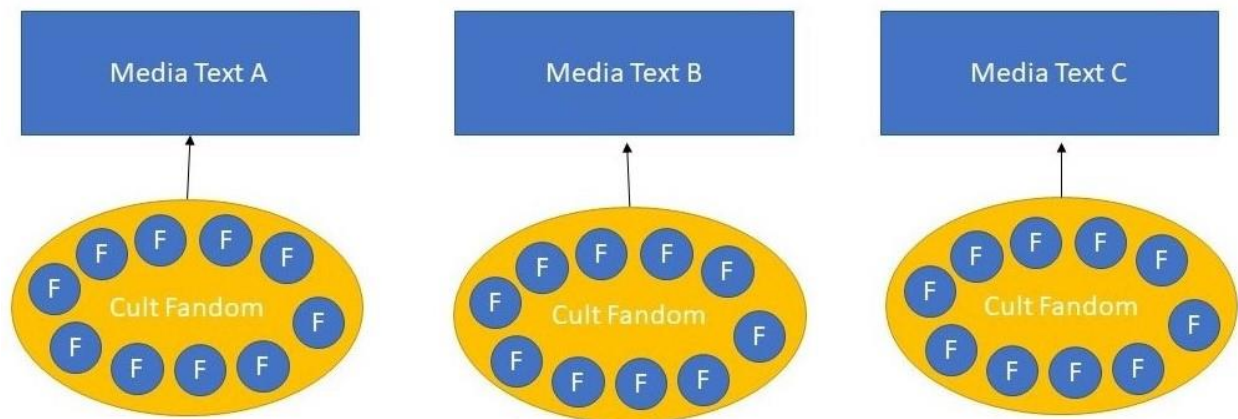
Because the consumption of goods is an integral part of anime fandom, merchants and subcultural entrepreneurs occupy central positions in these struggles for the definition of the cultural hierarchies of taste that constitute this field of consumption. The consumption of goods is so central because it helps fans mobilize collective identities and these goods work as a materialization of fan identities and emotional attachments. Becoming possessions, anime goods are powerful classifying objects that materialize the field of consumption centered on Japanese animation. Merchants and the goods they sell reveal the connections that this field has with consumer culture and the need to understand anime fandom as a space of possibles where taste cultures exist alongside groupings and individuals that subscribe to more traditional forms of consumption.

The core claims that emerge from the previous discussion and will be developed through this work have to do in first place with the inadequacy of current understandings of fandom as an interpretive community. I wish to advance instead a conceptualization of fandom that stresses the many individual consumers and groupings that exist inside this field of consumption. In particular, I will address those groups within anime fandom that possess subcultural qualities, that is, taste cultures. The challenge is to reconcile and integrate cultural studies and Bourdieu's work to create a more complex model of fans and fan cultures. In doing so, I intend to move away from previous conceptualization of fandom, mainly inspired in the work of Jenkins (2013) and Hills (2002). A diagrammatic presentation of the ideas discussed thus far can be represented as follow:

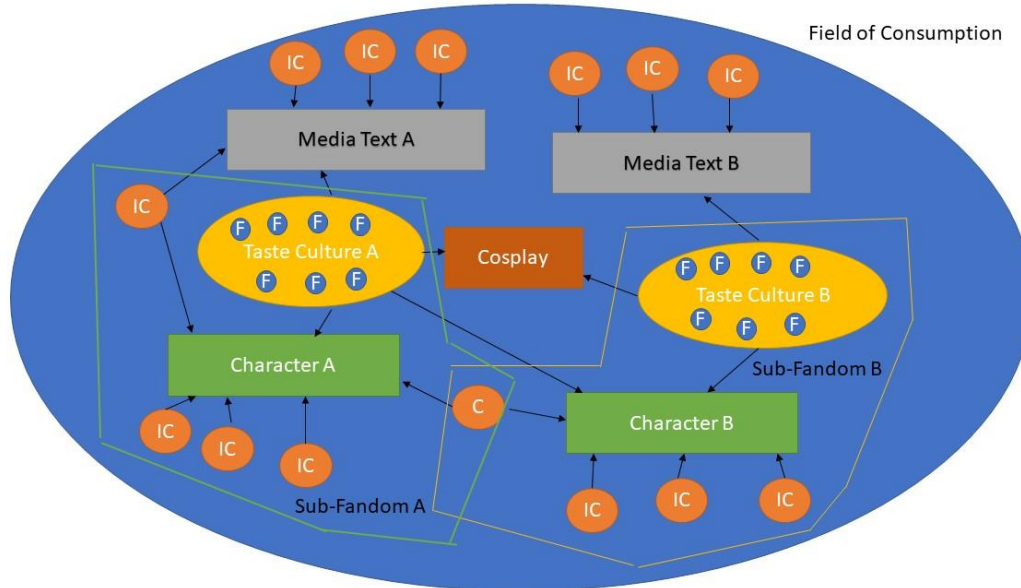
**Henry Jenkins (2013)**



**Matt Hills (2002)**



Nazario Robles Bastida (2018)



**Diagram 1. Fandom as presented by Jenkins (2013), Hills (2002) and Robles Bastida (2018). F means fan. IC means individual consumer of media.**

### The Study of Japanese Animation Fandom

Chapter two delves further into the notions discussed thus far. A discussion of subcultures, audiences and collective identifications leads to a more complete elaboration of the model used to analyze Japanese animation fandom as a field of consumption. First, this chapter explores key literature regarding youth and subcultural formations. This exploration leads to the reasons why the notion “taste culture” was chosen instead of other current concepts related to subcultural theory. After this, the chapter discusses audiences from the lenses of cultural studies. The study of media audiences within this school of thought remains close to subcultural theory as elaborated by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Indeed, as this chapter explains, both the notion of the resistive subculture and of the active audience can be traced back to the pioneering work of Stuart Hall. Linking both of them, as Jenkins does in *Textual Poachers*, brings fandom to the realm of subcultures in a way that makes analytical sense despite the limitations of conceptualizing fans as cultural nomads that poach narratives that originate in the mass media. As chapter two proposes, media audiences can be more fruitfully connected to subcultural theory through the notion of taste cultures. In order to perform this theoretical connection, the chapter employs the concept of field

as elaborated by Pierre Bourdieu. By framing fandom as a field, the dynamic nature of fan identities and of subcultural capital becomes clear.

Chapter three is a discussion of the methodology used to collect the data for this work. It proposes that ethnographic research is the most adequate method of gathering information regarding taste cultures and other subcultural movements. Because one of the characteristics of these groupings is the esoteric and specialized nature of their cultural capital (Thornton, 1996), researchers must immerse themselves within the subcultural community in order to properly understand the practices and narratives enacted by its members. Relying exclusively on interviews becomes problematic from this perspective, as this methodology falls easily into the “tell it like it is” approach to qualitative work, which neglects the fact that interviewees generally try to align with the interviewer and conceal their “back stage” narratives and practices. In the case of taste cultures, this means that subcultural members often try “to mitigate potentially negative views of them and their activities” (Anderson and Taylor, 2010: 55) when interacting with outsiders. Without field work, that in the case of anime fans requires attending Japanese animation conventions, many fan practices, including some controversial ones such as consumerism and the consumption of erotic narratives, would remain hidden.

Chapter four begins my empirical analysis of Japanese animation fans. It is proposed that the central practice that characterizes fans is not “textual poaching” but the appropriation of a particular set of narratives, a practice that I call, following the cultural critic Otsuka Eiji, “narrative consumption”. In the case of anime fans, this narrative consumption is directed towards Japanese animation and its related media such as manga and Japanese videogames. The chapter illustrates the fact that anime fans are attracted to anime itself as a result of its textual characteristics. They are not nomadic poachers that jump from text to text but consumers with a defined taste that often develop emotional attachments to the fictional worlds of certain anime series and the characters that inhabit them. Indeed, the emotional attachment to characters is so strong for some anime fans that it encourages a second form of textual appropriation that I call “character consumption”.

Inspired by the notion of “chara-moe” as conceptualized by Hiroki Azuma, character consumption opens the door to a more dynamic understanding of fans and fandom. As chapter four discusses, some fans appropriate characters whilst disregarding the anime texts from where they originate. Rivalry amongst fans of different characters of the same Japanese animation series is also not uncommon. Even more, a number of characters have become transmedia entities, having

transcended their original texts to be consumed in a multitude of narratives. Character consumption explains why anime fandom cannot be conceptualized either as an “interpretive community” or as a “media cult” (Hills, 2002). As a collection of media consumers and groupings that appropriate certain narratives and characters, it is better understood as a field of consumption, a space of positions born from similar tastes and from the affinities and knowledge generated by the appropriation of the same objects and practices.

Chapter five discusses Japanese animation fandom as a collection of taste cultures. Beginning in the notion of a “fan’s private sectarian world” of Umberto Eco (1990), this chapter illustrates how narrative consumption of anime is often not a solipsistic practice. Individuals that appropriate Japanese animation texts and characters tend to seek other fans with whom to share their love for these cultural products. As Thornton (1996) explains, joining others with similar tastes is the first step towards the creation of a taste culture. Crucial to the maintenance of this type of grouping is the subsequent generation of a knowledge that defines the subcultural world, its meanings and values. Thornton calls this knowledge subcultural capital and as the chapter explains, it has been incorporated into the study of anime fans through the work of Napier (2007).

The chapter goes on to expand the notion of subcultural capital in order to incorporate the historicity of this knowledge within Japanese animation fandom. It is proposed that this type of capital is not of a fixed nature. It changes as the hierarchies and expertise that characterize this field of consumption and its associated taste culture(s) also evolve. Old practices and discourses give way to new ones. Using Bourdieu’s ideas regarding the symbolic struggles over the representation of the social world, it is argued that Japanese animation fans constantly struggle with each other over the definition of practices, hierarchies and subcultural capital. This fact is illustrated by analyzing certain practices associated with anime fandom such as voice acting and fansubbing. What emerges from this discussion is the picture of an always changing fandom where media consumers that advance anime as a legitimate object of consumption oppose members of taste culture(s) associated with this field that have moved away from its Japanese roots to become a more generic fan culture centered around characters from both Japanese and Western texts.

Chapter six explores this somewhat blurred field of consumption through the analysis of its most important local happening, the Japanese animation convention. As an appropriation of public space where anime fans display their identifications and practices, anime conventions are places where the blurring of the symbolic boundaries of anime fandom can be clearly appreciated.

Beginning with a discussion of Japanese animation fandom as a knowledge community, the chapter explains how the changing and cumulative nature of subcultural capital has led to an emphasis in the practical and performative aspects of this type of knowledge. In a sense, expertise has become mastery, a fact especially clear within the confines of Japanese animation conventions where fans create a communal space through their fan practices. Being a fan is thus a practical achievement. In anime conventions, fans engage in subcultural practices that double as boundary and identity work. They create in this way a community constituted by processes of similarity and difference that finds at its center narrative and character consumption.

Chapter six argues that these symbolic boundaries are always contested and as a result, the texts and characters that fans appropriate vary from local taste culture to local taste culture. The chapter uses the case of yaoi, narratives centered on homosexual love among men, to exemplify this situation. While certain female fans consider it part of anime fandom, some male fans see this genre as an aberration that has no place inside this field of consumption. From this perspective, it becomes possible to understand fandom not as an “interpretive community” (Jenkins, 2013) but as a field of struggles where relatively distinct fan identifications and taste cultures compete for supremacy over the definition of Japanese animation fandom. As a result of this constant struggle, symbolic boundaries have shifted to the point where current anime conventions are open to members of fandoms that used to be considered clearly distinct from the local taste cultures associated with Japanese animation. Comic book fandoms, Western animation fandoms and videogame fandoms, to name a few, have been integrated into local anime conventions.

Chapter seven explores this change within the field of consumption articulated around Japanese animation from the perspective of material appropriation, that is, consumption of goods. It is proposed that the incorporation of narratives and characters that do not belong to anime texts is a result of the logic inherent to taste itself, as proposed by Bourdieu in *Distinction*. From this perspective, younger fans have integrated new texts into their narrative and character consumption because they want to maintain a profit in distinction that can no longer be found just within Japanese animation. Comic books, high fantasy or Korean music thus become appropriated as legitimated objects of consumption that can yield new forms of distinction. Instead of being nomadic readers, anime fans can be more usefully understood as nomadic consumers who often try to avoid the mainstream through the acquisition of a variety of texts and goods.

The chapter goes on to propose that the complexity of fan consumption, built as it is around taste and consumption, can be only apprehended through an analysis of the interrelations that connect the field of production of anime goods with anime fandom as a field of consumption. In order to properly grasp the politics of taste that structure anime fandom, it is necessary to explore the role that merchants and other subcultural entrepreneurs play in the production of the cultural hierarchies of taste that constitute the field of consumption associated with Japanese animation. The result of this analysis reveals a picture of a consumer culture rooted in the values of familiarity, community and personal exchange. The centrality of vendors within anime fandom constitutes a counterpoint for the unending search for distinction enacted by younger fans. In a way, subcultural entrepreneurs and the objects they sell are the glue that holds anime fandom together. Chapter seven moves to discuss this togetherness. It argues that cultural goods represent identifications and symbolic boundaries that fans use to manifest the position they occupy within anime fandom. Collective approval and individual desires for distinction and attachment motivate the acquisition of these goods. Consumption becomes in this way the production of a fan identity and the expression of collective identifications with a variety of fandoms and taste cultures that put value in anime and its related media and merchandise.

The following chapters thus are an invitation for thinking about consumption and taste within contemporary forms of consumer culture, mainly those centered on media texts and characters, as a fluid yet structured practical appropriation of classified and classifying objects and practices that are defined by the complex interrelations between the dispositions of individual agents and the many positions that constitute a field of consumption always in transformation.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Japanese animation is also known as anime.

<sup>2</sup> Kawaii refers to Japanese products that are considered “cute” and “little” by Japanese animation fans. Indeed, the word “kawaii” itself means cute in Japanese. Ivy defines kawaii as “a positive aesthetic descriptor of things pert, neat, appealing, attractive, and engaging but not heavy, glamorous, massive, or overwhelming. There is always a dimension of vulnerability, smallness, and – indeed – (feminized) childishness attending the kawaii (2010: 13)

<sup>3</sup> Discussing the field of cultural production, for example, Bourdieu (1993) explains how the same dispositions associated with a certain social origin can lead to very different political or aesthetic positions within this field, a fact motivated by the particular logic of the game, practices and *illusio* that define the structure of positions and of position-taking that constitute the field of cultural production as an autonomous and symbolic space.

<sup>4</sup> Jenkins introduced this term in *Textual Poachers*. It refers to an academic that is also a fan.

<sup>5</sup> Brony refers to male fans of the tv show *My Little Pony*.

<sup>6</sup> See below, page 16.



## Chapter 2: Redefining Subculture

### Introduction

In *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, Henry Jenkins defined media fandom as a “recognizable subculture” (2013: 1). This novel idea opened the door for new understandings that were not limited by the shortcomings of the notion of audience. No longer just a mode of reception of different media, fandom is instead portrayed in this book as an alternative social community capable not just of consumption but also of a type of production that Jenkins terms “textual poaching”. Within this analytical framework, fans are not exclusively “media consumers” (Beng Huat, 2008) but members of a resistive subculture that possess values opposed to those held by members of “mundane society” (Jenkins, 2013), a term closely related to classical notions used within subcultural studies such as “mainstream”, “parent culture” and “dominant culture”.

The echoes of what Weinzierl and Muggleton call “the ‘heroic’ CCCS model of subculture” (2003) are clear in Jenkins’ depiction of Fandom and fans. As these authors assert, the conceptualization of subcultures as resistive and politically rebellious has been thoroughly criticized. From its understandings regarding the bounded nature of both subcultures and the dominant culture to the belief in the incorporation and diffusion of the alternative community brought forward by the media and consumer culture, every notion related to the CCCS model of subculture has been shredded to pieces by its critics. Yet, I would argue that there is still value in the notion of subculture, or at least, in some of its elements. By the same coin, while Jenkins bought in too much in notions related to subcultural heroism, framing fans as participants within a subcultural formation offers analytical possibilities that far surpass theoretical frameworks that see in them only consumers and audience members. In what follows, I discuss and criticize the central notions of subcultural studies, as they were developed in the twentieth century, in order to formulate my own definition of media fandom as a subcultural formation.

### The Evolution of the Notion of Subculture

According to Andrew Tolson (1997), the foundations of the notion of “subculture” can be found in the work of Henry Mayhew, an English journalist from the nineteenth century. Conducting research on poverty in London, Mayhew identified the distinctive practices of some sections of

the metropolitan working class and described them in his book *London Labour and the London Poor*. This identification and classification of working-class ways of life, according to Dick Hebdige, “served to articulate and direct a growing moral impetus towards the education, reform, and civilization of the working class masses” (1983: 73). Understood in this way, the concept of subculture was in its origins a technique of knowledge through which the unruly masses were dissected, atomized and made socially visible through the construction of categories of knowledge (Tolson, 1997). It is this conceptualization of subculture as the deviant practices of different and differentiated working class groups and individuals that characterizes its incorporation and subsequent use in sociology during the early twentieth century (Bennett & Kahn-Harris, 2004).

The Chicago school is often regarded as the academic institution where the notion of subculture, understood as the deviant cultural norms of particular working-class individuals and communities, first emerged within the sociological field (Bennett & Kahn-Harris, 2004, Hebdige, 1983). If the working-class origin and subordinate status of those studied as other was concealed in Mayhew by the notion of “the poor”, Park and his colleagues at the University of Chicago unknowingly kept this process of othering directed towards the working class through a discourse centered on organic metaphors: “the metaphors of social pathology, urban disequilibrium, the breakdown of the organic balance of city life” (Hebdige, 1983: 77). Working class and bourgeois ways of life (Bourdieu, 1984) were subsumed in this way into notions of “deviant” and “conventional” society, a fact illustrated by the following passage of *The Life-Cycle of the Taxi-Dancer* by Paul G. Cressey:

Many girls, however, do not satisfactorily readjust themselves to conventional life. [...] [I]n this little isolated world of taxi-dance halls, the young woman may very soon come to accept without great resistance the standards of life and the activities of those with whom she is inevitably associated (Cressey, 1997: 29).

The contraposition of a “conventional life” with the world of taxi-dance halls and the fact that young women embrace the values and activities of those that populate the latter, function as an othering not only of working-class life but also of other marginalized groups such as women and racialized populations. This becomes evident once Cressey (1997) further elaborates his understandings about “conventional life”. For women this means only one thing: heteronormative

bourgeois marriage. The men with whom the taxi-dancer female associates in the taxi-dance hall are on the other hand, Chinese and Filipino immigrants and African-Americans, highly marginalized ethnic and working-class communities during the period described by Cressey, the first half of the twentieth century. As can be seen, the struggles of the dominated, be they women, ethnic groups or working-class communities, disappear in a sociological discourse that, through the use of functional notions such as “deviant” and “conventional”, ignores questions of power, inequality and exploitation in order to stress “behavior systems” (Hollingshead, 1970; Sutherland, 1970) that hide pernicious processes of othering.

The notion of “behavior systems”, elaborated by the criminologist E.H. Sutherland (1970), crystallized the conceptualization of “subcultures” developed through the empirical work of the Chicago school (Young & Atkinson, 2008). Described as an integrated system that included “the individual acts, the codes, traditions, esprit de corps, social relationships among the direct participants, and indirect participation of many other persons” (Sutherland, 1970: 10), the concept of “behavior system” offered clearly defined sociocultural categories such as “lower class culture” (Miller, 1970) and “inmate culture” (Irwin & Cressey, 1970). Writing within this conceptual explosion of “cultures” based on “behavior systems”, Gordon (1970) advanced the first proper definition of the term “sub-culture”. He suggested that a “sub-culture” was an integrated and functional “sub-division of a national culture” (Gordon, 1970:32).

Despite this definition of “sub-culture” as any integrated and recognizable sociocultural group within a larger society, research on “subcultures” remained centered on gangs, prison inmates and criminal and deviant behavior (Irwin, 1970; Irwin & Cressey, 1970; Miller, 1970; Wolfgang & Ferracuti, 1970; Yablonsky, 1970). From this perspective, research on “sub-cultures” remained a modern technique of social surveillance and subjectification (Hebdige, 1983; Tolson, 1997) through which, as Foucault suggested in relation to modern mechanisms of vigilance and punishment, the bourgeoisie judged, controlled and extinguished the political struggles and resistance of the working class (Foucault, 1979). Reducing working-class groupings to deviants and normalizing the bourgeoisie way of life was another form in which hegemonic discourses of class, race and gender were asserted and maintained.

The publication of a now classical work, however, began to challenge these hegemonic discourses and was able to create a shift in the understanding of the notion of “subculture” that would lead to its most prominent conceptualization. *Delinquent Boys: The Culture of the Gang* by

Albert K. Cohen brought to the fore a notion of social class (Young & Atkinson, 2008) that until then had remained obscured by structural-functionalist paradigms. Although still gravitating within these paradigms as the reference to “social system” and “problems of adjustment” attest (Cohen, 1997), the introduction of concepts such as “social hierarchy” and “class struggle” opened the way for a reformulation of the notion of “subculture”. From stressing the deviance of those outside conventional society, that is, of the unruly factions of the working class, “subculture” gradually become part of a theoretical framework that stressed and celebrated the resistance and insurrection of the working class vis-à-vis the dominant classes.

This theoretical shift was a long process that encompassed many important works which highlighted in one way or another the social mechanisms of power, inequality and exploitation implicated in the appearance of “subcultures”. *Outsiders* by Howard Becker (1963), for example, emphasizes how dominant groups enforce their rules on others, thus creating the deviance they claim to prevent. In a similar vein, *Stigma* by Erving Goffman (1963) underlines the processes through which those individuals and groups possessing discrediting attributes are marginalized within the interactional order, a situation that effectively reduces their life opportunities. Despite the importance of these and other works, such as those by Robert Merton, David Matza and Jock Young (Bennett & Kahn-Harris, 2004; Gelder & Thornton, 1997; Young & Atkinson, 2008), I focus my attention on work that took place around the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS). The research and theoretical contributions of its members were essential for reformulating the notion of “subculture”. Leaving behind its American roots in the study of criminality and deviance, this concept was reframed by the CCCS and became a key conceptual tool for the study of working-class youth, leisure, style and music.

Within the theoretical framework of the CCCS, the term “subculture” designates a resistive social formation composed of individuals that focus around certain activities and values that are significantly different from those of the “parent culture” (Hall & Jefferson, 1976). This resistive grouping is a “sub-culture” because despite being an alternative community vis-à-vis the dominant culture, the former is still connected to the latter through “the determining matrix of experiences and conditions which shape the life of their class as a whole (Clarke et al., 1976: 15). This connection, however, does not preclude the emergence of “sub-cultures” with clearly defined boundaries and distinctive activities, concerns and territorial spaces. This is especially the case for working-class subcultures which, according to the seminal work of the CCCS, *Resistance Through*

*Rituals*, constitute a counter-hegemony, that is, a resistive response of certain working-class youth to their class subordination. On the contrary, middle-class youth mainly congregate, according to the CCCS in “countercultures”, a much more diffuse grouping:

Working-class sub-cultures are clearly articulated, collective structures – often, ‘near-’ or ‘quasi’ –gangs. Middle-class counter-cultures are diffuse, less group-centred, more individualized. The latter precipitate, typically, not tight sub-cultures but a diffuse counter-culture milieu (Clarke et al., 1976: 60).

The intellectual debt owned by the members of the CCCS to early twentieth century American theorizations of subculture is clear in this quote. The notion of “sub-culture” is conceptualized as an aggrupation of working class youth characterized by an articulated and bounded “behavior system”. The notion of “counter-culture”, on the other hand, is defined as a fluid and much more individualized association of middle class youth. The relationship of these two concepts seems to be of a dialectical nature. “Counter-culture” is the mirror image of “sub-culture”. Not only middle-class, individualized and diffuse, it also is a true “emergent ruptural force for the whole society” (Clarke et al., 1976, 69). The working-class subculture, by contrast, can only offer to its members an imaginary solution for their problems “which at the concrete material level remain unresolved” (Clarke et al., 1976, 48).

While it could be said that both formulations remain immersed, via American theorizations of subculture, within distinctions between the “respectable” and “deviant” classes articulated by Mayhew and other social explorers of the nineteenth century (Hebdige, 1983), the incorporation of Antonio Gramsci’s notion of “hegemony” into the theoretical framework of the CCCS connects both concepts with notions of power, inequality and exploitation in such a way that their origin within a functional discourse is left behind in favor of a narrative of class struggle, resistance and protest. A technique of social surveillance became in this manner, the spearhead of a scientific and political project of emancipation, later to be known as cultural studies. Through the use of a critical framework influenced by the sociological imagination of Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser, among others (Hall, 1992), working-class subcultures and middle-class counterculture became central conceptual tools for the study of what the CCCS perceived as an antagonistic and differentiated “social whole” composed of a host of dominant and subordinate cultures.

*Subculture: The Meaning of Style* by Dick Hebdige (1979) further expanded the complexity of the reformulation of “sub-culture” and “counter-culture” proposed by the members of the CCCS by incorporating the work of Roland Barthes to the theoretical field of cultural studies. Connecting ideology and hegemony with the sign, this author performed a semiotic turn that proclaimed the centrality of meaning, textuality and representation. The spectacular working-class subculture and its style was presented in his work as an actual challenge to a hegemonic order understood as symbolic, “an actual mechanism of semantic disorder” (Hebdige, 1979: 90). Not just “magical” solutions to class contradictions (Cohen, 1997; Hall and Jefferson, 1976), working-class subcultures are conceptualized by Hebdige as possessing the power to disturb the naturalized obviousness of everyday practice. Because of this power to disrupt normalized society, subcultural formations have to be continually suppressed by what he terms “incorporation”, a process through which youth participating in spectacular working-class subcultures are returned “to the place where common sense would have them fit” (Hebdige, 1979: 94). Incorporation restores the symbolic, hegemonic order by incorporating subcultures to the dominant mythology. Transforming their subcultural signs into mass-produced commodities and redefining their behavior through hegemonic interpretations, dominant groups such as the media and the police defuse the subversive potential of working class subcultures, rendering them harmless.

This conceptualization of the notion of incorporation by Hebdige was influenced by the work of an author working outside the tradition of the CCCS, Stanley Cohen who, in his book *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers* (1972/2002), advances a transactional approach to deviance akin to Becker (1963) and labelling theory more generally. This author proposes that two working-class subcultures, Mods and Rockers, were in their origins hardly deviant or subversive vis-à-vis the hegemonic order. Their depiction in the media, driven by a “moral panic”<sup>7</sup>, transformed them into “folk devils”, that is, social scapegoats that were labelled with negative stereotypes and blamed for a varied array of social problems. As a result, Mods and Rockers emerged as a distinctive subcultural phenomenon, their deviance amplified by a societal reaction that constructed what it feared, their style solidified by media reports (Cohen, 2002).

Hebdige proposed an inversion of this account. For him, the grassroot emergence of working-class subcultures predated the moral crusade mobilized by the media against them. In his view, media hysteria takes place only after the subculture has acquired its own semiotic codes and

distinctive style. It is only then that the media can begin its “incorporation”, presenting subcultural members as Others, as enemies, as “folk devils” or on the contrary, in a further subversion of Cohen, as domesticated, as not so different, as trivial clowns. The first strategy excludes subcultural formations from the hegemonic order and can result in deviance amplification, just as Cohen (2002) proposes. The second one, on the other hand, defuses the subversive power of working-class subcultures by trivializing them and transforming their symbols into commodities. The moment that mass media proclaimed that “punk is chic”, for example, was the moment when this alternative formation received “the subcultural kiss of death” (Hebdige, 1979).

### **Beyond the notion of “subculture”**

The influential work of the CCCS eventually came under attack from a variety of social scientists that did not agree with the diverse conceptualizations of the center regarding subcultural formations. Two of the more powerful and extended criticisms to the work of the members of the CCCS address (1) their depiction of subcultures as clearly bounded communities that possess a unified “behavior system” which is always opposed to the ideological discourses of the dominant culture, and (2) the equation of working-class young males with subcultural resistance, a fact that ignores subcultural formations articulated around other subordinate groups, such as women or ethnic communities (Gelder and Thornton, 1997; Weinzierl and Muggleton, 2003; Bennett and Kahn-Harris, 2004; Young and Atkinson, 2008). As Hebdige himself recognizes (1983), both of these criticisms can be traced back to the original formulations of the Chicago school which in turn were based on “a variety of strategies for social intervention, in nineteenth-century practices of philanthropy, education and moral reform” (Tolson, 1997: 303) which can be appreciated in the work of Mayhew and other social explorers of the nineteenth century.

Through a discourse about the “jungles” and the “Africas” of Manchester and the slums of East London, populated by “wandering tribes” and “criminal” classes; through the use of photography and interviews for documenting “the alien-in-our-midst”, these bourgeois explorers constructed the working-class deviant juvenile subculture as a bounded category of brutalized objects offered up to the gaze of the bourgeois subject (Hebdige, 1983; Tolson, 1997). The case of the London costermongers constitutes one of the first examples of this othering. Young working-class boys who could be identified by their particular style of dress and developed argot, the costers performed gang attacks on solitary members of an emerging police force that, through their

methods of social vigilance, discipline and punishment, jeopardized the casual street economy upon which the survival of the costermongers depended (Hebdige, 1983). By describing them as a bounded group with distinctive social practices, Mayhew not only made the costermongers visible but attributed to them a particular “behavior system” that seemed to be completely alien vis-à-vis “conventional” bourgeois society. This “delinquent” culture had to be reformed through education and discipline, the virtues of orderly behavior engraved in their bodies and minds. Industrial schools and reformatories fulfilled this project and both costermongers and their street economy disappeared from history. But the discourse of working-class-youth-as-dangerous-other and the techniques of social vigilance and control that made these young people visible and constructed them as bounded groups remained, eventually finding its way into American theorizations of subculture (Hebdige, 1983, Tolson, 1997):

It is this tradition which produces or secures the frames of reference which then are applied to the study of youth [...] the links between deprivation and juvenile crime, and the distinctive forms of juvenile bonding (youth culture, the gang, the deviant subculture, the masculinist emphasis) are carried over intact into social scientific discourse. Youth becomes the boys, the wild boys, the male working class adolescent out for blood and giggles –youth-as-trouble, youth-in-trouble (Hebdige, 1983: 77).

“Subculture”, as a conceptual notion, crystalizes this tradition of othering where the dominant classes present themselves as conventional while constructing other classes and social groups as deviant. What this notion obscures are the multiple lines of interconnection and articulation, of transgression and liminality that exists between the “bounded” social worlds of normality and abnormality. As the criticisms to the work of the CCCS described above reveal, not even the reframing of the concept of subculture within a critical framework was enough to free it from its origin as a technique of othering and social surveillance. Its mirror notion, counterculture, suffers from similar problems as it presents middle-class youth as active subjects capable of political action. The bourgeois subject retains, in this way, its positionality vis-à-vis the working-class other.

Given the shortcomings associated with notions of subculture and counterculture, going beyond them seems necessary in order to properly research what Michel Maffesoli (1996) terms



an “emotional community”. This appeal to Maffesoli without employing the notion of “tribe”, however, already indicates the difficulty implicated in abandoning terms so well established as subculture and counterculture. A variety of new concepts have been proposed as more adequate conceptual tools. Some of them maintain links with both notions and with the field of cultural studies more generally such as “fan cultures” (Hills, 2002), “cybercultures” (Bell and Kennedy, 2007), “postmodern subcultures” (Muggleton, 2000) or “clubcultures” (Redhead, 1997). Others, such as “neo-tribe”, “taste culture”, “lifestyle” or “scene”, emphasize the fluidity and diffuse boundaries of contemporary emotional communities as well as their opaque and ambiguous nature (Bennett and Kahn-Harris, 2004; Young and Atkinson, 2008).

Many of these concepts have been constructed in a dialectical relationship with the work of the CCCS and as such they tend to see contemporary emotional communities as diffuse and classless (Redhead, 1997; Maffesoli, 1996, Thornton, 1996). Following a third common critique to the work of the CCCS, the simple opposition advanced by the center between “hegemonic power” and “resistant subcultures” (Gelder and Thornton, 1997; Weinzierl and Muggleton, 2003; Bennett and Kahn-Harris, 2004; Young and Atkinson, 2008), these notions also often stress the apolitical and hedonistic aspects of these emotional communities. The notion of Ted Polhemus, “Supermarket of Style” appears to be the epitome of this antithetical, postmodern approach to subcultural formations. According to him, “[w]e now inhabit a Supermarket of Style where, like tins of soup lined up on endless shelves, we can choose between more than fifty different styletribes” (Polhemus, 1997: 132).

These words, that reduce belonging to an emotional community to a simple act of consumption, underline the risks of going too far in the direction of the apolitical when it comes to subcultural formations. As Weinzierl and Muggleton argue, “if the CCCS over-politicized youth formations, then post-subcultural positions have been equally guilty of under-politicizing them” (2003: 14). They suggest that the recent emergence of “post-subcultural” protest movements has undermined the conceptualization of contemporary subcommunities as largely apolitical and hedonistic. Animated by the destruction that Neo-liberal capitalism has brought vis-à-vis independent organizations of production and distribution and opposed to the commodification of life in capitalist societies, these protest movements merge subcultural practices with countercultural ideologies to create “carnivals of protest” (Weinzierl and Muggleton, 2003).

This political nature of some emotional communities becomes even more evident when analyzing subcultural formations in developing countries such as Mexico. As Rossana Reguillo (2010) explains, most young people in this country live marginalized, disconnected lives, not only from the “global net society” but also from the major institutions that guarantee education, health and job security. Amidst the disappearance of jobs and social security brought about by Neo-liberal capitalism (García Canclini, Cruces and Urteaga Castro-Pozo, 2012), subcultural movements are not hedonistic and apolitical groups of individuals that choose among different options in a “Supermarket of Style”. For disfranchised individuals, these emotional communities constitute not just spaces for expressions of “togetherness” (Bennett and Kahn-Harris, 2004) but first and foremost places of survival (Reguillo, 2010). In Mexico, Punks, Goths and other alternative communities offer their members not only music and style but protection against a variety of enemies, be they police forces or criminal elements, and also job opportunities, legal as well as illegal (Reguillo, 2010).

In a sense, these Mexican emotional communities are reminiscent of the costermongers in as much as they constitute groups of disenfranchised individuals that oppose in one way or another the social order imposed by the bourgeoisie<sup>8</sup>. The costermongers’ struggles for survival, their street economy in particular, were a threat to the incipient order constructed by the bourgeoisie. As a result, they had to be controlled, their ways of life corrected. As Michel Foucault has addressed in numerous works, the arrival of the age of reason brought with itself a disciplinary power that no longer tolerated unruly elements (Foucault, 1976a, 2001, 2005). Through the use of techniques of surveillance, punishment and confinement, the subordinated classes were dissected, atomized and normalized. Those groupings such as the costermongers that were deemed a risk to the bourgeoisie “moral city” were violently “emended” as well as transformed into a category of knowledge (Foucault, 1976a).

The violence that the bourgeois disciplinary society directs against unruly groupings and individuals is as strong today as it was in the times of the costermongers. The case of Mexican emotional communities illustrates this situation. The members of these communities are not only marginalized by Mexican institutions but also represent human bodies where the social violence of Neo-liberalism and postmodernity engrave itself within a nation-state, a society, that was never fully modern (Nateras Domínguez, 2010). The “Emos” cutting themselves, the “Cyberpunks” grafting metallic plates in their heads and arms, are only a part of a complex carnival of bodies in

pain, marked with tattoos, with mouths and ears expanded, their skin branded and shining through the incrustations of cheap jewelry, rocks and metals. The bodies of many subcultural members in Mexico speak about the violence that comes from outside, from a hegemonic power that has gone global, monstrous. And even when they still take part in certain consumption practices, these unruly individuals do so through piracy, through informal markets that challenge the bourgeois ethics of trademark and copyright (Reguillo, 2010).

The complexity of the relationship between subcultural formations and the hegemonic and bourgeois social order is underlined by this discussion about Mexican emotional communities. While subjected to a disciplinary power that marginalizes and hurts them, these unruly individuals still find spaces to express and practice an “antidiscipline” (De Certeau, 2007), that is, a popular rationality that opposes the bourgeois order. Enacted in this case as a carnival of pain, this antidiscipline or “delinquent narrative” (De Certeau, 2007) constitutes one of the myriad of “tactics” through which these emotional communities “reappropriate the space organized by the technicians of sociocultural production” (De Certeau, 2007: XLIV. The translation is mine).

Understanding subcultural movements as created by hegemonic power or as completely resistive to such power loses sight of the never-ending renegotiations that take place within them. As De Certeau asserts, popular tactics are not a “semiotic guerilla warfare” (Hebdige, 1979) but “surreptitious ways acquired by the dispersed, tactical and crafted creativity of groups and individuals caught hereinafter within networks of ‘surveillance’” (De Certeau, 2007: XLV. The translation is mine). Delinquent narratives are minuscule non-normative tactics that groupings and agents employ to escape the grid of rationalities and disciplines that comprise bourgeois society. For De Certeau, these narratives are not only an “art of saying” but more importantly, an “art of doing”, that is, practice understood as schemes of action (2007). From this perspective, subcultural formations are not bounded entities but the practical enactment of non-normative tactics or, in other words, the performance by certain individuals of a heterodoxy that challenges the “doxa”, that is, the tacit belief in the structures and rules of the commonsense world (Bourdieu, 1977).

The tactics of the subordinated classes thus challenge tacit hegemonic knowledges. However, this challenge is always fragmented, “a myriad of quasi invisible movements, that walk over an increasingly finer texture of a place that is homogenous, continuous and common to everyone” (De Certeau, 2007: 47. The translation is mine). Groups and individuals can only enact their everyday creativity inside social structures that constitute a vast grid of disciplines,

knowledges and practices that cannot be opposed in its totality. From this perspective, the term “subculture” must be abandoned not only because it suggests a unified behavior system but also because it constructs a clear demarcation between the subcultural grouping and the commonsense world that does not take place in practice. I have tried to address this issue through the use of the adjective “subcultural” until this point, following the notion of “(sub)cultural substance” by Paul Hodkinson (2004). This author argues that the work of the CCCS is still valuable in as much as it identified certain definitional traits of groupings that are not as fluid as to be characterized as “neo tribes”, “scenes” or “lifestyles” (Hodkinson, 2004).

### **Subcultural Formations and Taste Cultures**

In a similar way to Hodkinson, I consider the theoretical legacy of the CCCS – in terms of its analysis of power, inequality and exploitation – still valuable and useful for my work on Japanese animation fans. It is in this sense that the use of “subcultural” in this dissertation, through its links with the theorizations of the CCCS, has the intention of emphasizing the practical insubordination and subordinate status of “subcultural togetherness” vis-à-vis “the culture of the power-bloc”<sup>9</sup> (Hall, 1981). Following Stuart Hall, I understand “subcultural” as intrinsically related to “the people”, that is, the subordinated classes, groups and individuals constantly subjected to social surveillance and to techniques of othering. From this perspective, the notion “subcultural formations” designates any grouping that practically mobilizes tactics of resistance or subversion against the “Hegemonic”, either bourgeois, phallogocentric, Western or white (Hall, 1981).

While this initial approach opens the door for a study of subcultural groupings that does not stress either boundedness or flexibility, it is still necessary to advance a second notion in order to better understand Japanese animation fans and other fandoms. It has been a common problem among subcultural studies to incorporate groupings as varied as clubbers, goths and teenage girls as the focus of research<sup>10</sup>. This has resulted in a multiplication of terms, each of which is presented as the best alternative to the notion of subculture. However, very rarely have these concepts, that include “scene”, “lifestyle” and “neo-tribe” among others, have been compared with each other (Hodkinson, 2004). The resulting lack of clarity has given rise to important analytical problems, such as the indiscriminate use of different notions in some studies:

The potential for confusion can be illustrated by Rob Shields' contributions to his own edited collection *Lifestyle Shopping*, which, in spite of their overall value, are afflicted by what comes across as a somewhat interchangeable use of tribe, bünde, lifestyle and even subculture (Hodkinson, 2004: 141).

As illustrated by this quote, the extended criticism of the notion of subculture has created a vacuum that has been filled with a variety of terms that are sometimes used in an interchangeable form. I would argue that in order to create more clarity in this respect, it is useful to define a specific object of study for each concept introduced to classify groupings perceived in some way as subcultural. Having defined what I understand for subcultural, I propose that most current conceptual alternatives to “subculture” refer to particular categories of subcultural formations. In what follows, I will discuss one of these categories, taste culture, as it corresponds to my object of study, Japanese animation fans.

In her analysis of British “club cultures”, Sarah Thornton (1996) introduces the notion, inspired by the work of Bourdieu, of “taste culture”. According to this author, taste cultures are groups articulated around taste and consumption. While possessing fluid boundaries, these ad hoc communities nonetheless are spaces of socialization where members are exposed to the meanings, values and cultural hierarchies of the subcultural formation (Thornton, 1996). Such exposure leads to the acquisition of “subcultural capital”, a term that Thornton uses to describe the accumulation of the common knowledge that members of the taste culture acquire through their participation in this type of subcultural grouping. In her view, the possession of this kind of capital confers status within the taste culture. Because subcultural capital confers exclusivity, clubbers protect it from outsiders, particularly from the mainstream, that is, the unhip (Thornton, 1996).

Thornton's work has been criticized for depoliticizing subcultural formations and reducing them to a congregation of individuals trying to gain status within the taste culture through the accumulation of subcultural capital. As Weinzierl and Muggleton assert, “this model of analysis effectively robs youth cultures of any macro-political dimension” (2003: 13), in as much as members of a taste culture only care about being “hip”. Devoid of any resistive or oppositional quality vis-à-vis the dominant cultural formation, members of a taste culture appear as apolitical collectors of knowledge that are not interested in mobilizing non-normative tactics, a fact that becomes especially clear as Thornton concludes her research on club cultures by claiming that

“[c]ommunications media create subcultures in the process of naming them and draw boundaries around them in the act of describing them” (1996: 162).

There is no space in this formulation for agency, let alone political action. Taste cultures are created and defined by the media and other outside forces because according to Thornton, they lack any inherent quality that differentiate them from groups not labelled as “subcultures”. Just as these other groups, taste cultures are articulated around popular culture, and are embedded in the same micro-politics of taste and consumption. Their categorization as a subcultural formation is completely dependent on moral panics that construct them as transgressive. The heterodox nature of these subcultural formations is thus reduced to labelling by the media because taste cultures are not concerned with opposing hegemony as their members are only interested with “their own hierarchies of what is authentic and legitimate in popular culture” (Thornton, 1996: 3). In this sense, no matter how oppositional a group appears to be in relation to the commonsense world, in the paradigm advanced by Thornton, its members are only trying to gain distinction by differentiating themselves from the unhip (Weinzierl & Muggleton, 2003). This apolitical discussion of subcultural formations thus culminates with an understanding of taste and consumption that is blind to the many dimensions of power.

In order to incorporate power back into subcultural theory, some authors have returned to Gramscian-inspired models that have the objective of avoiding the limitations of notions that depoliticize subcultural formations such as “taste culture” (Weinzierl & Muggleton, 2003). I would argue, however, that this concept can be useful to understand certain subcultural formations if it is reworked to better incorporate the theoretical work of Pierre Bourdieu. In particular, Thornton’s work only employs certain elements of Bourdieu’s theory of taste. Lost in her account of taste cultures and subcultural capital are central theoretical notions of the French author such as “habitus”, “field” and “practical sense”. Among these and other concepts, the idea of “field” is the most important omission when it comes to the study of subcultural formations.

For Bourdieu, diverse confrontations between classes and class fractions are always symbolic struggles over the representation of the social world, over control of the principles of vision and division that organize and categorize social existence. In the end, what is at stake is nothing less than the truth, in the sense of absolute judgment. In order “to establish the truth of these struggles over the truth and capture the objective logic according to which the stakes, the camps, the strategies and the victories are determined” (Bourdieu, 1993: 263), Bourdieu develops

the notion of field: a structure of objective relations among positions, constituted around particular social games, each of which is constructed around an “*illusio*”, that is, around the belief that the stakes of the game are serious, real.

Through the notion of field, Bourdieu escapes reductionist views that reduce social life either to agency or structure. Due to the multiplicity of fields that compose the social world, analyzing symbolic struggles within their boundaries is not a question of understanding individual motivations or establishing social class or origin as the fundamental principle underlying such conflicts. The particular history of the field, as well as the space of positions and the space of position-taking correlated to these positions, have to be elucidated and taken into account if the truth of these struggles over the truth is to be revealed: “The network of objective relations between positions subtends and orients the strategies which the occupants of the different positions implement in their struggles to defend or improve their positions” (Bourdieu, 1993: 30).

Agents trying to improve their practical and symbolic positions in the field are always oriented in their struggles by the objective relationships that exist between every position occupied in that particular field. In other words, agents can only orient themselves and deploy their strategies and tactics within a social structure that provides them with the rules of the game and a corresponding illusion. Without the space of positions and the space of position-taking there cannot be individual positions to be occupied. On the other hand, without agents playing it, there cannot be a game or a structure. It is for this reason that every new position that appears in the field transforms it as it opposes already existing positions in the struggle for the representation of the social world, a fact addressed by Bourdieu in his discussion of the field of cultural production:

In the field of restricted production, each change at any one point in the space of positions objectively defined by their difference, their *écart*, induces a generalized change -which means that one should not look for a specific site of change. It is true that the initiative of change falls almost by definition on the newcomers, i.e. the youngest, who are also those least endowed with specific capital: in a universe in which to exist is to differ, i.e. to occupy a distinct, distinctive position, they must assert their difference, get it known and recognized, get themselves known and recognized [...], by endeavouring to impose new modes of thought and expression, out of key with the prevailing modes of thought and with the *doxa*, and therefore bound to disconcert the orthodox by their ‘obscurity’ and ‘pointlessness’. The

fact remains that every new position, in asserting itself as such, determines a displacement of the whole structure and that, by the logic of action and reaction, it leads to all sorts of changes in the position-takings of the occupants of the other positions (Bourdieu, 1993: 58).

Change and structure are discussed by Bourdieu in this quote through the idea of a space of positions that is objectively defined by the difference among positions. Change comes from the introduction of new distinct positions, occupied by newcomers that challenge the doxa of the field in order to assert themselves and gain a specific capital. The orthodox opposes these newcomers not only because they advance new forms of thought and expression but also because the new distinctive positions can displace the whole structure of the field and significantly alter what passes as capital and distinction in it. While Bourdieu is discussing a particular field, that of cultural production, I would argue that the logic of the space of positions, in terms of structure and change, remains quite similar in other fields that compose the social world. In particular, it appears to me that the field of cultural consumption maintains strong parallels with the field of cultural production in terms of the space of positions, to the point that these two fields appear to share a number of positions among which it is possible to include taste cultures.

As consumers that also produce, members of taste cultures can be better understood through incorporating the notion of field into the analytical framework. Doing so illuminates the fact that the cultural hierarchies of club cultures and other subcultural formations do not exist in a vacuum, disjointed from other positions in the field of cultural consumption. They affect and are affected by the space of positions that characterizes this field at any given point in time. Difference is not something that members of a taste culture use exclusively to gain subcultural status. It also works as a challenge to the doxa of the field, a fact evidenced by the attacks that the media and other orthodox institutions often direct to some of these subcultural groupings. Contrary to Thornton's claim regarding the labelling of subcultures by the media, I would argue that newcomers that lack particular types of capital use consumption to create taste cultures, communities where they can assert their difference and gain distinction.

The incorporation of the notion of field to the study of taste cultures also offers new insights into the definition of subcultural capital. Just as other forms of capital, subcultural capital is a terrain of struggle among members of a particular taste culture. In other words, the style and practices of club cultures and other subcultural formations articulated around taste and



consumption, change over time not only through their conflict with the mainstream but also as a result of their interactions with other positions within the field as a whole and through the unending struggle between different definitions of what being a member of the taste culture entails, which are advanced by different participants in the subcultural formation.

### **Audiences as Taste Cultures**

This reconceptualization of the notion of taste culture will be further elaborated in the empirical chapters of this dissertation. For the purposes of the current discussion, it is enough to understand these subcultural formations as groups of newcomers within the field of consumption, either because they are young or for some other reason, that lack specific types of capital, particularly the cultural and economic capital that allows the acquisition of legitimate cultural possessions, and thus turn to consumption and taste to assert their difference and gain distinction among their peers. This assertion in turn, brings a displacement of the structure of the field of consumption that is resisted by the orthodox. In an inversion of the CCCS, it is mainstream institutions that resist taste cultures which are mainly concerned with asserting their difference, a fact that does not automatically lead to insubordination. Their challenge to the orthodox takes place at the practical, tactical level of position-taking and not as a “semiotic guerrilla warfare” that explicitly resists hegemonic discourses.

The question at this point becomes which subcultural formations can be classified as taste cultures. One of the purposes of this dissertation is to argue that certain groups of enthusiasts of media can be understood in this light. Henry Jenkins called these groups “fan cultures” and asserted that the one he studied, “media fandom”, was in fact “a recognizable subculture” (Jenkins, 2013: 1). He opened, in this way, the door for the incorporation of fans and fandom to subcultural studies, an action that has since been consolidated by other authors such as Matt Hills (2002) and Gerry Bloustien (2004). While these authors analyze Western fan cultures, the work of Mizuko Ito, Daisuke Okabe and Izumi Tsuji, *Fandom Unbound: Otaku Culture in a Connected World*, inscribes “otaku”, that is, Japanese fans of Japanese animation, into the theoretical framework of Henry Jenkins. For Mizuko Ito, otaku culture refers to “a constellation of ‘fannish’ cultural logics, platforms, and practices that cluster around anime, manga, and Japanese games and are in turn associated with a more generalized set of dispositions toward passionate and participatory engagement with popular culture” (Ito, 2012: xi).

This definition of otaku culture is clearly embedded in Jenkins' conceptual framework regarding fan cultures. Otaku display practices, cultural logics and platforms articulated around their fandom but connected to generalized dispositions of active engagement with popular culture that are common to every fan culture. However, while in line with Jenkins' idea of participatory culture, Ito does not follow that closely this author in terms of his conceptualization of fans as nomadic readers that move freely among texts, as he proposes that otaku are attracted by specific characteristics of Japanese animation and related media: "The media mixes of Japanese popular culture invite fannish engagement through links across multiple media types (games, toys, TV, cinema, manga, novels), intricate and open-ended story lines, and massive databases of characters, monsters, and machines" (Ito, 2012: xviii). From the perspective of Hiroki Azuma, this type of engagement with a media mix composed of a variety of cultural products that are not limited to texts, and with a database of characters, creatures and machines, corresponds to a postmodern consumer behavior that he names "Database Consumption" (Azuma, 2009). It is in this sense that, following both Ito and Azuma, it is possible to argue that otaku culture is in fact guided by taste and consumption.

Understanding taste and consumption as the two central axes of otaku culture not only offers an alternative to Jenkins' model of fandom, it makes it possible to classify this subcultural formation as a taste culture. Instead of conceptualizing fans as "textual poachers" that move among texts taking only the meanings that are pleasurable to them (Jenkins, 2013), it is more useful to analyze fans in terms of their aesthetic choices and practices of distinction and appropriation. This does not mean, however, that production and textual poaching are absent from the fan practices that constitute anime fandom as a field of consumption. Indeed, taste cultures also take part on certain occasions in the field of cultural production, as will be discussed in the empirical chapters of this work. Either as cosplayers, fan writers or artists, many members of anime fandom assert their distinction through creative practices.

The fact that members of taste cultures often participate in the field of cultural production alerts us to the dangers of conceptual frameworks that simply invert Jenkins' ideas as is the case with Matt Hills (2002) and his notion of "cult fandom". Proposing that fans are cultists that are emotionally attached to certain "cult" texts and are gathered around the "charisma" of the "auteur" of these works, Hills has the intention of breaking away from Jenkins' work regarding media fandom by focusing instead on their "neoreligiosity":

Neoreligiosity implies that the proliferation of discourses of ‘cult’ within media fandom cannot be read as the ‘return’ of religion in a supposedly secularized culture [...]. Instead, the neoreligiosity of cult fandom is pragmatically produced through the ‘new regularities’ of ‘cult’ as a label for types of media texts and media consumption, as well as through the ‘unusual recurrences’ of such religious discourses within fandom (Hills, 2002: 119).

Hills claims in this quote that media texts that have been labelled as “cult” invite the use of religious discourses on the part of their fans. This, however, does not mean that these fans are part of an organized religion. On the contrary, the neoreligiosity of fans is a practical matter that, as Hills explains, has the objective of producing the sacredness of the cult work and its author. I will not argue the possibility that some media fandoms are indeed “cult fandoms” that center on religious discourses or that certain fandoms mobilize neoreligious narratives. The idea that neoreligiosity is created through the practice and narratives of fans of “cult media” is an interesting one, in as much as it constitutes a category of analysis for certain groups of fans, such as Elvis “fanatics” and other groups of fans that are centered on the charisma of celebrities and creators.

Japanese animation fandom is not a cult fandom, a claim that will be illustrated in this dissertation and that constitutes a warning regarding the dangers of generalizing certain analytical categories. Just as the “media fandom” by Jenkins is an overgeneralization that does not include fandoms more in line with the notion of “cult fandom”, this concept by Hills loses sight of fan groupings that largely ignore religious discourses and favor aesthetic narratives. In other words, Hills ignores those fandoms that are more closely aligned with taste. From this perspective, it is possible to argue that contrary to the ideas of Jenkins (2013), Hills (2012) and even Ito, Okabe and Tsuki (2012), fandom is not a monolithic type of subcultural community but in fact is composed of distinct media consumers, groupings and communities, among which it is possible to include taste cultures. As will be discussed in this work, the complexity of fandom is such that any definition that does not account for its fluidity and constant change is doomed to fail by painting a static picture of a field constantly in displacement.

It is important to note, however, that understanding fandom as a field of struggle which constitutes a set of positions within the field of cultural consumption does not mean going to the opposite extreme than Jenkins (2013) and Hills (2002). If these authors reify fandom as a bounded

and monolithic “subculture”, other media scholars have fallen into the trap of understanding fans and members of audiences in general, as individualistic consumers of media: “audiences in fact consist of numerous awkward individuals, whose interpretations and pleasures are complicated, informed and often downright weird” (Hunter & Kaye, 1997: 4). The idea that audiences and fandom are composed exclusively of individuals that possess their own interpretations and pleasures when it comes to media is not an unusual one among media scholars that draw inspiration from cultural studies. Interestingly, it is inspired in the work of Stuart Hall, particularly in his model of encoding/decoding.

### **Audiences and the Legacy of Stuart Hall**

Just as he was instrumental for advancing subcultural studies, Stuart Hall also shaped the ways in which scholars of cultural studies understand audiences. Opposing Theodor Adorno’s conceptualization of the mass audience as passive and easily manipulated by the culture industry (2001)<sup>11</sup>, Hall (1980) proposes approaching the engagement of audiences with media through a semiotic framework. Following the work of Umberto Eco, he suggests that language and other codes have a polysemic character. Signs cannot be reduced to a fixed set of representations because of the arbitrary articulation of Signifier, Signified and meaning. Being the result of convention and not of nature, this articulation is always “open to new accentuations and, in Volosinov’s terms, enters fully into the struggle over meanings – the class struggle in language” (Hall, 1980: 122).

Due to the polysemic character of language and other codes, Hall (1980) suggests that the communication process between mass media and audiences cannot be understood as a single moment where a “receiver” perfectly decodes the message of a “sender”. On the contrary, this communicative event should be seen as a process of “encoding/decoding” that does not necessarily imply a homology between the codes inscribed in the message by the source and those used by the receiver to decode it. In this sense, the concept of encoding/decoding recognizes that broadcasters and audiences do not share perfectly symmetrical codes. Through polysemy, messages are always open to misunderstandings and distortions. However, polysemy does not mean that audiences are able to interpret the messages encoded in media in any way they want:

Polysemy must not, however, be confused with pluralism. Connotative codes are *not* equal among themselves. Any society/ culture tends, with varying degrees of closure, to impose

its classifications of the social and cultural and political world. These constitute a *dominant cultural order*, though it is neither univocal nor uncontested. [...] The different areas of social life appear to be mapped out into discursive domains, hierarchically organized into *dominant or preferred meanings*” (Hall, 1980: 123. Italics in the original).

For Hall, codes possess a degree of closure that results from cultural classifications that delineate a dominant cultural order. Organized into a grid of discursive domains, the dominant meanings of such an order are the result of institutionalization. These meanings are embedded with ideologies that legitimate a particular social order and also constitute taken for granted, everyday knowledge and practices. Hall suggests that these dominant meanings exist as “performative rules”, that is, as “rules of competence and use, of logics-in-use” that seek “to *enforce* or *pre-fer* one semantic domain over another and rule items into and out of their appropriate meaning-sets” (Hall, 1980: 124). These performative rules can be found in media where broadcasters mobilize dominant meanings in order to enforce “legitimate” forms of decoding that continue to justify the dominant social order.

While the possibility of escaping dominant meanings within Hall’s paradigm occurs through misunderstandings that take place at the moment that members of the audience interpret media messages, it does not follow that different interpretations of such messages correspond to individual preferences and meanings. Hall is very clear in this regard. Even when individual variants are possible, most personal readings coalesce around interpretative clusters structured by social differences such as class (Hall, 1980). For him, misunderstandings within the chain of communication are caused precisely by these social differences. In the case of media, the different social positions occupied by broadcasters and members of the audience can result in poor practices of encoding, an asymmetry between the codes of broadcasters and audiences, or non-preferred readings of media messages.

The model of encoding/decoding is therefore not a model of audiences as individual consumers of media that appropriate texts “to suit specific and often incommensurable needs” (Hunter & Kaye, 1997: 3). It is a model of the struggle over meanings that take place among classes. In this, it is close to Bourdieu’s theory of the field. In fact, it is possible to argue that the third decoding position proposed by Hall (1980), “oppositional code” corresponds with heterodoxy in as much as it refers to a decoding of dominant codes that is completely opposed to their preferred

meanings. It is in this sense that in the conceptual framework advanced by Hall, the idea of active audiences is political in nature, as it addresses the struggle over the definition of the social world. This situation becomes especially clear when taking into account the way in which he defines popular culture as the “culture of the oppressed, the excluded classes” (Hall, 1981: 238). Emerging from below, popular culture gives a voice to those that have been forgotten by the dominant social order and as a result, is opposed by the hegemonic culture of the power-bloc which tries to preserve itself.

This paradigm is similar to the one advanced by Hall regarding subcultural formations in as much as it takes class struggle to the symbolic sphere. However, it also constitutes a more nuanced elaboration of this movement to the symbolic. As Hall (1981) asserts, the dialectic of cultural struggle is a continuous process of domination, resistance and supersession where popular culture exists inside relations of power, domination and insubordination vis-à-vis the dominant culture. Interestingly, he uses the term “field of force” to delineate these relationships of power, a concept that closely resembles the notion of “field of power” of Bourdieu. The parallelism between these authors becomes even clearer when Hall explains the dialectic of cultural struggle in more detail:

This is the dialectic of cultural struggle. In our times, it goes on continuously, in the complex lines of resistance and acceptance, refusal and capitulation, which make the field of culture a sort of constant battlefield. A battlefield where no once-for-all victories are obtained but where there are always strategic positions to be won and lost (Hall, 1981: 233).

Just as for Bourdieu, for Hall the field of culture is a dynamic social space where different social actors try to occupy a variety of positions that can never be fully won. It is in this sense that the field of culture is a never-ending battlefield characterized by innumerable resistances, capitulations and acceptances. Unfortunately, this dynamic model of popular culture and the field of culture more generally, did not receive much attention within cultural studies. The imagination of media scholars was instead captured by the idea of an active audience composed of creative individuals capable of producing their own meanings. The work of John Fiske (2010, 2011) was especially significant in this regard. By incorporating the work of Hall with the oeuvre of Michel de Certeau (1984), this author proposed that the audience was in fact “a producer of meanings and

pleasures” (Fiske, 2010: 22). Under this conceptual framework, the act of consumption became a tactic of resistance against “the powerful”, a form of cultural production unique to consumers: “Every act of consumption is an act of cultural production, for consumption is always the production of meaning” (Fiske, 2010: 28).

Through Fiske, the model of encoding/decoding becomes a celebration of the agency of audiences. The consumption of fans and other members of media audiences is depicted as a productive practice of interpretation. At its limits, this paradigm of the active audience leads to conceptualizations such as the one advanced by Hunter and Kaye where media consumption is transformed into “a democratization of culture” (1997: 2) where individual members of the audience construct their own meanings and pleasures. While much more cautious than Hunter and Kaye, the intellectual debt owed by Jenkins (2013) to Fiske (2010) also becomes evident in this discussion of the active audience. Just as Fiske, Jenkins believes that consumers of media are in fact producers of meanings that resist the cultural industries (2013), an idea that he articulates through the notion of textual poaching.

It is precisely this incorporation of Fiske’s conceptualization of audiences to his own work that leads Jenkins to an overestimation of fandom’s resistive characteristics, and to an emphasis on textual poaching and production that ignores the centrality of consumption within media fandom. Because he understands consumption as the production of meaning, Jenkins cannot focus on the taste around which media fandoms are constituted. Instead, even when he briefly discusses Bourdieu, Jenkins chooses to analyze the interpretative practices of the members of media fandoms, a strategy that takes him to what Shaun Moores calls “the populist celebration of consumer freedoms” (1993: 103), a practice that according to Moores obscures the fact that constraint and creativity operate at the same time within popular culture (1993).

While Jenkins’s incorporation of the notion of subculture within his analysis of media fandom does address in part questions of structure, the truth is that his model never abandons the optimistic portrayal of media consumers introduced by Fiske (2010). Lost in his work is the dialectic of cultural struggle with its field of force and its multiple positions. In other words, there is no account of power and of the myriad constraints that compose a taste culture in the depiction of media fandom advanced by Jenkins (2013), a fact perhaps unavoidable given that he defines fandom as a utopian community where fans can construct “an alternative culture” that is committed to “more democratic values” (Jenkins, 2013: 282). For him, the hierarchically flat and democratic

community of fans is opposed by the dominant order with all its “superficial relationships and shoddy values” (Jenkins, 2013: 282), a conceptualization that closely follows “the people versus the power-bloc” thesis of Hall (1981).

This thesis regarding the opposition between the people and the power-bloc reveals the complicated nature of Hall’s legacy to the study of audiences. This idea is introduced in the same text in which he discusses notions such as field of force and strategic positions, and constitutes a continuation of his earlier work regarding class struggle that now, translated into the realm of culture, becomes the conflict between the people and the power-bloc (Hall, 1981). While more nuanced than interpretations of this thesis advanced by Fiske (2010) or Jenkins (2013), Hall’s notion of “the people versus the power-bloc” remains trapped into a dialectic understanding of culture that reduces the social world to two poles: the dominant and the dominated classes. Given the use of this dialectic paradigm to understand culture, it is perhaps no surprise that authors influenced by it constructed binary oppositions, as is the case with Jenkins’s formulation of a democratic community of fans versus a broken everyday world.

I would argue that the more dynamic elements of Hall’s model of popular culture were not incorporated by other authors precisely because ideas such as the field of force do not function inside a dialectic paradigm of culture. I believe that only a multifaceted paradigm, such as Bourdieu’s theory of fields, can adequately incorporate these dynamic elements in order to avoid portraying popular culture as a flat congregation of oppressed classes. This movement to Bourdieu allows sociological analysis to escape the dualism composed by the people and the power-bloc. Instead, popular culture can be understood as a field of struggle where individuals and groups confront each other to gain a profit in distinction and advance their own definitions of what is legitimate in cultural terms. In other words, audiences are not “the people” but individuals and groups that participate in the field of consumption in order to appropriate distinctive objects and practices that in turn, define the identities of these same individuals and groups.

### **Taste Cultures and Practical Enactments of Collective Identities**

It is in this sense that the opposition between the people and the power-bloc becomes, through the incorporation of the theoretical framework of Bourdieu, a constant struggle among a wide variety of distinct and distinctive tastes that together structure the field of consumption. As Thornton indicates, these struggles function as processes of differentiation and identification in as much as



“[t]astes are fought over precisely because people define themselves and others through what they like and dislike” (1996: 164). From this perspective, consumption is important not in terms of being a productive interpretation of meanings but because, as Moores asserts, cultural identities are “produced through practices of distinction” (1993: 120) among which, I would argue, consumption holds a central place.

Analyzing the aesthetic choices and practices of distinction and appropriation of certain members of the audience, their particular taste, thus leads to questions of identity understood not as an essential attribute of an individual or group but as a process: identification. As Richard Jenkins suggests, identity is a practical achievement (2008), a fact that can further consolidate the model of audience participation and subcultural formation discussed in this chapter. Taste cultures, as proposed in this work, can include certain audiences that are not “the people” but particular factions in the field of cultural consumption that define themselves and others through taste. These taste cultures are also subcultural formations because the taste they mobilize to gain a profit in distinction is heterodox in nature in the sense that the members of these groupings are newcomers whose only possibility for distinction lies in the appropriation of objects and practices considered non-legitimate by the orthodox. Incorporating the idea of identification as practical achievement to this framework allows the analysis to focus on practices that create belonging and shared knowledge among individuals and groups that share similar tastes.

The idea of consumption as a practice of appropriation that in turn creates emotional attachments and collective identifications is central to this work. It allows me to break with the idea of consumers as producers engaged in the interpretation and creation of texts. Instead, I analyze consumption as a practice in itself that can lead to the emergence of taste cultures. Moving away from a semiotic understanding of audiences and subcultural formations, I propose instead to focus on the practices through which fans gain distinction, create identifications and connect with each other. Taste cultures are a practical achievement in as much as they are the result of the collective, embodied practices of their members. In other words, subcultural formations such as Japanese animation fans can be understood as the result of subcultural “performativity” (Butler, 1993), a reiteration of certain heterodox patterns of appropriation of objects and practices. From this perspective, taste cultures emerge from the “sedimented effect of reiterative or ritualized practices” (McNay, 1999: 177) inscribed upon the body, a collective imprint emerging from processes of performativity and belonging that find a particular taste at their center.

While Gabriele Klein (2003) suggests that Bourdieu's notion of habitus is a useful complement to the concept of performativity, given the fact that Butler's theory does not include a conceptualization of "body-memory" or "memory", I have argued for the inclusion of the notion of field because it offers a more dynamic understanding of the relationships between agency and structure. Indeed, the idea of habitus, a set of dispositions that generate practices and perceptions, is perhaps too rigid to account for the "arts of doing" used by individuals and groups to gain a position within the field of cultural consumption. According to McNay (1999) the cultural necessity for a performative repetition of normative codes reveals that they are open to transformations. The theory of fields addresses these transformations because it takes into consideration not only the complexity of symbolic codes and normative discourses but also the social struggles that take place around them.

These struggles to defend or improve positions within a field are first and foremost practical endeavors. In other words, they are practical performances through which symbolic codes and normative discourses are changed and negotiated. This nuanced understanding of agency and structure, as practical achievement, suggests that the social world in general and taste cultures in particular, rest on a dialectic of sedimentation and innovation (McNay, 1999); in other words, on processes of identification and differentiation that are enacted at the practical level. The case of two fandoms can illustrate this complex interplay between fields and identification as a practical achievement.

Bloustien's (2004) work focuses on Buffy fans not as an abstract phenomenon but in terms of their embodied embeddedness within a particular place: a pub called The Seven Stars in Adelaide, South Australia. The owner of this place had decided to introduce weekly "Buffy nights". These Buffy nights took place on the day of the week in which Buffy and its spin-off series Angel were transmitted on television, and offered fans the opportunity of watching both series in a communal space. By the time Bloustien visited this pub for the first time, it had become an important site for the performance of a particular form of "Buffy Fan" identification. He describes this first visit in the following manner:

On the first Tuesday evening I attended, I crammed into the main bar at the pub along with over sixty others. Together we watched the episode in intense silence on the big screen above

the bar, but chatted, laughed, mingled and discussed the programme loudly during the commercial breaks (Bloustein, 2004: 152).

Here it is possible to appreciate how taste and identification are articulated through ritualistic repetition. The fans watch the show in absolute silence and talk about it in the breaks. Through their embodied practice the fans make present a community that respects Buffy, pays attention to this TV show and talks about it when is not being broadcast. Buffy is thus practically constructed as the center of their “fan identification”. That this collective identification is enhanced by the effect of the performance and does not appear to be informed by a pre-existing belonging in a subcultural formation is illustrated by Bloustein’s description of a regular Buffy night:

The sudden hush descending on the room was one of the first things that newcomers would notice about the atmosphere on a Buffy night, attempting at first to talk through it – but not for long. The will of the many would take over. Silence would reign – that is, except where, after a particular witty comment or an exciting fight sequence, the audience would spontaneously laugh, sigh or exclaim together, and sometimes at a particularly exciting moment cheer and clap together. [...] The same episode watched again, alone at home, was often reported not to seem quite as funny or as dramatic (Bloustein, 2004: 153).

In this example of performativity, the historicity of a community of fans becomes evident. The silent enrapture and bursts of excitement experienced by the fans watching Buffy, appear as a result of an identification created through practices such as hushes, laughs and sighs. It is important to emphasize that this process of “identity formation” is not the work of a voluntarist actor in Goffman’s (1959) sense: the fans are not playing the role of a fan that hushes, laughs and sighs but are instead practically implicated in the construction and management of “typical expressions” of fan identity, understood as a reification which emerges from performing these very “typical” expressions. The fact that some fans report enjoying the show much more in the pub, than while watching it privately, attests to the power of reiteration in materializing the communal identifications that it appears to only describe.

While illustrative in terms of the practical construction of fan identifications, Bloustein’s discussion regarding Buffy Fans does not touch upon those segments of fandom that can be

understood as taste cultures. This is evident in the fact that there is no account in his discussion of symbolic struggles between fans or any other reference to the field of cultural consumption. This is important because it announces one of the themes of this dissertation: while every fan of a cultural product is a member of the corresponding fandom of that product, this does not mean that she or he will also participate in the taste culture associated with that fandom. The case of the fujoshi further expands upon this idea.

Okabe and Ishida (2012) analyze the complex negotiation and renegotiation of symbolic boundaries through which fujoshi, that is, Japanese fans of yaoi, not only conceal or reveal a collective identification to particular others but also align with apparently opposing symbolic norms. This situation alerts us to the complexity of the field of cultural consumption, in contrast to the dualistic opposition between the people and the power-bloc or between subculture and parent culture. The positions of those that take part in this field are in constant flux, a fact especially clear for those that participate in a taste culture as can be seen in the following words of a fujoshi informant of Okabe and Ishida (2012):

I think doujin are a great culture, but in the end, we're just drooling over gay guys. I may rave about it, but I hide my [doujin] in a card box that has my [fujoshi] friend's address so I'm prepared in case I die suddenly. [...] That way, my parents won't have to cry when they go through my things. (Okabe and Ishida, 2012: 219).

As can be appreciated in this quote, this fujoshi constructs, through her narrative practice, different collective identifications that reflect both her heterodox taste and what she perceives as the legitimate taste of her social world. She asserts that doujin, fan-made yaoi, is great but at the same time adopts what can be called a hegemonic position to suggest that reading homoerotic stories is a bad thing that needs to be hidden. Mentioning her parents, she jumps outside of the field of cultural consumption into the social space occupied by the family. This complex boundary work constructs her and other fujoshi such as her friend, as a “great culture”, something to “rave about”. At the same time, however, this fan also adopts the positionality of what can be called “conventional Japanese society” to establish the fact that from the perspective of legitimate taste, fujoshi are “just drooling over gay guys”. Because she is aware of her violation of legitimate taste, she hides her doujin, the classified objects that in turn classify her as a fujoshi in a box. The parents

appear to be ascribed to legitimate taste as the fan claims that they would “cry” if they found out the classifying objects of their daughter.

This complex process of shifting alliances and boundary work sheds light over the notion of field as a space of positions and as a site of alliances and struggles in which individuals and groups can defend or improve their positions. The next quote, taken from another informant of Okabe and Ishida (2012), illustrates how, in contrast to the fans described by Bloustien, fujoshi take an active place within the field of cultural consumption by deploying certain tactics of identification and boundary work that constitute a symbolic struggle with other participants in anime fandom:

There was this huge fight between fujoshi and tetsu-ota [Train otaku] on 2ch [a massive online Japanese forum]. The tetsu-ota would make all these posts about how fujoshi are creepy and gross, but the fujoshi wouldn't get angry and instead would just accept the comments. They would go like, “Yeah, yeah. And?” In the end, they smothered the tetsu-ota with that kind of response, and the tetsu-ota shut up.... We won the war (Okabe and Ishida, 2012: 221).

We can see here a struggle within anime fandom as experienced in Japan. According to the informant, a group of male otaku, the tetsu-ota, insulted the fujoshi on an online forum using a heteronormative discourse that referred to them as “creepy and gross”. This negative labeling was defused by the fujoshi by accepting the alternate sexuality implied by these insults. This struggle over the symbolic principles and norms of anime fandom was seen by this informant as a war that the fujoshi won, implying that these female otaku were able to defend and subsequently improve their position at the expenses of the tetsu-ota, a group of anime fans located at the bottom of both Japanese animation fandom and the everyday world, due to the incapacity attributed to its members to fully commit to either “reality” or “fantasy” (Tsuji, 2012).

The complex nature of the field of cultural consumption has been briefly illustrated through this discussion regarding conflict between fujoshi and tetsu-ota. However, fujoshi not only battle with conventional society and other groups within anime fandom. These fans also enact symbolic struggles against other fujoshi: “it's just different with people who liked the same genres as you. Even though people may like *Full Metal Alchemist* [a manga series], people who came in from a

Jump series and people who came in from fighting games are different” (Okabe and Ishida, 2012: 214). Even among fujoshi there are different tastes and the series and genres that a fujoshi likes or dislikes construct different positions within fujoshi fandom. As the quote above suggests, these fans construct different alliances and communities based on these tastes. Fujoshi “are different” based on the series and genres they enjoy the most. This is also the case for fujoshi that like the same series: different pairings of male characters often are preferred, thus creating divisions between fujoshi that consider Character 1 x Character 2 the best possible couple against those that view Character 3 x Character 1 as the ideal pairing.

This brief discussion of fujoshi illustrates the complexity of analyzing media fandom. Due to the refractory force of the field of cultural consumption, fandoms exist within fandoms in a complex web of identifications and performative enactments that are implicated in never-ending processes of identity formation and boundary work. Both as a taste culture and as an audience, media fandom constitutes a series of practical achievements that are always open to change and can even disappear. Taste, understood as the appropriation of classified, classifying practices and objects cannot be reduced to dialectic dichotomies as it takes as many forms as the many positions that constitute a field of cultural consumption.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed and analyzed the central notions of subcultural studies, as they were developed in the twentieth century. Based on this discussion, I have formulated a definition of media fandom as a subcultural formation that maintains the theoretical legacy of the CCCS in terms of the emphasis on power, inequality and exploitation, and incorporates such social issues into the notion of “taste culture” as introduced by Thornton (1996). To perform this incorporation, I have employed Bourdieu’s theory of fields, as discussed in *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993). The resulting conceptualization of taste culture is one that emphasizes the complex relationships between agents and field of consumption that allow the former to gain distinction and a variety of capitals within the latter.

The complexity inherent to the field of consumption prohibits any simple opposition between “the people” and the “power-bloc”. Introduced by Hall (1981) and subsequently taken up by influential media scholars such as Fiske (2010, 2011) and Jenkins (2013), this paradigm of the audience as resistive to the culture industries is insufficient to properly grasp the multiple positions that constitute popular culture. Instead of a flat congregation of oppressed classes, popular culture

becomes, in the bourdieusian paradigm proposed in this chapter, a field of struggle where individuals and groups confront each other in order to advance their own definitions of what is legitimate in cultural terms. To highlight such struggles, I concluded this theoretical chapter with a discussion of two fan taste cultures, articulated around *Buffy* and yaoi respectively. By analyzing these fan groupings, the fluid and complex nature of fandom comes to the fore. Refusing to be reduced to the “people versus the power-bloc” thesis, Buffy fans and fujoshi participate in fields of consumption in order to appropriate distinctive texts, objects and practices that in turn define their identities and positions as media consumers. In the empirical chapters of this dissertation, I will further bring to light the complexities inherent to a taste culture by discussing Japanese animation fans in Mexico and Canada. But first, I discuss and justify the methodologies used to approach these fans.

## Notes

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<sup>7</sup> Cohen defines a moral panic as the period when a “condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests” (2002: 1).

<sup>8</sup> Bourdieu terms the justification of such social order as sociodicy (Bourdieu, 1990).

<sup>9</sup> According to Hall, the culture of the power-bloc is an alliance of classes of forces “with the cultural power to decide what belongs and what does not” (1981: 238).

<sup>10</sup> See for example Bennet and Kahn-Harris (2004) and Muggleton and Weinzierl (2003) for illustrations of the eclectic nature of contemporary subcultural studies.

<sup>11</sup> According to Moores (1993), Hall’s opposition was not specifically addressed to Adorno but to its enduring influence in Media Studies which had taken in the 1970s the guise of a ‘textual determinism’ as illustrated by the British journal, *Screen*.

### **Introduction**

As subcultural formations articulated around taste and consumption that are constituted by a multiplicity of practices mobilized by their members, taste cultures such as Japanese animation fandom must be approached through the use of methodologies that allow the researcher to observe these practices first-hand. Ethnographic research is especially useful in this regard, as it offers the possibility of studying the actions of diverse individuals within a particular space of consumption. While the understandings obtained in this way are always partial in nature (Moore, 1993), they nonetheless open the door for a more nuanced model of media consumption. As Moore asserts, an ethnographic method has the potential to represent the lived experiences of actual members of the audience in a more complex way than methods that do not embrace participant observation in “the field” (1993). From this perspective, ethnographic methods represent the most effective form of accessing the fluidity of fans’ lived experiences within the different local and virtual spaces that make up anime fandom.

These claims regarding the importance of approaching subcultural formations through ethnographic methods are not new. The centrality of ethnographic research to the study of groups understood as “subcultures” can be traced all the way back to the foundations of subcultural theory as found in the work of Henry Mayhew (Tolson, 1997). The Chicago School was responsible for linking the classical mode of ethnography with the analysis of groups perceived as deviant (Bennett and Kahn-Harris, 2004), creating a methodological framework that was later incorporated by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies as can be appreciated in its seminal work, *Resistance Through Rituals* (Hall & Jefferson, 1976). From there, research on subcultural formations using ethnographic methods became a staple of cultural studies, a fact that eventually led to ethnographic accounts of media fandom as illustrated by the work of Jenkins (2013).

### **Alternatives to Ethnographic Research for the Study of Audiences and Fandoms**

While subcultural formations have often been approached through ethnographic methods, audiences and fandoms have been analyzed using a variety of methodologies. This fact has been influenced by the multitude of interpretations used to conceptualize those individuals that constitute the receivers of different media. From its Latin root as “the persons within hearing”, the



notion of “audience” was expanded in the nineteenth century to include also the readers of books (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998). In the twentieth century, this label was applied to “the consumers of electronically mediated messages” (Moore, 1993: 2) and became intrinsically connected with the concept of “the masses”, understood as a congregation of individuals who lacked agency and were easily influenced by the mass media. Perhaps the most potent account in this direction was the work of Theodor Adorno who theorized the masses as a passive, unimaginative and alienated source of labor (Adorno, 2001).

The concept of “culture industry” is central to Adorno’s theorization of the relationship between mass media and the audience. In fact, Adorno (2001) asserts that this expression substituted for the term “mass culture” that appeared in the drafts of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The objective of this substitution was to stress that the culture industry is not something that arises from the masses but rather is a manufactured culture that “intentionally integrates its consumers from above” (Adorno, 2001: 98). In this sense, the consumers, that is, the masses, constitute the objects of the culture industry and not the other way around. It impresses on them the same stamp, creating a consensus that replaces imagination with conformity. This power of alienation attributed to the culture industry, which exerts itself over a largely passive audience, focuses Adorno’s attention on the mass media and its messages, understood as different sectors that articulate the culture industry and constitute it as an integrated system. It is in this sense that Adorno’s work centers on “mediums/messages” and their effects on the masses.

The methodological implications of this theoretical model lead to an approach that ignores media audiences in favor of a focus on the ideological work performed by the culture industry, with a special emphasis on its hidden messages. Investigations inspired in the work of Adorno delve into the symbolic mechanism through which the mass media colonize the minds of the mass audience. *Para Leer al Pato Donald* (How to Read Donald Duck) by Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart (2000) is an example of this methodological approach. A pioneering work on “cultural imperialism” published in Chile in the seventies, *Para Leer al Pato Donald* analyses Disney comics, finding in them hidden ideological messages that lead the mass audiences of third world countries to accept the capitalist and imperialist worldview of the (American) bourgeoisie (Dorfman & Matterlart, 2000).

Lost in this analysis is the voice of the individuals and groups that constitute the mass audiences of the third world, an issue that perhaps can be traced back to the pessimism regarding

mass society that characterizes what Stuart Hall calls “the European approach” to mass communication research (1982). Indeed, Hall considers this approach to be over-generalized and speculative, even though it is historically and philosophically rich and extensive (1982). According to him, these characteristics of the European approach led Adorno to fail when he applied his model to empirical research in *The Authoritarian Personality*. The result was “a hybrid monster [...] the product of a mixed but unholy parentage” (Hall, 1982: 54).

Hall’s issues regarding the uneven methodology of the European approach to mass communication research are increased by his own political allegiances. For him, depicting those people that enjoy and consume mass media as “cultural dopes” trapped by a “false consciousness” that masks the fact that they are being manipulated by the cultural industries, is deeply troubling from a socialist standpoint. As he asserts, “the notion of the people as a purely passive, outline force is a deeply unsocialist perspective” (Hall, 1981: 232). It is in this sense that for Hall, the European approach that emerged from the Frankfurt School is an inadequate method of approaching cultural relationships. Even when this approach constitutes a powerful Marxist critique of mass society, it is too pessimistic to serve as “one of the places where socialism might be constituted” (Hall, 1981: 239) as it can never be more than a judgment that “may make us feel right, decent and self-satisfied about our denunciations of the agents of mass manipulation and deception” (Hall, 1981: 232).

It is in this sense that the disdain for the people contained within the European approach leads to “textual determinism” in as much as it understands the subject as a passive consumer perfectly manipulated by the text. Media consumption becomes, in this way, ideological indoctrination through which cultural industries reproduce the existing social order (Moore, 1993). Analyzing texts created by the culture industry thus becomes the focus of research, the way in which authors within this approach could join “the vanguard of revolutionary struggle” (Moore, 1993: 12). As a methodology, textual determinism focuses exclusively on the text, because only there the symbolic mechanisms of domination can be uncovered and criticized. The researcher becomes in this way a revolutionary capable of exposing the bourgeois ideology that alienates the masses.

Interestingly, the American alternative to the European approach to media research also relied on the paradigm of the mass society. Hall classified this “American approach” to mass communication research as “behaviourist” because its different formulations, among which

“effects” and “uses and gratifications” were the most important, focus on whether media exposure resulted in behavioural change (Hall, 1984). According to this author, the American approach was also empirical and scientific, because at the methodological level it followed the type of empirical tests characteristic of positivistic social science (Hall, 1984). If within the European approach, textual analysis was the method of choice for studying media consumption, the American approach relied instead in “methods of coding and processing a vast corpus of messages in an objective and empirically-verifiable way” (Hall, 1984: 57) that focused at first on content analysis and in later formulations such as “cultivation analysis” also incorporated survey methods for researching the audience (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998).

For Hall, this reliance on the “universal scientific method” constitutes the biggest limitation of the American approach to mass communication research. By presenting itself as empirically-grounded and scientific, this approach claimed that its findings were incontrovertible facts. However, these findings were predicated in political and ideological presuppositions that rested in American myths of integration and pluralism (Hall, 1984). It is in this sense that the American approach advanced “optimistic” conceptualizations regarding media effects that understood the media in a functionalist form. At the individual level, this meant theorizing power in terms of a direct influence of the different media on particular subjects that ignored issues of political and social power in favor of a poorly constructed notion of “value consensus”. This consensus was attributed to society at large, resulting in frameworks such as Parsons’ “social system” where norms and values organized and held together the social order (Hall, 1984).

In this functionalist framework constructed by American authors, media’s function was to reinforce the norms and values that kept the social order together. Their role was the maintenance of consensus. It was in order to discover such norms and values that researchers within this approach turned to methods of analysis that allow them to read and code media messages. Contrary to the European approach that explored the ideological, hidden elements within these messages, the methodological work of the American approach understood texts in a relatively simplistic way as a mirror where the intentions of the senders could be directly appreciated (Hall, 1984). With no surprise, what these researchers discovered in their analyses of media texts was a confirmation of social consensus, in other words, the “American Dream had been empirically verified” (Hall, 1984: 57) through a “mixture of prophecy and hope, with a brutal, hard-headed, behaviouristic positivism” (Hall, 1984: 55).

As can be appreciated in this discussion of theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of media consumption, what is missing from both European and American approaches is the audience understood as active consumers of texts. Despite their markedly different theoretical and ideological frameworks, these two approaches to mass communication research focus on the text and mobilize methodologies that have the object of analyzing media messages. The subjacent presupposition to both approaches is then that media has effects on people. If for the European approach these effects are negative and unconscious and for the American approach they become positive and empirically-observable in behavioural changes, the fact remains that in both frameworks members of the audience are nothing more than “cultural dopes” that are passively constituted by hegemonic norms and values.

It is in this sense that ethnographic research offers a counterpoint to the methods employed by the conventional European and American approaches. It centers on people, practices, narratives and interpretations. While always partial and informed by the interpretive practices of the researcher, ethnographic research nonetheless offers the possibility of approaching the lived experiences of consumers of media. Even more, as a methodology, ethnographic work can represent a political project in as much as it offers a view of the members of the audience as active agents capable of challenging or protecting different elements of the social order. This approach, however, must not be understood as an acritical celebration of consumer sovereignty as illustrated by the work of Fiske (2010) or Hunter and Kaye (1997). What is needed, instead, is what Moores calls “critical ethnography”, that is, “an approach which takes extremely seriously the interpretations of the media constructed by consumers in their everyday routines. At the same time, it is not afraid to interrogate and situate their spoken accounts” (1993: 5).

### **Critical Ethnography as an Alternative for the Study of Audiences and Fandom**

I would argue that this initial definition of critical ethnography must be expanded in order to incorporate questions of performativity and practice. Indeed, the “critical paradigm in media studies” introduced by Hall (1984) no longer constitutes an adequate framework for explaining the many practices of contemporary audiences. If focusing on the interpretations of texts by members of the audience was a valid methodological approach within the critical paradigm, transformations in media consumption have necessitated an exploration of the actions of consumers of media within different contexts of consumption and interaction. From this perspective, critical

ethnography can be defined as a methodological approach that takes into account both the interpretations constructed by consumers as well as the practices enacted by them in their everyday performances. However, this approach is not limited to description, as it interrogates and situates these interpretations and practices within a critical framework that addresses questions of power, symbolic struggle and the politics of cultural consumption.

It is important to stress that a critical ethnography of media audiences must observe and interact with members of the audience within their spaces of consumption. Moores (1993) argues that “the new audience ethnography” has in fact little to do with actual ethnographic work as most qualitative media studies are based on interviews. He nonetheless defends this trend as obtaining access to the classic space of media consumption, the household, is particularly complicated. He argues that audio-taped conversations can be understood as proper ethnographies (Moores, 1993). This fact is based on his definition of critical ethnography, and on his interpretation of ethnographic research as the analysis of spoken accounts collected among consumers of media. I would argue, however, that this is not the case. Interviews are not an adequate substitute for firsthand participation in the field, as they maintain the world of the other at the discursive level. The fluidity of people’s lives, their “practical reasonings”, the ways in which these individuals carry out their everyday routines can only be grasped through practical immersion in their worlds (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011).

Matt Hills (2002) raises another objection about the use of interviews as a proxy for field research. For him, the term “ethnography” is used often in a very loose manner in media and cultural studies, to the point that on occasion it corresponds with “little more than hour-long interviews with respondents” (Hills, 2002: 68). This understanding of ethnographic research is problematic because it leads to the methodological error of “asking the audience”, a reductive approach that assumes that discourses enacted during interviews by consumers of media can function as a transparent source of meaning regarding their media consumption (Hills, 2002). According to Hills, the qualitative process of “asking the audience” is especially inadequate when dealing with the most committed consumers of media, that is, media fans. The root of this inadequacy lies in the fact that fans often mobilize discursive justifications of their passion toward certain texts and genres. These justifications are often tactics through which fans defend themselves against external criticism (Hills, 2002).

Interestingly, Hills's discussion regarding fan justifications is conceptually close to research on other "leisure identities". According to Anderson and Taylor (2010), members of "male leisure subcultures", such as skydivers and gun collectors, tend to employ interactional tactics to maintain a positive social identity in front of outsiders. While interacting with nonpeers, these hobbyists often avoid discussing practices and narratives that could suggest deviant identities or behaviors. Aligning themselves with the outsiders, these members of leisure subcultural formations hide the most controversial aspects of their practices and discourses. My research suggests that this is also the case for fans. Not only do Japanese animation fans mobilize discursive justification of their love for anime, they also avoid talking about the more controversial aspects of fandom, particularly in terms of consumption of erotic narratives.

As such, "asking the audience" cannot offer more than a normalized, rationalized view of the worlds of consumers of media, particularly when approaching fans. As members of fan cultures often have to deal with the stigmatization of their identities (Jenkins, 2013), they are proficient in concealing certain fan practices and narratives. From this perspective, the "tell it like it is" approach to interviews that "consists of little more than giving voice to [...] informants" (Hollway and Jefferson, 2013: 52) remains largely blind to the range of lived experiences associated with being a member of a particular fandom. In order to better grasp these lived experiences of fans and move from the public, "official" discourse that they enact in interviews to a more personal "back stage" narrative (Moore, 1993), the researcher must enter the field to gain meaningful insight into the practices, narratives and objects that characterize the fandom under research. Only in this way can the more concealed and controversial aspects of a taste culture be brought to light.

Because gaining relative mastery over the practices, narratives and objects of a fandom and other taste cultures is a requisite of grasping the lived experiences of fans, ethnographic research must occupy a central place within the methods used to approach fandom and its members. Interviews can be undertaken as a complement to ethnographic work, but they do not constitute a valid substitute for immersion in the field. If the difficulty of obtaining access to the household makes the use of interviews almost inevitable for many media researchers, this limitation is not present in fandom research as fans often display their practices and narratives in public spaces. From this perspective, it is essential to visit the field when researching fandom.

While I have been advocating for the use of "critical ethnography" in fandom research, the trend in fandom studies has been to approach fans from the methodological position that Hills

(2002) terms the “academic-fan”, that is, an academic that claims to also be a fan. Initiated by Jenkins in *Textual Poachers*, the notion of academic-fan is a methodological tactic through which researchers can assert their mastery over the practices, narratives and objects of a given fandom. Jenkins, for example, proposes that being a fan allows him to better understand media fandom, as his ethnographic research is not limited by the academic distance generated by other authors’ “personal fears, anxieties, and fantasies about the dangers of mass culture” (Jenkins, 2003: 6). This is a dangerous proposal, as it presents Jenkins as a fan that, far from “going native”, is in fact “a native” that partakes in “certain understandings and forms of access impossible through other positionings” (Jenkins, 2013: 6).

The most brutal manifestation of this methodological tactic can be found in the work of Hills (2002). This author completely rejects the usefulness of ethnographic research for the study of fandom, claiming instead that the best method for understanding fans is autoethnography. Of course, Hills is referring to his own autoethnography as an academic-fan. He proposes that using this method, he “can chart how multiple fandoms are linked through the individual’s realization of a self-identity” (Hills, 2002: 81). Illustrating this approach, Hills undertakes an analysis of his experiences as a fan, mapping his fandoms and discussing them through accounts of gender, class, race, sexuality and family that, while not without value, fall more often than not into common sense reductions of subjectivity (Hills, 2002). Presenting this interpretation of his fandom as transparent reflections of a “fan native”, Hills claims the right to speak for other fans that are not given voice in any part of his work, let alone in his ethnography, which is characterized by a solipsistic account of his experiences as a fan.

While I could also take the mantle of the academic-fan, in as much as I certainly enjoy Japanese animation and Japanese videogames, it is my belief that being a fan does not give me the ability to ignore the academic distance between myself and anime fans. In as much as I have been socialized in social sciences, my participation in the field as a researcher is not homologous with my position in the field of consumption. When I walk through a convention taking notes, I become an ethnographer, observing in a detached manner what takes place around me, trying to balance my research commitments with my emotional and personal attachments (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011). When I talk to a friend about a videogame or an anime series that I like, I do so through a very different position, that of the fan that is passionate about narratives and characters.

This disjuncture between my position as a researcher and my position as a consumer of media is exacerbated by an issue not discussed by either Jenkins (2013) or Hills (2002): the fact that media fandom is composed of distinct communities of fans that hold different approaches to texts and consumption. In fact, as fandom is not an interpretive community with shared values, but rather a field of consumption oriented towards certain texts, practices and objects, claiming to be an insider does not automatically lead to greater insight regarding the lived experiences of other fans. This explains why Jenkins' work, for example, has neglected many dimensions of fan practice in favor of a utopian portrayal of fandom that reads more like a "fan manifesto" than actual ethnographic work. Jenkins asserts his own positionality within fandom as an accurate depiction of the lived experiences of every member of this field of consumption. Despite his critique of Jenkins, Hills (2002) goes even further in this direction. His autoethnographic approach, paired with his constant attacks on the field of academia, function as symbolic boundaries that inscribe Hills within fandom as the final academic-fan, capable of ending the "moral dualism" that separates the "good" academic from the "bad" fan (Hills, 2002). For him, academic accounts of fandom are always guided by particular agendas that do not reflect the "imagined subjectivity" of fans (Hills, 2002):

Fandom, I would suggest, deserves to be represented more on its own terms [...] rather than being used to form part of a moral dualism. The task which confronts cultural studies at this moment in time [...] is to theorise the media cult and its fandoms through a primary allegiance to the role of 'fan' and a secondary allegiance to 'academia' (Hills, 2002: 9-10).

The methodological assumptions of this quote are highly problematic. Hills implies that fandom is a monolithic entity that can represent itself. This representation can occur if the media scholar maintains a primary allegiance to "the role of fan", instead of towards "academia". Interestingly, this role of fan is also presented in a monolithic fashion. There is one fan identity within fandom that informs the work of the academic-fan against the abuses of reified "academia". It is in this sense that Hills can assert himself as an insider, representative of other fans. Being a loyal member of fandom, he can adequately represent the community of fans on its own terms. Like Jenkins, Hills claims to speak for every fan, a fact that is readily dismissed in his own work



when he asserts that Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and Transformers are not important objects of consumption for fan cultures (Hills, 2002).

As a consumer of media born in the eighties, I am well aware that Ninja Turtles and Transformers are loved by many fans. Even more, one of my interviewees collected action figures of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. As a field of consumption, fandom is a gigantic place that is composed of a myriad of positions. Claiming to be a fan of certain texts does not give media scholars the capacity to access a purer representation of fandom. Far from it. Without employing a critical approach to ethnographic research, it becomes quite easy to believe that one's own lived experiences as fans can be transferred without problem to other consumers of media. It is true that knowledge about characters and texts can help the researcher to navigate the always changing currents of media fandom. However, this does not mean that one's own position as fan can be presented as homologous to the positions occupied by other consumers of media. To grasp these positions, the only option is to participate and observe the practices and interactions mobilized by fans, as they occur in definite spaces of consumption.

### **Ethnographic Research on Japanese Animation Fans**

As Thomas LaMarre (2007) highlights in his introduction to the thought of Hiroki Azuma, the fact that the "subculture" constituted by Japanese anime fans is a movement and not an object, requires researchers to immerse themselves in the daily routines of otaku. For Azuma, truly studying "otaku culture" means that the researcher "cannot stand outside it and observe it but must participate in it" (LaMarre, 2007: 177). In other words, to explore Japanese animation fandom, understood both as a congregation of consumers of anime and a taste culture articulated around heterodox practices and meanings, media scholars must first immerse themselves within this fandom and grasp the texts, characters, knowledges, practices and objects that fans consume and mobilize within this field of consumption. As discussed in the previous sections of this chapter, ethnographic work, whether online or in the field, greatly facilitates this immersion.

It is in this sense that I decided to conduct a multi-situated ethnography of Japanese animation fans to better grasp their practices, meanings and experiences. According to Christine Hine (2004), the complexity of trans-local phenomena taking place within the contemporary world requires an ethnographic style that demands personal engagement with the context of research, and multiple forms of interaction with the participants in the field. While Hine proposes that the

Internet constitutes a legitimate space for conducting this type of multi-situated ethnography, given the possibility of analyzing textual interactions between individuals (Hine, 2004), I decided to focus instead on local spaces where anime fans came together and enacted their fan practices. This approach was motivated by my analytical interest in performativity and practice as well as my desire to move away from reflexive justifications of fandom and its associated taste. As Giddens asserts, self-identity has become a “reflexively organized” project within late modernity (1991), a fact that according to Charles Cheung, has established the Internet as a site for the construction of coherent self-narratives that more often than not establish positive identities (2007). From this perspective, grasping the messiness of the real, the contradictions mobilized by the participants in the field, or their failed identity claims and practical reiterations, can only be achieved through participation in the everyday world of people. A multi-situated ethnography must then include immersion within the actual physical places where participants enact “practical mastery” (Bourdieu, 1977) in their everyday lives.

Following this methodological approach to multi-situated ethnographic research means exploring trans-local phenomena within different local fields where participants mobilize the practices that create their everyday world. By immersing oneself in a variety of localities, it becomes possible to achieve multiple forms of interaction with the participants of a trans-local field. In the case of Japanese animation fans, this multi-situated immersion can take subcultural lenses, given the fact that fandom has often been understood as a subcultural formation (Jenkins, 2013; Hills, 2002). In this sense, multi-situated ethnographic research on anime fans can be framed as ethnographic research on social “scenes,” that is, on “mutually recognized subcultural ‘space’ where the production and consumption of esoteric activities flourish” (Young and Atkinson, 2008: 30). Contrary to other approaches to subcultural space that stress their dependence on firm subcultural memberships and styles (Baron, 1989, Hall & Jefferson, 1975; Hebdige, 1979), scenes are defined in terms of “the production and consumption activities of those involved” and also, very importantly in terms of ethnographic research on trans-local phenomena, are “symbolically linked to other spatial nodes, either nationally or internationally” (Young and Atkinson, 2008: 30).

I began my research by visiting anime conventions in Mexico and Canada. Anime conventions are one of the most important spaces in which Japanese animation fans gather and interact with each other (Napier, 2007), and can be framed as subcultural scenes where fans mobilize practices of consumption and production. They are linked to other localities through

consumer goods, guests and practices (Napier, 2007). Framing anime conventions as mutually recognized subcultural spaces linked to other subcultural nodes, allowed me to pay attention to the complexity of trans-local phenomena, that is, to the continuities and discontinuities that existed between the different Japanese animation conventions I visited and to the webs of connectivity that define the practices taking place therein (Hughson, 2008). Conducting research in two countries improved my understanding of anime conventions as subcultural spaces. I was able to compare and contrast production and consumption activities taking place in each convention. I was also able to consider whether and how these practices were linked to other subcultural, spatial nodes.

Choosing Mexico and Canada was motivated by the trans-local nature of Japanese animation fandom. During research for my master's thesis, I became aware of the many connections between Mexican fandom and fans in the rest of North America. In fact, my older interviewees referred in many occasions to resources in English that they accessed in the earlier periods of Mexican anime fandom, given the fact that most information regarding Japanese animation was only available on the Internet (Robles Bastida, 2012). A couple of them narrated how they would travel to Mexico City to buy anime movies and series that were only available in English. While Mexican anime fandom has come of age since those times, the connections between Mexican and English-speaking North-American fandom remain important. In this sense, my research is not about global cultures but about North America as a trans-local field of consumption for Japanese animation and related media and products.

Certainly, it would seem as if not including American fans in ethnographic research regarding a trans-local North American field is an important omission. However, I would argue that this is not the case, given the fact that the English-speaking community of North American fans is always in interaction, both on the Internet and in conventions. As my research revealed, many fans in Calgary travel to American conventions and mobilize in them the same practices as their American peers. This is also the case for fan producers that join fansubs or fan fiction sites. They write and subtitle in English and collaborate with other North American fans without constructing a Canadian or American identity in the process. While there are local differences among fan communities, both the subcultural scenes and the online communities of Canada and the United States are integrated into what can be called North American fandom.

Even when North America can be seen as a trans-local field of consumption, Mexico is not included into the North American fandom, both in terms of language and in the forms through which Canadian fans experience their consumption of Japanese animation and related texts and objects. The participants in my research often referred to the impact of anime in “North America” or to anime texts that were not available in “North America”, in a generic way that included Canada and the United States but ignored Mexico. From this perspective, constructing two analytical objects, “Mexican Fandom” and “North American Fandom”, constitutes a legitimate model to approach the trans-local field of consumption that has emerged around Japanese animation in the region known in Mexico as “América del Norte”<sup>12</sup>.

It is in this sense that I organized my ethnographic research within anime conventions through a methodological separation between “Mexican scenes” and “Canadian/North American scenes”. I undertook my research in two distinct ethnographic phases. The first of these phases included visits to Mexican anime conventions while the second of them took me to Canadian anime cons. In order to choose which anime conventions to attend, I accessed websites that featured information about anime conventions taking place in 2014. From this pool of information, I listed anime conventions taking place in Mexico and Canada. Based on this list, I decided to focus my ethnographic work on anime conventions in two specific areas: Central Mexico and Western Canada. This choice was in part a matter of convenience and resources as I live in Western Canada and my family resides in Central Mexico. Choosing these places was financially practical, as I was able to use my home and that of my parents as bases of operation and research. These methodological choices, however, also reflected the demands of comparative research, as both regions contain a number of big cities that feature important anime conventions. From these big cities, I choose three in each country: Mexico City, Toluca and León in Central Mexico and Vancouver, Calgary and Edmonton in Western Canada. This final selection was made based on both the size of the cities and the dates in which anime conventions were scheduled to take place between March and September of 2014.

### **The Process of Ethnographic Research**

I began my ethnographic research in Mexico on the 14<sup>th</sup> of March of 2014. The first convention I attended, “La Mole Comic Con,” took place in the World Trade Center (WTC) Ciudad de México, an important convention and exhibition center located in the southern part of Mexico City. I did

not have problems accessing the convention as the only requirement to enter was to pay the entrance fee. This was also the case for the other conventions I visited during my ethnographic research. The entrance fee for “La Mole Comic Con” was the most expensive among the Mexican conventions I attended. The reason was that this convention, as its name indicates, is not just about anime, but includes other types of fandom such as American Comics, Star Wars, and Doctor Who. As such, it offers a wider variety of merchandise and guests of honor, and charges a higher admission price.

I chose to visit first this convention of multiple fandoms with the objective of observing Japanese animation fans in an environment where fans of other cultural forms were also present. “La Mole Comic Con” occupied the third floor of the WTC. On the 14th of March, only two halls of this floor were open to the public. The largest of these had a rectangular shape and was filled with booths that sold merchandise related to different fandoms. At one end of this room, there was also an area called “Artists’ Alley” where artists of varying degrees of renown were located. The second hall was the conference room. It was filled with rows of chairs. At one end of this room there was a podium with a long table. I spent the first day of research constantly walking between these two rooms, watching the people attending the event and taking jottings with an iPod. I took notes openly, stopping close to a wall or booth when I saw something that appeared interesting or relevant. As many individuals in this setting were constantly using phones to text or check information, this style of note-taking was not intrusive or out-of-place. At first I thought that being alone would have been an issue, believing that most people probably attend conventions in groups. I soon noticed, however, that many people were actually there by themselves. A man without company writing on an electronic device was nothing out of the ordinary in this setting and as such my presence as an ethnographer blended in with that of the regular attendees to the convention.

To elaborate my jottings in this and the rest of the conventions I attended, I followed the recommendations given by Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (2011: 31-33):

First, jot down details of what you sense are key components of observed scenes, events, or interactions. [...] Second, jot down concrete sensory details about observed scenes and interactions. [...] Third, avoid characterizing scenes or what people do through generalizations or summaries. [...] Fourth, fieldworkers use jottings to capture detailed aspects of scenes, talk, and interaction; [...] Fifth, use jottings to record the details of

emotional expressions and experiences; [...] Sixth, use jottings to signal your general impressions and feelings.

Using my jottings, I created detailed descriptions of the events, practices and people that I observed that day. Again following, Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (2011), I organized these descriptions as a narrative that recounted my day's experiences in chronological order. This "day's entry" allowed me to create an episodic tale about the things that I watched, heard and felt in that first day of research. I was not able to finish my initial field notes that night as I was exhausted by the trip and the fieldwork. Instead, I chose to finish it the following day. This decision meant that I did not attend "La Mole Comic Con" on its second day. I returned to the convention on its third and final day. The field notes of my previous visit had been completed, and this initial narration that emphasized certain features and actions taking place within the convention, informed the events, practices and persons which I chose to watch and write about on the second day of fieldwork. On this day, a third hall was open to the public. It had a stage close to one of the walls and there were no chairs on it. This room was meant for performances such as fan contests and musical concerts. As was the case with my first visit to "La Mole Comic Con", I spent the day walking among the halls, observing people and taking notes. I left around 7 p.m. and worked on my field notes that night and the following day.

The second convention I visited, "Expo Anime León," took place in a hotel located in downtown León in the state of Guanajuato. "Expo Anime León" was considerably smaller than "La Mole Comic Con" in terms of space, events, and special guests. Also, as its name indicated, "Expo Anime León" was an anime convention. This was illustrated by the fact that most of the merchandise and activities were related to Japanese animation. As with "La Mole Comic Con", I walked, observed attendees, and took notes with my iPod. "Expo Anime León" occupied the three convention halls of the hotel. The two smaller rooms were interconnected and located on the first floor. One of them had a rectangular shape and a stage. This was the place meant for events and fan activities. The other one was the smallest room in the convention and housed a screen and chairs. This was the Videogames Hall. The largest room, located on the second floor, was the Vendors' Hall. It was filled with stalls that sold anime merchandise. I noticed a number of differences and similarities between this anime convention and the multi-fandom convention I had

previously observed. In this sense, although informed by my previous field notes, my ethnographic work in “Expo Anime León” offered many new insights into the practices and events taking place.

I spent the rest of the evening and part of the night writing field notes. The next morning, I undertook the same routine. The convention was crowded this time and it was really hot inside the convention halls. Due to the quantity of people concentrated in the small rooms I was able to listen much more closely to many conversations taking place among the attendees. This provided interesting snippets into the anime fans’ meanings, experiences and concerns while visiting “Expo Anime León.” The convention ended around seven and I decided to walk in the area that surrounded the hotel, in order to watch the behavior of the attendees outside the convention. The observation of fans’ actions outside of anime conventions became part of my ethnographic research in all the subsequent conventions I visited, as it offered interesting insights into the ways in which otaku interact with other people in non-fannish spaces.

I did not visit another convention until 26 April. On that day, I attended “JuguetiAnime”, a small convention in Toluca, organized to collect toys for children on the occasion of Children’s Day in Mexico. It came to my attention that “Expo Anime” (an itinerant convention) was also taking place that weekend in Toluca, and due to the small size of “JuguetiAnime,” I decided to change my original plan and go to the former on the 27<sup>th</sup>, instead of attending two days the latter. In this way, I undertook ethnographic research at two different conventions that weekend. This was the first time that I became aware of the politics surrounding the organization of anime conventions. Through my two days in the field, I learned that “JuguetiAnime” had been organized by the same group that handled a long-running convention in Toluca, called “Expo MAGyC” as a response to “Expo Anime” visiting the city for the first time.

Because “JuguetiAnime” had been organized in a rush, the event took place in an old shopping center located in downtown Toluca. This shopping center houses many of the stores responsible for “Expo MAGyC” and is in a sense, the headquarters for the organizers of this convention. I had expected to find a formal convention but other than a stage in one corner of the second floor of the shopping center and a couple of booths that sold Japanese food and merchandise, the mall seemed to be the same as usual. The stores were open and people were walking around and entering them. Access to the stage was not restricted and anyone could watch the events. In this sense, this gathering of anime fans was more public than the previous ones I had visited. As with previous days of fieldwork, I walked around, paid attention to the activities taking

place at the scene, and wrote jottings. After leaving “JugueteiAnime”, I composed my field notes for the day and, reflecting on the small size of this event, decided to attend “Expo Anime” the next morning.

As was the case in León, “Expo Anime Toluca” took place in the convention halls of a hotel. Contrary to León, however, this hotel was located in the southeast of the city, at the side of a large street that leads to Mexico City. Because of this, there was not much to observe in terms of fans’ actions outside of the convention as most people arrived and left the event in cars. “Expo Anime Toluca” had more space than “Expo Anime León”. The two halls occupied by the convention were spacious and cool. The larger one of them had a rectangular shape and was divided between the Vendor’s Hall and the Videogames Hall. The other was a big square and had a stage near one of its walls with rows of red chairs facing it. Size notwithstanding, this configuration was the same that I had observed in “Expo Anime León”. The activities and guests were also very similar and in this sense, it was easy to realize that this was the same convention that I had attended before. The attendees, however, were different as Toluca and León are very distinct urban centers. This situation offered the possibility of making comparisons between fans’ practices in anime conventions with very similar structures. I remained in “Expo Anime Toluca” until the vendors began to take apart their booths.

The convention I visited next was the one in which I was most interested. “TNT” is the largest anime convention in Mexico and as such, a very significant space of research. It takes place, perhaps with no surprise, in Mexico City. This anime convention has been taking place since 2001 in a convention center located in Tlatelolco, a place infamous because of the killings of students by the Mexican government in 1968. There were two entrances to the convention. One was for those persons that had pre-paid tickets and the other for those that were going to buy their tickets on site. “TNT 27” occupied the whole convention center. It was much larger than any of the previous conventions I had visited. The first floor had two huge halls. Both of them were occupied by booths. Most of these sold merchandise but some belonged to publishing companies and artists. In the first hall, to the right of the entrance doors, there was a stage which was surrounded by metal fences. Big speakers were over it and loud music was coming from them. At one end of this room, which was the larger of the two, there was a big stand that sold Japanese and Korean food. In smaller stands located in some corners of the first floor, they also sold drinks, hot dogs and hamburgers. The wall of the first hall opened in its upper and lower corners to the second hall. At



the bottom of this smaller room, close to the upper corner that connected both halls, there was a staircase that led to the second floor.

This second floor was smaller than the first one as it had a big, open space at its center. Despite having some booths scattered around, it was mostly meant for fans' activities. In three corners of the floor, there were stages dedicated respectively to dancing, cosplay, and concerts. The other corner was occupied by an area decorated in a medieval style where people were shooting arrows and fighting with swords. Again, I walked, watched and took notes. There were not many people on the first day that I attended this convention, as it was a Thursday, but this situation changed for the other three days of the convention. Friday was well-attended and Saturday and Sunday were so crowded that it was hard to walk. This impressive quantity of fans gathered in a single place allowed me to observe many new situations. On the weekend, for example, the scene I watched as I left the station was surreal. Among the old buildings of Tlatelolco, survivors of the fifties and sixties, a number of young people, dressed as anime and videogame characters walked in groups towards the convention center. Some of them were even getting dressed near walls. Because of all these new observations, my field notes for this convention were significantly longer than the ones before.

After this convention, I left for Canada. On 16 May I attended "Otafest 2014". In contrast to the Mexican conventions that took place in hotels or convention centers, this Canadian anime convention took place at the University of Calgary. As I lived on campus at the time, attending this event was easy and I was able to arrive early and leave late. The three days that I conducted fieldwork in this convention provided a significant amount of data. The similarities and differences with the Mexican conventions offered new insights along with variations of themes that I had already observed in Mexico. Walking through a university in order to observe the actions taking place was a different experience than moving between convention halls. In this case, fans were appropriating a space originally designed for educational purposes and had to interact with people attending the university for reasons other than the convention. This situation made for interesting contrasts and practices of concealment and interaction that I had not seen in Mexico.

The structure of the convention itself also provided valuable data as it was clearly different from the standard structure in Mexico. There were different activities for fans than the ones I had observed in Mexico, and the cosplay contest and other events took a local color. The fact of having the activities in classrooms and not conference halls also changed the dynamic of the events. All

in all, “Otafest 2014” provided many observations that helped me to further the reflective and continuous distancing characteristic of ethnographic work (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 2011). In this sense, my first visit to a Canadian convention both opened new lines of inquiry and reflection, and allowed me to distance myself from the events and people that I had observed in Mexican conventions. I gained new perceptions regarding my fieldwork and noticed things in my field notes that until then had seemed natural or unimportant.

The second convention I visited in Canada was “Northwest Fanfest 2014.” This convention took place at the University of British Columbia. Unlike “Otafest 2014” which was spread throughout the University of Calgary, “Northwest Fanfest 2014” took place in only two buildings, the Student Union Building and the Student Recreation Centre. Besides anime, this convention was also dedicated to videogames and board games. “Otafest 2014” also had had a space for these activities but in “Northwest Fanfest 2014” they occupied a big hall in the Student Recreation Centre. Another difference was that some of the treed areas around the Student Union Building had been designated as “photoshoot areas.”

The spatial organization of “Northwest Fanfest 2014” was not the only difference vis-à-vis “Otafest 2014.” The events and panels in this convention were also different. This situation made me reflect about local differences among conventions, about how these places have their own way of enacting fan practices. I had at this time, a distinct feeling that the Otaku fandom in Vancouver was different than the one in Calgary. Listening to panelists discuss local events, stores and famous members of the community created for me a broad picture of Vancouver anime fans as a particular community. For the three days that “Northwest Fanfest 2014” lasted, I made jottings that explored the particularities of this convention.

The last convention I attended during this period was “Animethon 21”. This anime convention took place in the City Centre Campus of MacEwan University in the city of Edmonton. “Animethon 21” was spread around the whole campus including the parking lot, where the vendors’ hall was located. I walked through this parking lot and around the first and second floor of the campus, using my iPod to take notes. I did this for the three days of the convention, paying particular attention to the themes and practices that my previous field notes revealed as relevant. At this point, I already had a clearer view of Canadian anime fandom and its practices. If “Otafest 2014” showed to me the Canadian anime convention, “Animethon 21” gave me a fuller understanding of these subcultural spaces.

### **Interviews as Part of the Ethnographic Research on Japanese Animation Fans**

The achievement of this understanding, dependent on a systematic process of creating descriptive and lively portraits of people, actions and places, opened the doors to the practices and meanings that characterize Japanese Animation fans, at least in the spaces of the anime convention. After going back to Calgary and writing my field notes for “Animethon 21,” I decided to conclude the ethnographic phase of my research. As a result, I moved to the interview phase of my data collection process. This movement from the field to the discursive practice of localized individuals, had the objective of exploring not only the meanings that fans themselves attributed to their practices but also the ways in which they constructed their fan identity. As Michèle Lamont asserts, individuals create their persona as they speak through the use of symbolic boundaries (1992). In this sense, interviews can be used to access not only the interviewees’ worldview but also their practices of identity formation and boundary work. Nevertheless, as I have emphasized in this chapter, interviews by themselves cannot offer an adequate substitute for immersion within the field. In the words of Lamont: “Interviews force one to focus on the outer edges of classification systems, however, and to ignore finer types of behaviors that can only be tapped through observation” (1992: 18).

The finer practices that constitute social life cannot be grasped by interviews. Paired with the fact that the interview process is always exposed to distorting effects (Lamont, 1992), this limitation of interviews as a qualitative methodology makes it indispensable to integrate them into ethnographic research. From this perspective, interviews must be conducted as complement to field work. As Emerson, Fretz and Shaw assert, ethnographic research “is not primarily a matter of asking but, rather, of inferring what people are concerned with from the specific ways in which they talk and act in a variety of natural settings” (2011: 168). In this sense, inferences about the lived experiences of participants in the field, obtained through ethnographic work, must always precede the process of interviewing these participants to grasp their discursive understandings regarding their everyday world.

Following this methodological approach, I began the interview phase of my research by reading again and analyzing the field notes, from nineteen days of observation, that I had elaborated until this point, with the objective of discovering themes and practices that appeared frequently. While carefully reading my field notes, I underlined passages that I found important. I also wrote several notes on the margins of every page I read. This process of identifying categories

and analytic dimensions is sometimes referred to as open coding. According to Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, “[i]n such line-by-line coding, the ethnographer entertains all analytic possibilities; she attempts to capture as many ideas and themes as time allows but always stays close to what has been written down in the fieldnote.” (2011: 175). Following this approach for open coding, I identified as many categories and themes as I could. This analytical work was shaped by my theoretical background and as such, centered around themes related to my research interests. Because of this situation, the focus of my open coding was on the social practices that Japanese animation fans performed within the spaces of the anime conventions, such as cosplay contests and buying merchandise.

Once I had analyzed all my fieldnotes in this way, I used the themes, ideas and categories that emerged from this process of open coding to create a set of questions related to the practices of Japanese animation fans. These questions had the objective of exploring the opinions and ideas of particular individuals regarding their experiences within anime fandom. This standardized interview guide asked fans to talk about Japanese animation, other media, merchandise, community and conventions, cosplay and other fan practices, online practices, and Japan. It also included a discussion of some of the jargon that I had seen in anime conventions and webpages. Once this guide was ready, I began to reach out to anime fans that might be interested in participating in face-to-face interviews. My criteria of selection sought participants that wanted to talk about their experiences as anime fans and with Japanese animation. In other words, I looked for people that identified as fans in the sense of having interest or even passion regarding anime and its related practices. For a study like this, focused on fans, self-selection was not a weakness of the research design; it actually helped to ensure that actual anime enthusiasts reached out to me. My plan was to get forty participants, twenty in Central Mexico and twenty in Western Canada. Because of my previous research, I already had some contacts in my home city so I contacted one of them first. She agreed to help me and offered to tell her friends about my current research. As a result, I flew to Mexico on the first day of December and spent all that month interviewing Japanese animation fans in Toluca.

During this time, I interviewed ten people. My first interviews took place in a coffee shop in downtown Toluca. I had planned to only interview my initial contact on this occasion, but she brought four friends with her. Apparently, she had convinced three of them to talk with me so I took advantage of the opportunity and made four interviews, one after the other. Each interview

lasted around an hour so we remained in the coffee shop for more than four hours. My interviewees were two women and two men. At the end, I was exhausted but also fascinated by the amount of information that these four fans shared with me. Although I used the questions I had created as a guide, I also explored some fan experiences that emerged during the interviews. It was clear to me from the beginning of our talks that each fan had a particular approach to fandom and that they gave importance to different subcultural practices, so I adapted my interviews accordingly, creating some open questions that concentrated on these fans' interests and passions.

I followed this approach with the remaining six individuals I interviewed during this visit to Mexico. They were part of a different clique of anime fans than my first contact. I had met three of them during my Master's research. Since then, the group had expanded and now included new members. These interviews lasted between forty-five minutes to one hour and a half. I interviewed the members I already knew first. Because I had familiarity with them, I was able to obtain good rapport during the interview process. The first person I interviewed was a woman. As was the case with my first interviewees, we met in a coffee shop. The second person I talked to was older than the other members of the clique. I interviewed him in his house. This was also the case for the third member of the group I interviewed, another man. These two interviews proved to be very important as I was given access to the private spaces of Japanese animation fans. One of the sections of my interview guide asked about these private spaces and being able to see them first hand was very informative. I interviewed the remaining three members of this clique in coffee shops. One of them was the fiancée of the second man I interviewed at home. The other two were a couple and I interviewed each of them with the other member of the couple present.

After these ten interviews, I returned to Canada, where I conducted twenty-one interviews with fans living in Alberta. Twenty of these interviews were face-to-face and took place in the city of Calgary. The other one was conducted by email with a young woman living in the city of Edmonton. My recruitment of participants in Canada was different than the one I employed in Mexico, as I had no prior contact with Canadian anime fans. I began by writing an English version of my interview guide. I had designed a recruitment poster as part of the process for obtaining ethics approval for my research. It invited Japanese animation fans to talk about their experiences. I put some copies of this poster around the university but I did not obtain any response until I contacted the Japanese Animation club of the University of Calgary. I wrote an email, asking them

for help and attaching a copy of my poster. One of the executives of this club showed the poster to the regular members and some of them reached out to me, offering to give me an interview.

Five members of the Anime club contacted me. They were all male and their age was between twenty and twenty-five years. I met them in different parts of the University of Calgary. The first interview took place the 26 January and the last one four days later. Although initially it appeared as if I would be able to finish my Canadian interviews relatively fast, after the fifth interview, no other member of the club reached out to me. This was puzzling, especially considering the fact that the fans that I had already interviewed encouraged other members of the club to participate in my research. Contrary to Mexico, where fans introduced me to other fans, snowball sampling did not seem to work in Calgary and as a result, I was unable to establish a network of participants. Because of this, I had to rely on individual methods of recruitment. I spent February trying to contact anime fans. My recruitment poster never seemed to reach anyone in the university but I also posted it online in different forums and club sites frequented by anime fans that lived in Calgary and other parts of Alberta. I did not obtain any answer until I visited the webpage for Otafest. I submitted an online message to a member of the planning committee, asking authorization to create a thread in the forums of the webpage that showcased my recruitment poster. This member, who was responsible of the marketing of Otafest, answered quickly and kindly. He allowed me to post my poster in their website and suggested that I could also post it on the Facebook wall of Otafest. I liked this suggestion so I became a member of the Otafest group on Facebook and posted my recruitment poster there. Not long after doing this, some fans reached out to me through my university email account.

Not every fan that contacted me at this time decided to become a participant. Some of the individuals that inquired about my research stopped sending emails after some online interactions and others never showed up for an interview, even when they had previously agreed to talk with me. Eight people followed through with the whole process and became participants in my research. Five of them were men and three women. I interviewed them throughout March 2015. At the end of this second group of interviews, I decided to focus my recruitment efforts on female anime fans as at this point I had interviewed ten men and only three women. This proved to be difficult as most of the female fans that reached out to me did not seem enthusiastic about the prospect of face-to-face interviews. Some of them asked about the possibility of answering the questions by mail and another one wanted to use Skype. I tried to accommodate them but the answers I obtained by

mail were very brief and the fan that asked for a skype interview never managed to show up during the times that we had previously agreed upon for her interview.

Finally, I published my recruitment poster again in the Facebook group of Otafest. I included a text that stressed the importance of hearing the experiences of female fans of Japanese animation. After doing this and reaching out again to some female fans that had stopped answering my mails, I finally got a third wave of interviewees. It started on April 23th and ended on May 13th. The participants in this occasion were four females and one male. Again, this did not reflect the number of persons that reached out to me during this period as some fans stopped answering mails after some interactions and others were not able to go through with the interview process. One female fan, for example, agreed to talk to me at the University of Calgary during Otafest 2015. She asked me to meet her in a panel that she was organizing on 16 May. She told me that she would be accompanied by her friends so I would get the chance to also interview some of them. That day, I went to the panel, dedicated to the anime series *Soul Eater*, and I watched my contact and her friends interact with the audience in many playful ways. When the panel ended I approached my contact; however, after explaining again to her that the interviews lasted between thirty minutes and an hour, she let me know that she and her friends could not spare that amount of time as they had several activities planned for the day. Because of this, after handing some of my recruitment posters to them I left the panel, agreeing with her to perhaps conduct the interview at a future time.

Despite missing the chance to interview this female fan, this visit to Otafest 2015 was useful in terms of my research. In the first place, the panel that my contact had hosted was of a type and style that I had not watched in my previous ethnographic work. Because of this, after leaving this fan and her friends I sat down to write a brief fieldnote about the things that I had noticed about this panel. Also, after finishing this fieldnote, I went back to Otafest, hoping to obtain the final two interviews that I needed to reach the twenty interviews of Canadian anime fans that I had established in my prospectus. After walking around the convention for a while, I approached one of the booths of the planning committee, asking if it would be okay to hand my recruitment poster to the fans walking the convention. The members of the staff that were on the booth contacted someone by radio and instead of allowing me to hand out my posters, they offered me the possibility of interviewing members of the planning committee. I had already interviewed one of them, so I was aware of the important insights that people working in the organization of an

anime convention could offer to my research. Because of this, I accepted their offer and was taken to the room that the planning committee was using as their center of operations.

I met with the member of the planning committee that I had previously interviewed and he introduced me to the man apparently in charge. I explained my research to this man and told him that it will be great if I could interview two female members of the staff. I was taken to one of the tables of the room and after some minutes a young woman joined me. She was in charge of the cosplay contests. After our talk, a second, older woman came to the table. She was in charge of the special guests. Both conversations shed light over the inner workings of Otafest. When I finished the second interview, I thanked the man in charge, gave him my business card and left the room. I had twenty interviews in English so I decided to conclude this phase of my research in Canada. However, that night I was contacted by one of the participants from the panel that I had visited that day. She was from Edmonton, and we agreed that I would send her my questions by electronic mail once Otafest was over and she was back in her city. I sent my interview guide to her and a couple of days later she sent her answers back to me. They were long enough to merit inclusion in my data. With this final set of answers I reached twenty-one interviews with Japanese Animation fans in Canada, of these, ten were women and eleven were men.

During these months of research in Canada, I also undertook three interviews with female Mexican fans using Skype. The interviews took place between the 4<sup>th</sup> of February and the 25<sup>th</sup> of March. I had planned to conduct my remaining interviews with Mexican fans through Skype, but these three interviews presented a series of problems. First, there were problems with the internet connection of my interviewees. This caused constant disconnections and more importantly, lagging. At some points during the conversation, I would ask a question and the person in the other side of the screen would hear it many seconds later. The flow of the conversation was notably impaired when this happened. Second, my interviewees rescheduled several times or did not show up, perhaps feeling that a Skype interview could be undertaken at any time. Third, I had reached a third contact for these interviews, in order to avoid clustering in my data, but her network included only female fans. With eight interviews with women and five with men at this point, I had to find a way to contact more male anime fans. Taking all these issues into consideration, I decided to go back to Mexico that summer in order to recruit male participants.

After my arrival in Mexico, I tried to use the method of recruitment that I had employed in Canada. I posted my recruitment poster in several forums and webpages frequented by Japanese



animation fans. I also wrote messages to some anime clubs and to the organizers of one of the conventions I visited during my ethnographic research. I received a couple of answers from users of one of the forums but they were from fans that lived in zones of Mexico City that were hard to access. Because of the lack of success with online recruitment, I decided to explore other options. While meeting with one of the three female fans that I had interviewed using Skype, in order to collect her signed consent form, she suggested that I visit the old shopping center where “JuguetiAnime” had taken place, as its upper floor was frequented by anime fans. I followed her advice and once there, I ran into the female fan that I interviewed at the beginning of the interview phase of my research in Mexico. This was a happy coincidence as she introduced me to a couple of people working in the anime stores that populated this mall. This new network of individuals working in anime shops comprised most of the final wave of interviews in Mexico. The other individuals I interviewed during this wave were a female friend of the participant that suggested that I attended the old shopping center in the first place, and the boyfriend of one of the female vendors that worked at the mall.

The interviews with vendors that I undertook at the shopping center were very interesting because they gave me insight into the experiences of individuals that were making a living through commerce related to Japanese animation. As I had already talked with regular fans, participants in anime clubs and members of an anime convention planning committee, interviewing people that worked in anime stores offered me a new piece of the puzzle. The perspectives offered by the vendors complemented and enhanced the themes that I had noticed in my previous interviews, allowing me to better understand the role of anime stores within the Otaku community. At the end of this final wave of interviews in Mexico, I had interviewed three men and four women. This completed my research in Mexico as I had now twenty interviews in total, twelve with female fans and eight with males.

### **Data Analysis and Gaining Subcultural Knowledge**

With twenty sets of fieldnotes and forty-one interviews, I decided to finish my ethnographic research. I felt that I had reached an acceptable point of saturation with my data as I began to notice a significant amount of recurring accounts and ideas. I also had interviewed fans that had experiences related to most Otaku practices from Cosplay to Con organizing. My sample was also diverse in terms of age, social class, ethnicity, race and gender. The youngest of my interviewees

was eighteen and the oldest forty. Some of them were students, some of them worked in the service sector, with both blue-collar jobs and white-collar occupations. In Canada I interviewed white and non-white Canadians as well as second generation immigrants and international students. As a result, the sample included people with ethnic backgrounds from Europe, Asia, Africa, and North and South America. In Mexico, I interviewed only Mexican mestizos as this group composes most of the population. This difference in the two samples appears to reflect the racial and ethnic makeup of both countries. With to the inclusion of 22 women and 19 men, the sample is also balanced in terms of gender. The following tables show the anime conventions I visited and the people I interviewed during my PhD research. I assigned the interviewees pseudonyms based on characters, places, texts and activities related to the fandoms that they mentioned during their respective interviews:

### Central Mexico

Name	Date and Place
La Mole Comic Con	14 and 16 March 2014. Mexico City.
Expo Anime León	22-23 March 2014. León, Guanajuato State.
JuguetiAnime	26 April 2014, Toluca, México State.
Expo Anime Toluca	27 April 2014. Toluca, México State.
EXPO TNT	1-4 May 2014. Mexico City.

### Western Canada

Name	Place and Date
Otafest 2014	16-18 May 2014. University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta.
Northwest Fanfest 2014	27-29 June 2014. University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia.
Animethon 21	8-10 August 2014. MacEwan University, Edmonton, Alberta.
Otafest 2015	16 May 2015. University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta.

**Participants interviewed in Mexico**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Date of Interview</b>
Yuna	Female	14/December/2014
Lizzy	Female	14/December/2014
Kero	Male	14/December/2014
Yamato	Male	14/December/2014
Miyu	Female	16/December/2014
Vash	Male	17/December/2014
Kenshin	Male	19/December/2014
Sakura	Female	21/December/2014
Aisaka	Female	30/December/2014
Inuyasha	Male	30/December/2014
Belldandy	Female	04/February/2015
Tsumiki	Female	16/March/2015
Sumiko	Female	25/March/2015
Gilgamesh	Male	17/July/2015
Morrigan	Female	17/July/2015
Kaneki	Male	17/July/2015
Monokuma	Female	18/July/2015
Gaara	Male	18/July/2015
Yu	Female	22/July/2015
Elsie	Female	22/July/2015

**Participants interviewed in Canada**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Date of Interview</b>
Matsuri	Male	26/January/2015
Natsu	Male	27/January/2015
Seiya	Male	29/January/2015
Lelouch	Male	29/January/2015
Kentaro	Male	30/January/2015

Tenma	Male	03/March/2015
Edward	Male	05/March/2015
Kirito	Male	05/March/2015
Van	Male	09/March/2015
Kamina	Male	12/March/2015
Hetalia	Female	13/March/2015
Nell	Female	17/March/2015
Yoruichi	Female	23/March/2015
Dragneel	Male	23/April/2015
Karui	Female	24/April/2015
Hinata	Female	29/April/2015
Konoha	Female	30/April/2015
Reborn	Female	13/May/2015
Daenerys	Female	16/May/2015
Faye	Female	16/May/2015
Chrona	Female	28/May/2015 (email)

These tables account for only a fraction of the anime fans and Japanese animation conventions that currently take place in North America. In this sense, authoritative generalizations regarding Japanese animation fandom cannot be made based on my ethnographic research. I visited only eight anime conventions and interviewed a small and non-representative sample of the population of anime fans. Based on the number of people I watched in anime conventions during my research, this is by no means a small subcultural community. Rather than the opportunity to test hypotheses or employ inferential statistics to generalize my observations to a broader population, my ethnographic research and interviews offer an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of anime fans and the way in which these experiences relate to Japanese animation fandom as a field of consumption. The ethnographic process I followed enriched my understanding of the practices and activities that I saw in the anime conventions. It is in this sense that my interviews, when combined with my ethnographic work and web-based complementary research, allow a deep understanding of the way in which fans experience anime fandom, of their practices, and of the meanings they attribute to their social life (Hine, 2004).

This in-depth exploration of the experiences of anime fans began when I was writing my fieldnotes, continued while I was talking with my interviewees and extended to my work on the transcription of my interviews. Similar to how each fieldnote informed and modified the next one, my interviews identified new themes that I explored in subsequent talks with fans. The patient listening required by the transcription process facilitated the emergence of even more themes that I subsequently explored in later interviews. The laborious task of transcribing my talks with fans, however, extended beyond the interview period. Even when I had an interview guide, I allowed fans to deviate from the questions and explore new themes. As a result of this flexibility, my interviews were semi-structured. The resulting recordings lasted between half an hour and an hour and a half and were full of jargon related to Japanese animation fandom that included among other things, names of anime shows, mangas, movies, videogames, musicians and even historical periods. A further complication had to do with the English interviews: as I am not a native speaker I had to put a lot of work into understanding everything being said, particularly in the interviews that I made with other people not native to Canada. Some of them were originally from places such as Brazil and China and their accents were hard to understand for someone for whom English is a second language. At that time, I still watched the lips of people when they talked in English so I could fully get what they were saying. The recordings did not offer this possibility so I had to play the same fragments over and over to properly transcribe what was being said.

Drafts of the forty face-to-face interviews were made as a first step of transcription. Names and jargon that I was not familiar with were written as they sounded. After this, I corrected all the drafts both in terms of words incorrectly transcribed and in relation with titles and jargon. I spent a fair amount of time on the internet, looking for the latter two. Jargon was easier to find as it could be found in anime websites. Names of anime, manga, videogames, musicians, cities, and so forth proved to be much harder to find as most of the time the fans had spoken them in Japanese. This time searching on the internet was very useful in terms of subcultural awareness as when I found one of the names, I would read more about that particular anime, manga, musician, and so forth. From this perspective, the process of transcription was also a period in which I learned more about the current taste culture composed by Japanese animation fans and of the media products that were popular among those fans.

After transcribing all the interviews, I used NVivo to perform a focused coding of my data. I created an NVivo project using the themes and categories that emerged during the open coding

of my ethnographic notes and interviews. After this, using the capabilities of this software, I began to link different themes together. Themes that seemed to be subtopics of other themes or categories were transformed into subthemes. I followed this process until I created a tree structure, with themes, subthemes, subtopics, and subcategories. The roots of the tree became my core themes. These core themes are at the center of my analysis and constitute the basis for my chapters. They emerged from my disciplinary and theoretical background, and allowed me to articulate an analysis of Japanese animation fans. The many branches facilitated the further elaboration of these themes as they shed light on the many variations and details existing within the core themes (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 2011).

This focused coding allowed for a more detailed analysis of my fieldnotes and interviews, a process involving both deductive and inductive forms of reasoning (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 2011). This approach connects natural observations of anime conventions and the words of anime fans, in order to create a doctoral dissertation that seeks a balance between fans' experiences, meanings and concerns and my own theoretical framework. The effort to better capture and represent fans' practices, meanings and experiences while still, and perhaps inevitably, exercising my own sociological imagination, has gone well beyond my Master's research and yet, it owes a lot to the work I realized at that time. My earlier research on anime fans familiarized me with many practices, names and jargon that I encountered again during the data collection phase of my PhD Dissertation. Using a concept I introduce in the present work, it infused me with a substantial amount of "subcultural capital" that allowed me to communicate more easily with my participants.

I engaged significantly with anime and manga during my Master's research, visiting a significant number of webpages created by anime fans and exploring certain practices such as the creation of anime music videos. This allowed me to obtain important knowledge about fan practices and discourses, a subcultural capital that noticeably facilitated my interaction with fans of Japanese animation in both the online and the non-virtual world. In the case of interviews, the knowledge shared by me and the interviewees made them feel at ease. We were able to have open conversations in which they shared many insights into their lives as fans. They trusted me because my knowledge regarding anime fandom made me look sympathetic to their emotional attachments to certain texts, if not exactly a peer<sup>13</sup>. While my PhD interviews were much more formal and structured because I had an interview guide, I was still able to mobilize my subcultural capital to

obtain not only rapport with my interviewees but also to explore controversial aspects of Japanese animation fandom.

There is no doubt that many themes, particularly the more controversial, would have remained hidden if my research had been based only on interviews. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the “tell it like it is” approach to qualitative work neglects the fact that interviewees generally will try to align with the interviewer, particular in cases where subcultural practices are concerned. When subcultural members have to interact with outsiders, they will generally try “to mitigate potentially negative views of them and their activities” (Anderson and Taylor, 2010: 55). Being in the know and mobilizing subcultural capital, is thus of great importance in the effort to understand subcultural members’ meanings.

The case of female anime fans that like Yaoi, that is, narratives about homosexual love between male characters, gives insight to the advantages of entering the interview phase of research with knowledge about the interviewees. According to Daisuke Okabe and Kimi Ishida (2012), Yaoi fans manage impressions in a complex way that not only makes invisible their fan identity in their everyday lives but also offers glimpses of this identity to other people that share the community’s subcultural capital. This was certainly the case during my interviews as some female fans began to talk about anime shows closely related to the Yaoi fandom. These shows feature conventional heterosexual male characters and only a person that possesses the adequate subcultural capital would know that within the Yaoi community, the sexual preferences of these characters have been changed and they are depicted as romantically paired with other, also originally heterosexual, characters. Although this change can be made to any character in any show, there are certain anime series and characters that are very popular among most Yaoi fans. They are in a sense, a sign of belonging to the Yaoi fandom.

If I had not been aware of the connection between these anime shows and the Yaoi fandom I would have missed important information regarding this unique group within anime fandom. A couple of female fans that I interviewed talked about certain anime series associated with Yaoi fandom when asked about anime and characters that they liked. There was no mention of Yaoi, homosexual love or any of their related subcultural capital. They presented a normalized version of their experience as anime fans. To move beyond this normalized version of their fandom and reach their “back stage” narratives, I began to ask questions subtly related to the Yaoi community and its members. Specific jargon casually mentioned, other popular anime shows among the Yaoi

fans, questions that called for the Yaoi subcultural capital of the interviewee. It was a subtle construction of rapport that communicated to the Yaoi female fans that I was aware and had no issue with Yaoi fandom. As a result, they opened to me and we had very interesting conversations about this particular part of the Otaku world.

### **The Liminality of Trans-local Ethnographic Research**

Immersion within Japanese animation fandom opens the doors for a more nuanced understanding of the practices, narratives and cultural objects that give shape to this field of consumption. As emphasized in this chapter, this knowledge is not the privilege of the “academic-fan”, as the liminal state of “outsider-insider” is the result of ethnographic work in itself. Participating in the field, the ethnographer takes part in another way of life, while not “going native.” In this sense, there is not a methodological difference between “academic-fan” and “researcher-native”, other than an implausible claim to objectivity by the former. Liminality is the objective of ethnographic research and as such, neither the “academic-fan” nor the “ethnographer-participant” are privy to an ontological truth regarding fans. Their place is not objective or subjective but in-between.

To conclude this chapter, I will discuss another type of liminality that permeates my research: translation. My interviews in Canada and Mexico both required that I perform the role of a translator. In Canada, this took place when I was interviewing the participants. My mastery of the English language is not that of a native speaker, and at the time of the interviews it resembled much more the conscious work of a translator than the interiorized practice of those that grew up with English as a mother tongue. As someone from a Spanish-speaking country, whenever I speak English, I have to pay attention to word usage, conjugation, pronunciation and even tempo. When I interact with an English speaker, I also have to pay attention to what the other person is saying and translate it in an instant so I can keep up with the flow of the conversation. For every answer I give to my partner in interaction, my inner-thoughts, which are in Spanish, have to be translated and then properly delivered. This is a demanding process and sometimes I make mistakes such as choosing a wrong word, mispronouncing others, or increasing the tempo until what I am saying becomes unintelligible.

These mistakes affected on occasion my interviews and at those moments I had to repeat what I was trying to say to my interviewees. Although the overall quality of my data was not compromised as a result, it complicated at times the flow of the conversation and made the



interviews more work than they should have been for my participants. Perhaps for this reason, my interviews in Spanish are longer than the ones in English as not only I am quite proficient in the former language but also have the same accent as my Mexican participants. In this sense, it would seem that language in itself is an important element when trying to create rapport with interviewees.

Another aspect of my research that required that I took the role of translator was the fact that twenty of my interviews are in Spanish. Although I only translated the fragments of the interviews that I inserted in the text of my dissertation, translation is always a complicated process, especially when dealing with spoken language, as personal flourishes and variations are much more common than in written language. Often times, spoken language will even break grammatical rules and is filled with false starts, redundancies and idioms. “Traduttore, traditore”, says the Italian proverb. Translations can be treacherous and this is especially true when dealing with spoken language. In the end, translations are always adaptations, processes of altering the original while trying to preserve its central meaning. In words of Jacques Derrida:

It is a question of giving taste, a different taste that is blended with the first taste, now dulled, remaining the same while altering it, while changing it, while undoubtedly removing something of its native, original, idiomatic taste, but also while adding to it, and in the very process, more taste, while cultivating its natural taste, while giving it still more of its own taste, its own, natural flavor (Derrida and Venuti, 2001: 195).

Derrida argues that translation is a question of giving new taste to the original words being translated that, while removing their idiomatic nature, cultivates at the same time their natural flavor. In the case of my research, trying to translate from Spanish to English, that is, blending their idiomatic tastes to create a proper adaptation, was a challenge as again, my mastery of the English language is not that of a native speaker. Creating a Spanish adaptation of my English interviews would have been easier as I have much more resources in my mother tongue. Because of this situation, I felt that something essential within my Spanish interviews would be lost if I relied only on the English translations that I made based on them. In other words, my dissertation could be deceptive if I only used English adaptations of the voices of my Mexican participants. Paired with a preoccupation with the power differentials between these two languages, my desire

to avoid a deceptive translation led me to preserve the original text in Spanish within my dissertation, and include below it the English translation. The analysis follows the original words of the participants in the language in which they were spoken. It is my belief that the liminality of ethnographic research must always be careful to avoid falling into the hidden colonialism that characterizes certain production practices within academia.

The following chapters are the result of a bilingual, multi-situated ethnography that goes beyond national borders to explore Japanese animation fans' experiences, practices and meanings. Rarely does a researcher have the opportunity of interacting with participants through two different personas. In Mexico, I am an educated, upper middle class academic. In Canada, I am an "other," a man from a developing country that has an accent and sometimes makes grammatical mistakes while speaking. It is a testament to anime fans' love for their subcultural world that they talked openly to me regardless of which of these identities I had at the time. More than the differences between fans in Mexico and Canada, which are to be expected given the very different cultural milieus of these countries, what surprised me the most were the similarities in experiences, practices and meanings that came to light while I traveled through anime conventions and talked to the participants in my research. What follows is a discussion of these similarities, of the ways in which anime fans create a field of consumption and a taste culture through narratives, characters, subcultural capital, spaces of belonging and material goods.

## **Conclusion**

I have discussed in this chapter my methodological rationale for studying Japanese animation fans through multi-situated ethnographic research. Participant observation in the field is essential to grasp the fluidity of fans' lived experience as well as their central practices. Alternatives to ethnographic research often ignore media audiences in favor of an emphasis on texts and their ideological qualities. Lost in textual analysis is the voice of individuals and groups that actively participate in the consumption of media texts. I have argued, however, that giving voice to the audience must not become an acritical celebration of consumer sovereignty. What is needed, instead, is a critical ethnography that, while respecting the interpretations of media advanced by members of the audience, nonetheless is not afraid to question and analyze their spoken accounts (Moore, 1993).

This critical ethnography must also incorporate questions of performativity and practice. From this perspective, interviews cannot function as proxies for ethnographic research. Relying exclusively on interviews often leads to the methodological error termed by Hills (2002) “asking the audience”, the assumption that the discourses enacted by the interviewees can function as a transparent source of meaning regarding their media consumption. This is especially problematic when talking to fans, as they often mobilize discursive justifications of their love for certain texts and characters (Hills, 2002). While Jenkins (2013) and Hills (2002) have developed a methodological approach that avoids the error of “asking the audience”, termed “aca-fan”, that is, an academic that claims to be a fan and thus to have privileged access to fans’ lived experiences, I have argued instead for the need for participant observation within the field.

The “academic-fan” constitutes a methodological error in as much as it assumes that fans’ lived experience are transparent to the researcher as long as she or he is also a fan. This methodological tactic is problematic, as it ignores the heterogeneous and complex nature of fandom as a field of consumption. Being a fan does not mean that the researcher has automatic access to the multiplicity of voices and positions that constitute media fandom and its associated taste cultures. It is to explore this complexity that I conducted a multi-situated ethnography of Japanese animation fans. This chapter has discussed the ethnographic process that took me to anime conventions in Central Mexico and Western Canada, and from there to interview fans in Toluca and Calgary. Paired with the online research that I conducted during this time, the following four empirical chapters are based on what, to my knowledge, is the most ambitious ethnographic research on Japanese animation fans to date.

## Notes

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<sup>12</sup> “América del Norte” designates Canada, United States and Mexico. North America, by contrary, is constructed culturally and geo-politically if not economically as a region that includes only the former two countries. Mexico appears in this paradigm as Central America. It is clear that this conceptual construction often advanced through language and practice by American and Canadian citizens excludes Mexico through symbolic boundaries in the same way that is excluded through actual borders from the rest of North America.

<sup>13</sup> As I discussed earlier in this chapter, the figure of the academic-fan that appear as a peer to fans is a methodological approach that hides the dynamics of power that characterize the interviewing process. Asking particular questions as a “researcher” always breaks the practical flow of everyday life and generates a discursive space that hides as much as it reveals.

### **Introduction**

Moving away from a paradigm that constructs fans as “textual poachers” (Jenkins, 2013) is not a question of adopting an antithetical position and depicting them as “cultists” (Hills, 2002). Both positions are essentialist and make either fans or media texts the center of an “interpretive community” that both authors term “fandom”. On the contrary, I would argue that the best way to break with Jenkins’s understanding of fans as “nomadic readers”, always involved in “textual poaching”, is to focus on fans’ consumption, that is, on their practices of appropriation and distinction (Bourdieu, 2010). Exploring the taste of fans, their capacity and propensity to appropriate certain practices and objects (Bourdieu, 2010), can lead to new interpretations of fandom that do not view it as a “community” or “group” of media consumers.

This chapter explores the consumption practices of a particular category of media consumers: Japanese animation fans. By analyzing the genesis and development of their tastes, a very different picture of fandom begins to take form. This interpretation of anime fandom is not that of an “audience community” of avid consumers of media (Beng Huat, 2009) but instead focuses on the appropriation of cultural possessions and practices by Japanese animation fans. Central to this appropriation is the consumption of Japanese animation itself and its related texts and media. From this perspective, the study of anime fandom should begin by undertaking an analysis of the ways in which anime fans understand and appropriate the texts that constitute Japanese animation as a distinctive cultural product.

### **Japanese Animation Fans: Constructing Anime as a Legitimate Object of Consumption**

Every participant in my research said that they discovered Japanese Animation during childhood. Most of them said that they did not know at the time that the cartoons they liked so much, such as *Dragon Ball* and *Sailor Moon*, were in fact media texts created in Japan. They knew, however, that there was something different about these animations. Kamina, a Canadian male of twenty-two years who indicated during the interview that he was half-Japanese, studied graphic design and was a member of the staff of Otafest, explained his initial attraction to anime in the following way:

I think I've always had like a little bit of a draw to animation in general, like cartoons. I think part of that was just the fact that you could go to kind of different worlds that didn't exist so that was definitely part of it. I think it was also just because some of the first stuff I started watching with the Miyazaki stuff was so different than anything you would see here. (Kamina)

As can be appreciated in this account, Japanese animation caught the attention of fans-to-be because it seemed to offer something different vis-à-vis Western media texts. According to my participants, they were attracted to anime and its style because it spoke to them in a way that other media did not. The words of Kamina suggest that the difference and draw of Japanese animation can be found in the fact that it allows the audience the possibility of going to worlds remarkably different from their own. Talking specifically about the work of Hayao Miyazaki, the famous director of Japanese animation mentioned by Kamina, Napier (2007) proposes that the complex animated movies created by this renowned director offer, to Western fans of his oeuvre, the possibility of going beyond Hollywood's constraining narratives in order to explore imaginative worlds where the rules of Western culture can be questioned. This possibility offered by the work of Miyazaki seems to be also present in Japanese animation as a media. When discussing why she started to like anime as a child, Sakura, a Mexican female of thirty years that was married to a male fan of comic books and had a Master in graphic design, said:

Mmmm... Eeeel hecho de que nooo... no eran tan aburridas como... las comedias mexicanas de esa época. Nunca fui fan de... Chespirito. O sea, totalmente diferente. Era lo que me llamaba la atención. Como era... era más imaginativo. No sé... Generalmente, el anime no obedece a ciertas reglas de nada. (Sakura)

Mmmm... the fact that they were not... not as boring as... the Mexican soap operas of that time. I never was fan of Chespirito. I mean, totally different. That was what caught my attention. It was... it was more imaginative. I don't know... generally, anime doesn't obey certain rules of anything. (Sakura).

Here again, we can see how my participants found, in Japanese animation, narratives that are “different” and more “imaginative” than those offered by media texts from their own country. In the case of this Mexican fan, these texts are Mexican soap operas<sup>14</sup> and Chespirito a famous creator of Mexican comedies. These media products remain quite popular in Mexico and have many fans, to the point where most Mexican audiences are familiar with them. They have also been exported to other countries and constitute well-known Mexican cultural products in other parts of the world. Given this popularity among Mexican media consumers, it is telling that Sakura considers them boring, preferring instead the consumption of a media text that, according to her, does not follow any type of rules.

According to Napier (2005), the medium of animation itself possesses extraordinary creative characteristics that often times are used to explore the realms of the exotic, the irrational and the fantastic. Japanese animation, in particular, brings to the screens of the Western world an Otherness that allows viewers to catch “flashing glimpses into the dreams and nightmares of a highly technological society beset by change yet still valuing a rapidly disappearing past” (Napier, 2005: 293). From this perspective, Japanese animation allows its fans to explore foreign worlds created by the imaginations of people from another society that, contrary to media texts produced in their own country, appears to them more open, interesting, and even devoid of the rules that they experience in their everyday lives. Dragneel, a Canadian white male of twenty-two years that worked as a security guard, explained how this Otherness of anime remains as a reason why he prefers it over Western animation:

Typically I like the animation style more than western animation, it’s more vibrant, a little more dynamic, one of the things I like in a lot of cases is that they are more willing to experiment than a lot of western animation is, a lot of western animation is more about the “here and now”, and it doesn’t really explore too deeply into the fantastical, whereas with anime I think there are fewer pretenses for that, so they are more willing and open to going to topics that western animation doesn’t. (Dragneel)

The uniqueness of anime vis-à-vis other media that the participants in my research perceived when they were children, remained for many of them the reason why they continued consuming this medium into adulthood. As with Dragneel, the perceived difference often was

explained in terms of artistic style and narratives. For this fan, Japanese animation has a unique style and offers narratives that delve deeply into the fantastical. These narratives are often willing to explore topics that he has not seen in Western animation. Just as with Kamina and Sakura, Dragneel constructs Japanese animation not only as different but actually as superior to other media texts. This boundary work, which sees anime as clearly “different” and more “imaginative” and “experimental” than Western animation or Mexican soap operas, runs counter to Jenkins’s (2013) monolithic understanding of fandom. Anime fans do not appear to be the “free-floating” agents he described, moving from media text to media text. They are invested in certain narratives and openly reject others.

The “broader” fan community proposed by Jenkins (2013) is a utopian conceptualization of fans and their practices. Just as we should not think about nation, ethnicity, race or gender in terms of bounded, reified groups (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000), we should not construct “media fandom” as a singular, reified community. Anime fans perceive something unique in Japanese animation, something that, for them, makes their media consumption more legitimate than the one mobilized by fans of other cultural products. When Japanese animation fans assert, for example, that soap operas are “boring,” they are distancing themselves from that type of media text and from its fans. Moreover, they construct a cultural hierarchy of taste that establishes anime, in contrast, as “interesting”. The boundary work enacted by my interviewees thus works as a justification of their media consumption at the same time as questioning the legitimacy of other cultural texts and their fans. From this perspective, media fandom constitutes not a community of peers but a field of struggle wherein media consumers advance their own cultural hierarchy of taste.

The consumption of certain texts constitutes the defining characteristic of Japanese animation fandom, understood both as a particular form of “groupness”<sup>15</sup> and as field of cultural consumption. Within anime fandom, the consumption of Japanese animation and other related media such as manga and videogames, is legitimated through a cultural hierarchy of taste that constructs the textual characteristics of these media as unique and valuable, especially when compared to other cultural texts. While explaining why she kept watching anime after childhood, Yuna, a Mexican female of thirty-three years that had a bachelor’s degree in communications, was doing a master’s degree in the same area, and worked as auxiliary personnel in a government agency, further illustrates the way in which anime fans draw on the textual characteristics of

Japanese animation and what they consider lesser media texts, in order to construct the legitimacy of their fandom:

Pues, realmente me gustaban las historias. O sea, tenían mayor complicación. Incluso sí llegué a ver novelas. De hecho cuando estaba chica, aún chica empecé a ver novelas. La que vi, la única que vi realmente en mi vida completa fue la de *Carrusel de Niños*, pero, vamos, las historias se me hacían súper mal, los personajes eran así como que sufrían demasiado y digo, ni siquiera tanto como *Remi* que realmente era un drama, pero se me hacía, como que se me hacían virtualmente más lógicas las historias del anime que las que ofrecían en novelas y todo eso, entonces, como que la empatía en los personajes me era más fácil con los dibujos animados y todo y sobre todo porque sí como dicen, y ahora que ya estoy grande lo entiendo, se ve como cine, realmente como cine, los personajes no son tan repetitivos, cada uno tiene su personalidad distinta y me encantaba, me encantaban los dibujos, o sea, incluso los clásicos, porque ahora ya es más animación digital, pero me gustaba mucho el detalle, los fondos. Porque incluso Hanna Barbera y todo lo demás que veía norteamericano, repetía mucho los fondos y era algo que era como la música repetida, repetida y veía los fondos y decía “¿qué corren en círculos en la habitación? En cambio la animación japonesa te permitía ver escenarios, personajes, extras, más cosas, y me gustó más, me llamó más la atención y entonces seguí con la animación japonesa. (Yuna)

Well, I really liked the stories. They were more complicated. I actually watched soap operas. When I was little, really little, I started to watch soap operas. The one I watched, the only one I really watched complete was *Carrusel de Niños* but the stories seem to me very bad, the characters look as if they suffered too much and, I mean, not even as much as with *Remi*<sup>16</sup> which was really a drama but it seemed... I found anime stories virtually more logical than the ones presented in soap operas and all that so having empathy with the characters was easier to me with cartoons and all and especially because as they say and now that I am older I understand it, it looks like cinema, really like cinema, the characters are not as repetitive, each one has a different personality and I loved, I loved the drawings, even the classic one because now is more digital animation but I liked the detail, the backgrounds. Because even Hanna Barbera and everything else that I watched North American<sup>17</sup>, repeated the



backgrounds a lot and it was something that was like repeated music, repeated and I watched the backgrounds and said “Do they run in circles in the room?” By the contrary, Japanese animation allowed you to watch settings, characters, extras, more things and I liked it more, it caught more my attention so I kept with Japanese animation. (Yuna)

Yuna establishes Japanese animation as a text superior to soap operas and American cartoons. She asserts this superiority not through the use of religious discourses (Hills, 2002) but by employing aesthetic discourses<sup>18</sup> that center on the form and content of these texts. Soap operas are presented as melodramatic and illogical. Hanna Barbera and other American cartoons are presented as very repetitive. In contrast, anime, even when it can be very dramatic like *Remi*, has logical narratives, unique characters with whom you can empathize, is cinematographic, and has quality drawings with many details. These aesthetic justifications, that stress the quality of anime vis-à-vis other texts, construct Japanese animation as a complex narrative form that can be a legitimate object of consumption. Indeed, Yuna begins her discussion by asserting that the narratives offered by this medium are “more complicated.” This complexity of anime as narrative space was advanced by most of my interviewees. According to them, not only do these narratives address topics that Western media do not, they also possess a noticeable variety of settings, characters and plots. Some of them also stated that, in contrast to Western cartoons, anime has story arcs that keep developing in each episode until they reach a resolution of the narrative.

### **Anime Fans as Media Consumers of Complex Narratives**

As a textual characteristic, the narrative complexity of anime occupies a central place within the cultural hierarchy of taste advanced by my interviewees. A couple of them discussed this perceived complexity of anime as a narrative form in terms of ontological coherence<sup>19</sup>, asserting that although Japanese animation often did not follow the rules and constraints of the everyday world, it generally gave its worlds particular sets of rules. In an interesting contradiction, some of my participants liked the fact that anime was not subjected to the constraints of their social reality but also stressed how they preferred anime shows that respected the rules established for that particular fantasy world. In the words of Seiya, a Brazilian male fan of twenty-four years that defined himself as gay and studied physics in Canada:

Favourite shows. I think *Soul Eater* is magnificent, it catches you off guard a lot of the time, and it's like a surprise after another. They did like a superb job up to the end, they wanted to end the Anime too early, so the ending was not great, but it's just so much going on it, they have a Universe created with all the exaggerations of an Anime, it doesn't go out, it doesn't exaggerate out of the Universe it has created which I think I like creating a world that has its own boundaries, it doesn't need to be the boundaries of our world, like in the other story, it has to have. You create a different world, different laws, different gravitational laws whatever it is and but you got to obey those laws. (Seiya)

Discussing the fighting gamer otaku community, Yoshimasa Kijima (2012) proposes that rules not only exist to advance games but more importantly, to create an alternate world that is different from everyday reality. Rules create an internal order around which the game world is constructed. From this perspective, rules define the fictional universe and its boundaries, creating a self-sustaining, immersive world which players can explore. As the words of Seiya indicate, Japanese animation is also a medium through which creators develop unique and bounded universes that have their own sets of rules. These rules are the structuring framework around which characters, settings and plots are created. This particular style of storytelling that centers on the creation of detailed and bounded universes is called, by Jenkins, the “art of world building.” Through this narrative technique, artists create compelling worlds that fans can explore for extended periods of time (Jenkins, 2006). The worlds constructed through this art of world building can become so complex and fleshed out that they seem realistic to some fans, as Vash, a Mexican male of forty years that was a computer systems engineer and worked as a university instructor in an elite Mexican university, explained when discussing what types of Japanese animation narratives he likes to watch:

Todo lo que tiene que ver con Hard SciFi de que, de que... está súper, súper pensada. Este, toda la estructura sociaaal, toda la políitica, toda la... obviamente, toda la tecnología de un mundo futuro. Este... pero cómo... cómo van todas las piezas y cómo encajan y cómo te hacen creer que, de veras, podía [sic] pasar algo así, ¿no? O se... o... o que es, este, o que no es tan... disparatado, ¿no? Mmmm, tons, todo ese tipo, ese cuidado de un universo bien hehecito y todo —como en *Ghost in the Shell* o... en algunas versiones ya por seguido en

otras cosas— me encanta, ¿no? O sea, tanto que se ve que la arquitectuuura, el diseño de... de los coches, de las casas, de los... de llla, de las personas, de todo, ¿no? De la ropa, del, este... eh... yy cómo viven y todo eso. Cómo lo, lo, lo detallan tanto que sí te lo hace creíble, ¿no? Eso me encanta de, este... la creación de mundos, pues, este, en ese tipo de universos asíii futuristas. (Vash)

Everything that has to do with Hard SciFi when, when... is super, super well-thought-out. When all the social structure, all the politics, all the... obviously all the technology of a future world. Like... how... how all the pieces go and how they fit and how they make you believe that, it really could happen something like that. Or that... or that it is not as unrealistic. Mmmm, then all that type... all that attention to a well made universe and all - like in *Ghost in the Shell* or... in some versions already followed in other things- I really like it. I mean that you can see the architecture, the design the... cars, of the houses, of the... of the people, and all. Of the clothes, of... how they live and all that. How they detail it so much that it becomes believable. I love that, the... the creation of worlds, in that type of futuristic universes. (Vash)

As illustrated by this quote, fans enjoy the world building that characterizes many anime series. All the details of these narrative universes, from their politics to the way in which the characters are dressed, add up to create a realistic and compelling environment. As was discussed previously, these worlds are remarkably different from the world of everyday life and feature fantastical elements. It is no coincidence that Seiya talks about *Soul Eater*, a fantasy show, while Vash refers to *Ghost in the Shell*, a hard Sci-Fi series. Fantasy and science fiction are two genres especially well-suited for the creation of imaginative worlds that have their own rules. Despite being generally considered opposed to realism (Napier, 2007), these genres encourage world building precisely because their universes exist outside reality in realms that artists have constructed by borrowing some elements from our world and by creating the rest of the setting. Often far removed from the world of everyday life, these “worlds of simulacra” (Napier, 2005), nonetheless resonate strongly with certain members of the audience. Either taking place in a galaxy far, far away like *Star Wars* or in the secret world of wizardry of *Harry Potter*, the universes of

science fiction and fantasy have such a power of fascination that many popular fandoms have formed around them.

### **Beyond “Textual Poaching:” Japanese Animation Fans and Narrative Consumption**

Hills refers to the “art of world building” present in science fiction, fantasy and other genres such as horror, comedy and camp as “hyperdiegesis:” “the creation of a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen or encountered within the text” (2002: 137). This detailed narrative space requires active engagement from the audience. In order to better grasp these vast “worlds of simulacra,” fans have to move through different media in order to collect information regarding them and experience their many narratives. In this sense, the pleasure of experiencing these fantasy worlds is not given by simple escapism but instead by the excitement of discovering and exploring these dense textual universes (Jenkins, 2006, 2013). The following quote from Kamina, where he talks about the anime *Tokyo Ghoul* illustrates this situation within anime fandom:

Ah, *Tokyo Ghoul* would be a good example, for instance, like I started watching it. I felt that the first episode of this series was really, really good and then, series was pretty good through that but I heard that the manga was like better so what happened I read all of that. It’s usually any time that if you think like that the characters or the world is really interesting, then I try to cut and take as much content about it and info. (Kamina)

Because he found *Tokyo Ghoul* interesting, Kamina also read the manga, in search of more content about the world and characters presented in this narrative. Furthermore, according to him, this is not a unique occurrence: every time he discovers a world that seems really interesting, he consumes as much content and information as he possibly can about it. I would argue that this consumption and collection of data about a given “world of simulacra” is at the heart of anime fandom as a field of consumption. Rather than being primarily engaged in an active reading that “takes away only those things that are useful or pleasurable to the reader” (Jenkins, 2013: 24), fans seem to be primarily committed to what the cultural critic Otsuka Eiji calls “narrative consumption:”

What is being consumed is not the individual “drama” or “goods” but rather the system hidden behind them. However, the system (or the grand narrative) itself cannot be sold, so, in appearance, installments of serialized dramas and “goods” get consumed as single fragments that are cross sections of the system. I want to label this kind of situation “narrative consumption” (*monogatari shohi*). (Otsuka in Azuma, 2009: 30)

The “system” that fans consume through its different fragments is the vast narrative space of their favorite Japanese animation texts. According to Hiroki Azuma (2009), these fragments include derivative works created by the fans themselves and supported by the “worldview” and “settings” of the original or “grand” narrative. From this perspective, these derivative works are not just “textual poaching” in Jenkins’s (2013) sense, but also “narrative consumption” – a way in which some fans keep consuming and travelling through their favorite “worlds of simulacra.” Recreating these fantasy universes through their creativity and discussions, fans give these narrative spaces a presence, an ontological coherence that can enhance their immersion in these “worlds of simulacra.”

The result is the kind of textual proximity we have described earlier: the fan, while recognizing the story’s constructedness, treats it as if its narrative world were a real place that can be inhabited and explored and as if the characters maintained a life beyond what was represented on the screen; fans draw close to that world in order to enjoy more fully the pleasures it offers them. This degree of closeness, however, can only be sustained as long as the imagined world maintains both credibility and coherence, and hence the importance the fans place on even the most seemingly trivial detail. (Jenkins, 2013: 115).

In this paragraph, Jenkins allows himself to go beyond his idea of fandom as a “resisting” subculture to embrace the idea of fans as consumers of narratives who are engaged in a particular type of affective play: that of inhabiting and exploring interesting and beloved worlds of simulacra. Even when he insists that fans are “cultural nomads” more interested in their subcultural community than in the media texts they “poach,” he constantly describes the labor that these same fans put into giving their favorite narrative spaces both substance and ontological coherence (Jenkins, 2013). The pleasure that fans gain from textual proximity implies a mastery over the text

that puts into question the notion of the fan as a “free-floating” and “nomadic reader.” The degree of closeness that fans have vis-à-vis their favorite media texts requires an important investment in terms of time and labor. While this investment can take the form of textual poaching on certain occasions, this is not always the case. In fact, textual proximity can also result in an open rejection of derivative works. This situation is exemplified by the answer that Nell, a Canadian white female of twenty-four years that was a graduate student in the religious studies program of a university in Western Canada, gives when asked if she had read fanfics:

I haven't before, no I tend to stay away from Fanfics, because I'm fan of the original stories. I'm like I will make up my own things in my head; I don't want to read yours. Because some of them I really disagree with and they bother me, so it's like. Like a lot of the relationships people create, I'm not into that stuff. (Nell)

This is not an unusual answer among the anime fans that I interviewed. Most of them emphasized that they preferred original texts over derivative works. Being critical of alternative interpretations of characters and narratives was also common. Jenkins claims that fans read fanfiction “to explore the range of different uses writers can make of the same materials, to see how familiar stories will be retold and what new elements will be introduced” (2013: 177). Among anime fans these “new elements” are rarely well received because they modify the original text and often ignore the textual characteristics that justify the legitimacy of Japanese animation as a valuable object of consumption. Even between Japanese animation fans that have read fanfiction and find this practice interesting, alternate conceptions of narratives and characters are not appreciated because they not only reduce the ontological coherence of the original texts but also often fall short in terms of the cultural hierarchy of taste that articulates Japanese animation fandom as a field of consumption. In words of Faye, a Canadian female of Asian descent of twenty-six years, who worked as a barista and was a member of the staff of Otafest:

Sometimes there are interesting stories, it's interesting to see what people envisioned about certain characters into certain universes, but it's not really for me [...] I just don't like, a lot of the time when I read a fanfic I think the writing is kind of bad, it's hard to find one that's well written, it's really strange to see anything, sometimes the universes don't match well

with how your relationship to that character is. You see them in a certain light but someone completely changes it, and I'm like "the reason that they're like this is because of this."  
(Faye)

This quote problematizes the equation of fandom with a community of textual poachers who raid certain media texts in order to create alternative meanings. Fans do not always oppose the creators and owners of these texts; on the contrary, sometimes they oppose the poachers themselves. This is especially the case when these textual poachers elaborate narratives that lack the aesthetic qualities that other fans associate with Japanese animation. Because anime fandom is oriented by a cultural hierarchy of taste that constructs certain textual characteristic of anime as valuable and important, fan fiction that does not replicate these textual elements is dismissed as bad and poorly written. Even more, because narrative consumption gives many fans mastery over their favorite anime texts, reinterpretations of events or characters' motivations are often criticized as reflecting a poor understanding of the original texts. From this perspective, the struggle over possession of Japanese animation texts is not just between writers and readers but between different types of readers as well. Fans that perform narrative consumption and those that engage in textual poaching occupy conflicting positions within the field of consumption that has Japanese animation at its center. Far from being the "interpretive community" of fans proposed by Jenkins (2013), anime fandom constitutes a field of struggle where media consumers advance cultural hierarchies of taste that often clash with each other.

The fan "subculture" identified by Jenkins in *Textual Poachers* is too bounded, unitary and "resistive" to accurately account for the complexity of anime fandom. As illustrated in the previous section, the notion of fandom as an interpretive, alternative community underestimates the importance of narrative consumption and textual proximity, over-emphasizes the importance of textual poaching within fandom and misses the struggles over possession of the media text between fans themselves. Hills's (2002) notion of "media cults" acknowledges that "cult texts" are the unifying element of any given fandom, thus recuperating the centrality of "narrative consumption" and "textual proximity" within fans' practices. Equating fans with a cult allows this author to address the emotional attachments and passions that fans have vis-à-vis certain media texts. I will argue, however, that in his quest to break with Jenkins's rational and intellectual fan and offering a depiction of the irrational and emotional aspects of fandom, Hills (2002) exaggerates the degree

in which fans use religious discourses to anchor their “self-absent imagined subjectivity.” The result is a “media cult” whose members share a “communal faith” in certain “sacred” texts. The “interpretive community” thus become a community of faith, anchored in the “charisma” of the “auteur” of the sacred text.

### **Beyond “Media Cults:” Anime Fans and “Chara-Moe”**

If Jenkins’s “interpretive community” is too detached from the text, Hills’s “community of faith” is too close. “Cult texts” become sacred, set apart from the “profane” everyday life of the fan and protected by “a positive expression of faith and attachment” (Hills, 2002: 122). It is possible here, to make to Hills’ position the opposite objection that he makes to Jenkins. What about fans who are creators, who produce their own derivative work? If media texts become sacred for their fans, how can we explain the creative play that some of them make with these same texts? How do we account for the parodies that poke fun at the “cult text” and for what Jenkins (2013) terms “fan critics”? As discussed in the previous section, conceptualizing fandom as a field of consumption allows an integration of both cultists and poachers in a field of struggle where their positions can and often clash. Perhaps more importantly, analyzing fandom through the lenses of consumption reveals the personal relationship that fans establish with their favorite texts. As previously addressed, anime fans invest time and effort in order to gain mastery over their favorite texts. As a result, they often develop a sense of ownership towards these texts. This personal relationship with narratives and characters, illustrated when Nell asserts “I’m like I will make up my own things in my head; I don’t want to read yours” or when Faye says “You see them in a certain light but someone completely changes it, and I’m like ‘the reason that they’re like this is because of this’”, suggests that a “cult,” understood as an integrative community gathered around charismatic persons (Hills, 2002), is not an adequate framework for conceptualizing fandom.

The truth seems to be more complex. Even though textual poaching may not be as central as Jenkins (2013) envisioned, it is clear that it constitutes an important element for certain members of anime fandom. In fact, as I show in the next chapter, narrative consumption and textual proximity can be achieved by fans through textual poaching. Jenkins himself addresses this situation in *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*: “[Fans] fascination with fictional universes often inspires new forms of cultural production, ranging from costumes to fanzines and, now, digital cinema” (Jenkins, 2008: 135). While equating all fans with textual



poachers is, as I showed in the last section, an overgeneralization, certain fans approach their favorite texts not just as consumers but also as producers. This situation adds further complexity to fandom as some of its members also participate in the field of cultural production. While most fans nonetheless remain committed consumers of their favorite texts, I found during my ethnographic research that certain groups of anime fans have become so invested in these creative practices that their narrative consumption of texts has become secondary. During my visit to an anime convention in Western Canada for example, I attended the panel of a famous female cosplayer, Yaya Han. Questioned by a member of the audience if she kept watching anime, this cosplayer explained how she almost had no opportunity to watch anime anymore as the creation of costumes occupied most of her time. She followed this answer with a discussion on how she had decided to make the costume of a character with whom she was not familiar. According to her, she got to know this character and created a connection with it while making its costume (Field Note XII). There was no mention in her account of the narrative or the world of simulacra to which this character belonged. As a fan thoroughly committed to the practice of cosplay, Yaya Han appeared more interested in characters and their costumes than in anime media texts and their narrative spaces.

I would argue that this commitment with fan practices is at the center of the distinction between fandom as a field of consumption and fandom as a taste culture. While this fact will be discussed at length in the next chapter, I want to focus for now on the type of consumption implicated within this fascination with certain characters that on occasions is not paired with an equal interest in the anime media text from where such characters originate. This is not an uncommon form of consumption among Japanese animation fans. For some of them, characters and not narratives are the center of their devotions and fannish practices. Hiroki Azuma explains this situation in the case of the Japanese otaku in terms of a movement from a generation of fans still interested in grand narratives to one that imagines the world as a “database:”

Compared with the 1980s otaku, those of 1990s generally adhered to the data and facts of the fictional worlds and were altogether unconcerned with a meaning and message that might have been communicated. Independently and without relation to an original narrative, consumers in 1990s consumed only such fragmentary illustrations or settings; and this different type of consumption appeared when the individual consumer empathy toward these

fragments strengthened. The otakus themselves called this new consumer behavior “chara-moe” -the feeling of moe<sup>20</sup> toward characters and their alluring characteristics. (Azuma, 2009: 36)

Although the accounts of my interviewees discussed in the last section suggest that Azuma exaggerates the degree to which anime fans consume only the information and not the narrative of anime media texts, my own research also indicates that Japanese animation fans in North America often develop strong emotional connections with certain characters. As a fan and consumer practice, “chara-moe” appears to be quite pervasive within the field of consumption that has emerged around anime in Canada and Mexico. The merchandise I observed during my ethnographic work at anime conventions, for example, was mostly about particular characters. Apart from buying merchandise, cosplay, a fan practice that brings fantasy characters to the real world, was the most prevalent activity in these conventions. I questioned my interviewees about their favorite anime characters and their answers revealed the deep connections that some of them had with certain characters. Some of these connections were explained in terms of projection and identification as can be seen in the words of Matsuri, a Brazilian male of twenty years who was a visiting geology student at a university in Western Canada and had a girlfriend that he defined as “also an otaku”:

For example, I really like, uhh, I really like Ash because he has the idea of, “I’m going to discover the world, with these pokemons and go to the cities, make some friends” and this kind of style of life was most attractive for me, I really like this. And when I started to watch *Evangelion* when I was 12 years old, I was really, how can I say. I did identify myself with Shinji which is the protagonist. Because as me, he has a lot of insecurities, in his heart and tries to avoid the reality sometimes. (Matsuri)

Matsuri discusses two characters in this excerpt. The first one is Ash, protagonist of *Pokémon*. He talks about this character in aspirational terms: as this character, Matsuri would like to travel the world and make friends. He can experience this style of life through Ash and that is the reason he really likes this character. In contrast, he does not aspire to be like Shinji. Instead, he sees in this character a reflection of his own personality and shortcomings: Shinji is full of

insecurities and avoids reality, two traits he recognizes also in himself. In a sense, Shinji is the opposite of the confident and extroverted Ash. This dichotomy appears to be common among Japanese animation fans. They admire certain characters in which they see desirable or interesting qualities and they identify with others. Although this identification can be negative like in the case of Matsuri, sometimes it can take more positive forms, as we can see in this quote from Morrigan, a Mexican female of twenty-six years that was a student in the department of languages of the public university of her city, worked part-time in an anime store and was dating a male co-worker of eighteen years:

Se llama Yukine Chris, y me gusta mucho porque me identifico con ella demasiado. [...] Por-que... ella —además de que tiene su ideal bien... definido—, que es, este, de que todo el mundo con... el canto y la música se entienda, ella siempre es así de que... es bien directa, dice las cosas como son y —a pesar de que, en un principio, se... presentaba de manera hostil— es, este, una niña muy tierna cuando ya la llegas a conocer y a tratar. (Morrigan)

Her name is Yukine Chris and I like her very much because I identify with her a lot [...] Because... she -besides having a well-defined ideal- that is, that, all the people can... understand each other through singing and music, she is always like... very direct, she says things as they are and -despite presenting herself at the beginning... in a hostile way- she is a very gentle girl once you get to know and interact with her. (Morrigan)

Contrary to Matsuri, Morrigan seems to both admire and identify with Yukine Chris. She perceives in this character positive characteristics that she also ascribes to herself such as having a well-defined ideal, saying things as they are, and being very gentle. Also of note in this excerpt is the fact that Morrigan does not talk about Yukine Chris in terms of this character's role within the narrative. Instead, she focuses on the characteristics that she ascribes to this female character. It is not about what Yukine Chris does in the story but about what she "is". This is also the case with Matsuri, who discusses Shinji, the male protagonist of *Evangelion*, also in terms of character traits. Although this discourse of identification seems to always center on the personality and traits of particular anime characters, discussions about admired characters sometimes address what the characters do within the narrative, as is the case when Matsuri explains that he likes Ash because

he travels and makes friends. This explanation, however, is too general and used mainly to clarify who Ash is: an adventurous and extroverted boy. This use of the characters' actions to explain their personality can also be seen in the following excerpt of my interview with Sakura:

Por qué *Las guerreras mágicas*<sup>21</sup>. Ah, porque me gustaba el hecho de que... no eran las típicas niñas que tenían que rescataaar [inaudible]. Ellas eran las que tenían que pelear. Eran las fuertes, esteee... no necesariamente tenían que ser acá... este, digamos... Ah, sí, soy muy buena en kendo, soy muy buena en gimnasia. O sea, no. Niñas, digamos, normales. (Sakura)

Why *Magic Knight Rayearth*. Mmm, because I liked the fact that they... were not the typical girls that needed to be rescued [inaudible]. They were the ones that had to fight. They were the strong ones, mmm. They did not necessarily have to be like... let's say... like I am very good in kendo, I am very good in gymnastics. No. They were normal girls. (Sakura)

Although Sakura discusses here how the heroines of *Magic Knight Rayearth* were the ones that had to fight in this particular story, she does not explain how this happened within the narrative. Instead she uses this affirmation to advance her depiction of these three characters as strong but normal women that were not typical damsels in distress. From this perspective, it seems that Japanese animation fans identify with and admire characters not as elements of the anime text but as personas with personalities and biographies of their own. This centrality of the characters for fans is lost in both the accounts of Jenkins (2013) and Hills (2002). Understanding fans as textual poachers that appropriate media texts or as followers of cult media completely loses sight of the important bonds that fans have with certain characters. Conceptualizing fandom in terms of texts can thus be very misleading. Chara-moe is a central aspect of the consumption that fans undertake vis-à-vis Japanese animation. It is in this sense that for many of them, media consumption is not a question of “textual proximity” but of “character proximity.” Anime fans often view and consume anime narratives as the developing biographies of their favorite characters. This process can be seen in the following quote by Edward, a Canadian white male of twenty-four years that was a student in a media program of an institute of technology in Canada, and worked as both an actor and a voice actor:

Ah, *Steins; Gate*, if you've seen that before. Ah, I absolutely love Rintarou Okabe. [...] I love him because he like... especially, love the way he progresses through the story, He starts out so charismatic, weird and bizarre. You're just thinking, this guy's a complete goofball. Ah, he's just off his rocket. But then, as he progresses, you can see the human in him. I think I love characters that you can start to attach to and he becomes a very, you know, likeable character by the end of it. You feel so deeply for him throughout the entire thing. (Edward)

Edward discusses his love for Rintarou Okabe in terms of this character's progression through the narrative of *Steins; Gate*. He enjoys his journey from a goofball to a very human, likeable character. Edward's relationship with Rintarou cannot be reduced to his relationship with *Steins; Gate* as a media text. The deep connection that this fan feels towards Rintarou is of an emotional nature. Edward's love for this character began as an attachment that kept growing while he followed Rintarou's journey and ordeals. This fan loves Rintarou because he was able to feel so deeply for him through the whole narrative of *Steins; Gate*. From this perspective, he loves him because of all the feelings he was able to experience through this character. This emotional attachment does not seem grounded in any type of religious discourse but instead in discourses of identification, admiration and empathy towards anime characters.

### **Transmedia Characters: Anime Fans and Character Consumption**

Discussing the fan movement surrounding Lara Croft, a popular videogame heroine, Bob Rehak (2007) suggests that the popularity of this character can be found in her semiotic excess: the multiple life stories created by fans and media companies for her have given Lara more and more substance within popular culture. This flood of meaning and imagery has been organized by fans into a consistent biography. As a result, Lara Croft has gained "ontological coherence" which not only has increased fans' identification and admiration for this character but also has granted her a "life beyond simulation." Lara Croft exists beyond her game of origin, *Tomb Raider*. She has transcended her videogame origins to become a cultural icon that can be found in movies, books and even Nike advertisements.

While Rintarou Okabe is not as popular as Lara Croft, the words of Edward also indicate that, for him, this character has ontological coherence, a consistent identity that progresses throughout the narrative of *Steins; Gate*. He enjoys that this character seems to have a life beyond

simulation that can be discovered while the story progresses. Just as the fans of Lara Croft produce her “as a living being” (Rehak, 2007: 163), Edward asserts, referring to Rintarou, that “you can see the human in him.” The semiotic excess of this character can also be appreciated by the fact that other fans perceive him in a different light, as the words of Konoha, a Canadian black female of eighteen years that attended university in British Columbia illustrates: “Honestly the main character he is hilarious, it’s this crazy mad scientist that cracks me up.” For her, the defining trait of Rintarou is his “crazy mad scientist” persona, a trait not directly addressed by Edward.

Hilarious, charismatic and with hidden depth, Rintarou Okabe resonates with anime fans in different ways. Just as with Lara Croft, this semiotic excess is a result of the flood of meaning and imagery that surrounds him. Like Lara, he began as a videogame character in the original version of *Steins; Gate*. The complexity of the story and the strength of its characters made this game popular enough to receive manga, anime and movie adaptations that were enthusiastically appropriated by fans. Even more, these cultural texts inspired fans to create different forms of fan art that further gave Rintarou substance and a “life beyond simulation.” While he continues to exist within the narrative space of *Steins; Gate*, he can also be an object of consumption and love for fans as an anime character in itself through different otaku practices such as cosplay and the consumption of merchandise.

Jenkins’s (2013) and Hills’s (2002) discussions on fans and fandom are a product of a time before characters became, just as audiences, textual nomads. As Bob Rehak asserts, “Lara Croft pushes us, in fact, to revise categories such as ‘fan’, ‘audience’, ‘character’ and ‘text’ in relation to a mediascape whose speed and multiplicity mark not just postmodernism, but *adaptive responses to postmodernity*.” (2007: 160. Emphasis in the original). Current media consumption cannot be understood any longer through classic conceptualizations of fan, audience, character or text, instead, new categorizations that take into account current practices of consumption among media enthusiasts must be inscribed into a framework that do not place the text as the only cultural object appropriated by them. Both Jenkins (2013) and Hills (2002) approach fandom as an interpretive community based on the relationship of fans with particular media texts. Hills, in particular, stresses this relationship to the point where he loses sight of fandoms that fall outside his definition of media cult:

It seems to be the case that many fan cultures, and especially those surrounding cult texts, stand at the precise antithesis to the ‘quickly abandoned’ Turtles and Transformers. Where the affective relationships of fan culture preserve an attachment with challenges the disposability, pre-programmed obsolescence and contained innovation of the commodity, the readily forgotten ‘Mutant Ninja/Hero Turtle’ appears to be far more thoroughly integrated within the circuits of capital and consumerism. (Hills, 2002: 110)

Hills easily dismisses *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and *Transformers* as narratives that cannot engender fan cultures because they seem to be disposable commodities. However, both of these media texts have in fact engendered active fandoms<sup>22</sup>. As is the case with Lara Croft and Rintarou Okabe, Ninja Turtles and Transformers have become popular characters that transcended their media origins to become part of a multiplicity of texts. This media translatability of Lara, Rintarou, Ninja Turtles and Transformers results from the desire of media companies to exploit the emotional attachments that fans have created with certain characters, as well from the textual poaching of fans, and goes beyond what Jenkins terms “transmedia storytelling:”

A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best -so that a story might be introduced in film, expanded through television, novels, and comics; its world might be explored through game play or experienced as an amusement park attraction. (Jenkins, 2006: 97-98)

The notion of transmedia storytelling puts emphasis on the text and its narrative qualities. The story unfolds on multiple media outlets but is still one ever-expanding narrative with each media making “a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole”, that is to say, to the massive story being told. Lara, Rintarou, Ninja Turtles and Transformers, however, often take part in stories that are not connected to each other: retellings, adaptations, and fan art. What remains through the many permutations of the narrative is not a grand, over-arching story, but rather the characters. Instead of “transmedia storytelling,” there are “transmedia characters” that anchor the myriad stories being told about them. These stories are not limited to the ones created by media corporations but include also those created by fans. As Rehak explains regarding Lara Croft:

A growing library of fan fiction does similar phantasmic labour, contextualizing Croft's life and relating her outward adventures to her psychic and spiritual development. Fan art imagines Croft in different costumes, environments and historical situations, engaging in a production of signs that reinforces Croft's official story. With each new item of information and speculation, she takes on more substance -higher resolution- in the popular imaginary. (Rehak, 2007: 164)

For Rehak, fans of Lara Croft are central for the "higher resolution" that this heroine has gradually gained. Their fan fiction and fan art add new information to the ever-increasing database that is Lara Croft's fictional biography. Japanese animation fans also engage in labor that gives more substance to their favorite characters. I would argue, however, that this labor is not just a production of signs that reinforces these characters' official story. Fans want to be closer to their favorite characters, they want to know everything there is to know about them, to have them always present in their lives through the consumption of narratives and in the form of merchandise. In a word, they want to fully appropriate their favorite characters. In the case of anime fans, this appropriation takes the form of creative practices such as fan art and cosplay, as well practices of media consumption. It is in this sense that within anime fandom production and consumption of cultural objects work as both an expression and a consolidation of the emotional attachments that fans have for certain characters. Chara-moe, understood as the strong affection that fans feel towards certain characters, emerges from these emotional attachments that are constructed through what I call "character consumption," the propensity and capacity to appropriate beloved characters<sup>23</sup>.

In contrast to narrative consumption, that is, the propensity and capacity to appropriate certain texts considered narratively or aesthetically superior to other cultural products, character consumption focuses on the powerful affection toward characters that emerges from processes of identification and emotional attachment. As such, character consumption introduces characters themselves to the cultural hierarchy of taste that constitutes anime fandom as a field of consumption. As a result, fandom has fragmented into a multitude of positions that have character x or y at their core. In this sense, fans of a certain character of a particular text can be understood as members of a subfield of consumption that is articulated around Japanese animation characters.



These anime characters fandoms are also field of struggle where different definitions of beloved characters are advanced and rejected. The clash between fans that like the original narratives and textual poachers discussed above, for example, is mainly conceptualized as a conflict between different interpretations of anime characters.

### **Fandom as a Field of Consumption: The Case of *Neon Genesis Evangelion***

The more intense symbolic struggles, however, are between fans of different characters that often belong to the same anime text. Love for a character often appears to correspond with hate for another. My interviewees, for example, mentioned not only characters that they liked but also some that they abhorred. In order to better appreciate the symbolic struggles to define the superiority of certain characters in comparison to others, it is useful to examine a particular case. *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, as mentioned in the quote from Matsuri, is an anime that was identified many times during my interviews. The words of Yamato, a Mexican male of thirty-six years that was a temporary worker in the Mexican agency that collects taxes and was mainly into mecha<sup>24</sup>, illustrates the affection that some fans experience towards characters of this popular series:

Rei Ayanami porque se me hizooo... literalmente, me fasci... así te lo digo: me fascinó su forma de ser. Es seca; pero como que... a mí no... Yo... Hasta en uuun... hasta el día de hoy sigo pensando que yo no quiero conocer a la Rei Ayanami que es piloto del Evangelion. Yo quiero... romper ese cascarón, esaaaa, ese muro que se hizo ella, para conocer a la verdadera Rei Ayanami. Eso, hasta el día de hoy, sigue siendo como que, pues, eh, misterio que te dejó esa chava al día de hoy. Aunque tú sabes que es un clon y todo eso; pero, yo me quedo... no me importa que sea un clon. Yo quiero conocer a la verdadera Rei Ayanami a la chava que está detrás y yo sé que puede sonreír. (Yamato)

Rei Ayanami because she looked to me... literally, she fasci... I am telling it as it is: I was fascinated by her way of being. She is dry; but like... to me... I... Even... even to this day I still think that I do not want to get to know the Rei Ayanami that is a pilot of an Evangelion. I want to... break that shell, that wall that she made around herself, to get to know the real Rei Ayanami. That, even to this day, continues to be, well, a mystery left behind by that girl to this day. Even when you know that she is a clone and all that; but I will stay... I do not

care that she is a clone. I want to know the real Rei Ayanami, the girl that is hidden and that I know can smile. (Yamato)

In this quote, Yamato not only reveals his fascination for Rei Ayanami but also claims to want to know the “real Rei Ayanami” who exists outside of the narrative of *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. In which narrative space does this “real Rei” exist? How can he interact with her in order to break her shell and see her smile? The emotional attachment that this fan has towards Rei has made him reject the narrative and the world of *Neon Genesis Evangelion* where Rei is cold and pilots a giant robot known as Evangelion. To him, behind the Rei presented in the narrative there is a real Rei that awaits to be discovered. Through character consumption, he is able to perform this discovery. There is not only one *Neon Genesis Evangelion* world. Parallel worlds, in the form of fan fiction, have been created by other fans who also want to see Rei smile. Also, the production company behind *Evangelion*, Gainax, developed itself a myriad of other parallel worlds<sup>25</sup>. One of these worlds seems to have given Yamato a depiction of Rei that he seems to prefer over the one presented within the original work:

Sí, exactamente, como paso en la última película de *Evangelion*. Laaa la tres. En la cual prácticamente sonrió y prácticamente se dio lo que todos queríamos: que... despertaran los sentimientos, que quedaron inconclusos de Rei en el anime, en el anime original, que se vio que despertaron dentro de esa película. Es lo que muchos estábamos esperando. Y Asuka sigue siendo como es y se ve que no va a cambiar. (Yamato)

Yea, exactly as it happened in the last movie of *Evangelion*. The third one. In which she practically smiled and practically happened what we all wanted: that... those feelings were awoken, the ones which were left inconclusive of Rei in the anime, the original anime, that it was seen that wake up within this movie. Is what many of us were waiting for. And Asuka keeps being who she is and it can be seen that she is not going to change. (Yamato)

According to Azuma (2009) the fans of *Evangelion* in Japan were not that concerned with the whole narrative world of this series but instead focused on the characters and their different incarnations through a number of different media texts. Yamato certainly seems more invested in

Rei than in the series as a whole. Interestingly enough, he ascribes this investment to other fans: he says that Rei smiling was a thing that “we all wanted” and something “many of us were waiting for.” Following the notions that I have introduced of narrative consumption and character consumption, I would argue that when Yamato talks about “we” and “us” he is referring not only to the Evangelion Fandom but more specifically to the Rei Ayanami Fandom. This is further supported by the fact that he ends his train of thought openly criticizing Asuka, another one of the female protagonists of Evangelion. This dislike for Asuka goes as far as actually being hate:

La odio. No, o sea, Asuka, no sé como que... quiere ser el centro de atención. Quiere recibir alabanzas de los demás. Le falta, tal vez, un poco de humildad. Pasó por muchas cosas, sí, bastante fuertes: el ver cómo su mamá se suicidó, cómo la trataban a ella de muñeca. Por eso es que ella quiso salir adelante sin necesidad de nadie; pero hay en veces que esa misma soledad, porque yo la he vivido, te hace más fuerte; [...] pero, ella, se creó esa soledad... vacía: sin nadie que la apoyara. Sin nadie que la apoyara y —al final de cuentas— que se sentía, literalmente... útil, si recibía alabanzas, si era el centro de atención. Si no las recibía, se sentía inútil, literalmente, se iba para el fondo. Y de ahí nadie la podía sacar. Lo intentó Shinji y no pudo. En cuanto a Rei, ella... quiso salir del agujero con ayuda de Shinji. (Yamato)

I hate her. I mean, Asuka, she kind of... wants to be the center of attention. She wants to receive praise from others. She lacks, perhaps, a bit of humbleness. She went through many things, yes, very harsh: seeing how her mom committed suicide, how she was treated as a doll. That is why she wanted to succeed without needing somebody; but there are times that this same loneliness, because I have experienced it, makes you stronger [...] but she, created that loneliness... empty: without anyone to support her. Without anyone to support her and, at the end, she felt, literally... useful, if she received praise, if she was the center of attention. If she did not receive it, she felt useless, literally, she went to the bottom. And from there nobody was able to take her out. Shinji tried and he could not. Regarding Rei, she... wanted to go out of the hole with help from Shinji. (Yamato)

Yamato claims that he hates Asuka because she lacks humbleness and refuses the help of others. Despite addressing the troubled past of the character, he does not feel empathy towards her. For this fan, the fact that Asuka's mother committed suicide and she was treated like a doll does not justify her way of being. She went to the bottom and is never going to change, even with the help of the male protagonist of *Evangelion*, Shinji. He then contrasts Asuka with his beloved character, Rei, who "wanted to go out of the hole with the help from Shinji." This fascination for Rei and hate of Asuka is not shared by other fans of *Evangelion*. Edward for example, told me he only owned three anime figurines. One of those was precisely Asuka, a fact that as I will discuss in depth in chapter 5, indicates his emotional connection with this character.

We can see here, two factions within "Evangelion fandom." One of them is the "Rei fandom" and the other the "Asuka fandom." Given that *Neon Genesis Evangelion* has at its core a romantic triangle between Shinji, Asuka and Rei, it is perhaps no surprise that some fans hate one of the romantic interests of the protagonist and support the other one. The inclusion of a third romantic interest for Shinji later on in the story, in the form of the androgynous Kaworu, further complicates this rivalry between character fandoms within the "Evangelion fandom" as we can appreciate in the words of Hetalia, a Canadian white female of twenty-three years who was studying sociology, belonged to yaoi fandom and created AMVs (Anime Music Videos):

(Laughs) Am... my favorite character would probably be Kaworu from *Neon... Evangelion*, he's just... he's just really far out there, am... he just kind of says exactly what's on his mind he is really direct, and it makes all the other characters really uncomfortable, and I don't know... I think he is just, really interesting and he is very selfless too, so I think, am... compared to all the other characters in the show who are very am... they look down on the protagonist, Kaworu is kind of the only one who is really supportive and he is just....  
(Hetalia)

Here, Hetalia dismisses both Rei and Asuka, asserting that "they look down on the protagonist." Kaworu in contrast is selfless and supportive of Shinji. While Yamato seems to like Rei because she accepts the support of Shinji, Hetalia likes Kaworu because he does not need the support of the protagonist. Instead, for her, he is the only one really supportive of Shinji. Hetalia is part of the "Kaworu fandom," yet another faction within the "Evangelion fandom." Interestingly,

both Yamato and Hetalia introduce the relationship with Shinji as a reason for being fans of either Rei or Kaworu. Choosing a favorite couple within a particular anime text is a common practice among anime fans and is often referred to as “shipping” two characters together. From this perspective, it is possible to advance the idea that, besides being part of the “Evangelion fandom” and the “Rei fandom,” Yamato is also member of the “Shinji-Rei fandom.” Meanwhile, Hetalia belongs to the “Evangelion fandom,” the “Kaworu fandom” and the “Kaworu-Shinji fandom.”

Until now, I have been discussing the relation of *Neon Genesis Evangelion* with its fans in terms of character consumption. There are, however, some fans that do not belong to any faction but instead approach this anime through narrative consumption. For this group of fans, the characters of this world of simulacra are not as important as the narrative of Evangelion. Perhaps because of the many character defects of Shinji, Asuka and Rei, they do not establish emotional connections with the characters but find themselves nonetheless intrigued by the story. In the words of Inuyasha, a Mexican male of forty-years who had a Master’s degree in engineering sciences and worked for General Motors as a design engineer:

Yyy dee *Evangelion* ése también me gustó, ése sí tengooo, por la serie, ¿no?, ése es por la serie porque los personajes no te puedo decir que en sí, porque Shinji no, no te digo... no me fascinó; pero, pero en serio, ahí sí, la serie es lo que me gusta; entonces tengo una taza de NERV, la corporación pero esa fue por la serie. (Inuyasha)

And from *Evangelion*, I also like that one, that one I do own because of the show, right? That one is because of the show because the characters, I cannot say to you that is because of them, because Shinji, I cannot, I cannot say... I was not fascinated by him; but, but seriously, there yea, the show is what I like; and so I do own a mug of NERV, the corporation but that was because of the show. (Inuyasha)

While discussing the anime related merchandise that he owns, Inuyasha emphasizes that he owns a mug inspired by this show not because he likes the characters but because he likes the series in itself. He explicitly says that Shinji is not someone he likes, a common feeling among some fans of this show who find him weak and even pathetic. This emphasis on the show instead of the characters is further supported by the fact that the mug he owns is not about the characters

or the giant robots present in the show but instead of NERV, the shady corporation that orchestrates the events that take place in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. NERV is the central element of the world created in this anime. From this perspective, the mug represents a case of textual proximity with the narrative of this show and not of character proximity as represented for example, in the figurine of Asuka, owned by Edward.

Inuyasha seems to be just a member of the “Evangelion fandom.” Contrary to the other fans discussed in this chapter, such as Matsuri, Edward, Yamato and Hetalia, he does not seem to have a strong emotional connection with any of the characters in this anime series. He does not belong to the “Shinji fandom,” the “Rei fandom” or the “Kaworu fandom” or seem to care if Shinji ends with Asuka instead of Rei. His position resembles more the traditional approach to fandom described by Jenkins (2013). And yet, as these other fans illustrate, this is just one approach among many. Being a fan of a particular show does not mean being member of an interpretive community with shared values, practices and modes of reception. It is a question of taste, understood as schemes of perception and appreciation that invite the appropriation of certain objects and practices (Bourdieu, 1984). Because taste is guided by cultural hierarchies and the search for distinction, it is characterized not by consensus but by antagonistic relationships among those groups and individuals implicated in gaining a profit in distinction through cultural possessions constructed as legitimate (Bourdieu, 1984).

Conceptualizing Japanese animation as a field of consumption has the objective of bringing to the fore the antagonistic relationships of fans in terms of narratives and characters. The many fandoms within this field of consumption correspond to different hierarchies of consumers, each of which tries to advance their definition of the objects and practices that are legitimate and can yield a profit in distinction within anime fandom. Loving particular narratives and characters differentiates fans and create distinctive emotional communities that constantly clash with each other. It is in this sense that dissent is a common feature within fandoms. More often than not, fans argue over characters, pairings and story plots. Fans that have grown emotionally attached to Asuka, for example, will not stay idle if they hear a fan of Rei criticizing their beloved heroine.

## **Conclusion**

Contrary to reductive views of “media fandom” (Jenkins, 2013) and “cult fandom” (Hills, 2002), the case of *Neon Genesis Evangelion* and its fans sheds light on the multiple factions and subtle

divisions that exist among fans of media texts. Both Jenkins and Hills took particular types of fan culture as accurate representations of all fandoms. For them, there is only one way of being a fan, only one type of “alternative social community.” They offer an illusion of “subcultural fixity.” For the former, all fans are textual poachers; for the latter, followers of cult media. As I have argued in this chapter, fans’ fascination with certain media texts and characters cannot be reduced to either of these models. This would entail a monolithic approach to fandom and fans that does not take into account the many positions and position-takings that constitute fandom as a field of consumption. Instead of assuming the existence of a reified interpretive community called “fandom” and of “fan” as a fixed identity, it is more productive to focus our attention on the consumption practices of actual fans. By addressing both narrative consumption and character consumption, the complexity of Japanese animation fandom as a field of struggle composed of a variety of subfields of consumption can be appreciated.

As illustrated in this chapter, this complex field of consumption has been constructed by Japanese animation fans through the aesthetic legitimization of anime. Mobilizing narratives that stress the textual superiority of Japanese animation vis-à-vis other media texts, anime fans create cultural hierarchies of taste that celebrate this type of animation and establish it as a legitimate object of consumption. Among the textual characteristics of anime, the complexity of its narratives occupies a central place within these cultural hierarchies of taste: fans often mention the fact that Japanese animation is more complicated or even unique in comparison to Western media. It is in this sense that narrative consumption, that is, the appropriation by fans of the vast narrative spaces introduced within Japanese animation texts, constitutes one of the two consumer practices around which anime fandom has been structured.

The second consumer practice that guides anime fandom as a field of consumption focuses on the appropriation of characters. I have called this appropriation character consumption. Rooted in emotional attachments to, and processes of identification with, anime characters, this practice encapsulates current transformations in terms of media consumption that have shifted the relationships that audiences once had with texts. Current consumers of media no longer exclusively place the text at the center of their practices of appropriation. Popular characters have become increasingly central to anime fandom as a field of consumption. From this perspective, character consumption has inserted characters themselves into the cultural hierarchies of taste that structure this field of consumption. The resulting fragmentation of Japanese animation fandom, into a

multitude of positions that have a variety of texts and characters at their core, explains the multiple factions and divisions that exist among fans of anime.

The question that emerges from this conceptualization of Japanese animation fandom has to do with the ways in which different factions within this field of consumption construct and transform the cultural hierarchies of taste that characterize anime fandom at any given point in time. As such, the next chapter will delve into the complex processes through which media consumers become participants in different emotional communities that use consumption and taste as the basis for “being together”. Using both narrative consumption and character consumption, fans have created a place to belong that is not only a field of consumption but something more, a world that can be understood as “subcultural”.

## Notes

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<sup>14</sup> Here, my interviewee uses the colloquial term *comedia* (comedy), instead of the more proper “telenovela” to refer to Mexican soap operas. This stresses the lack of seriousness and narrative quality which some people associate with this type of media text. Also of note, is that in Mexico “telenovelas” are not associated with soap, making the term “soap opera” an abusive translation.

<sup>15</sup> According to Brubaker and Cooper, “groupness” can be defined as “the sense of belonging to a distinctive, bounded, solidary group” (2000: 20).

<sup>16</sup> A Japanese Animation, characterized by its melodramatic qualities.

<sup>17</sup> In Mexico, North American refers generally only to USA.

<sup>18</sup> A point to which I will be back further in this chapter.

<sup>19</sup> Understood in this case as a “reality” that is textually constructed and thus open to transformation (Rehak, 2007).

<sup>20</sup> Moe is an expression that means “having affection for a character that does not exist in reality” (Sasakibara in Kijima, 2012: 149).

<sup>21</sup> The title of this show in Spanish, “Guerreras Mágicas” (Magical Warriors), directly addresses the three protagonists of this anime show. This is not the case of the original name, also used in English “Magic Knight Rayearth”. That is the reason why my interview can jump from the title of the show directly to a discussion of the three titular characters without further explanation.

<sup>22</sup> Indeed, one of my interviewees was a big collector of Mutant Ninja Turtles toys and figurines.

<sup>23</sup> I follow in here, the definition of taste that Bourdieu proposes in *Distinction* (1984) as discussed in the introduction of this dissertation.

<sup>24</sup> Mecha refers to mechanical. It is an anime genre dedicated to robots and science fiction.

<sup>25</sup> “In the case of Evangelion, however, there were no sequels and no plans to make sequels. Instead, the original creator’s production company, Gainax, developed the derivative works sold in the Comic Market and at the same time created plans for related concepts; for instance, there are mah-jong games, erotic telephone card designs using the Evangelion characters, and even simulation games in which players nurture the heroine Ayanami Rei. These are all far removed from the originals.” (Azuma, 2009: 37)



## Introduction

From the perspective of “narrative consumption” and “character consumption”, Japanese animation fans are individuals that enjoy and consume the narratives and characters of Japanese animation. In contrast to Jenkins (2013) and Hills (2002), I do not see fans as members of an alternative interpretive community called “Fandom”. Instead, I propose that anime fandom constitutes a field of consumption where individual consumers of media appropriate texts and characters, creating in this way an ever-increasing number of sub-fandoms. While becoming a fan is thus a question of consumption and taste, I would argue that creating a “fan identity” that is part of a “community” is a labor of love that passes through many practices associated with Japanese animation fandom. This labor of love emerges precisely from narrative consumption and character consumption, a fact recognized by Umberto Eco while discussing what makes a media text a cult object:

The work must be loved, obviously, but this is not enough. It must provide a completely furnished world so that its fans can quote characters and episodes as if they were aspects of the fan’s private sectarian world, a world about which one can make up quizzes and play trivia games so that the adepts of the sect recognize through each other a shared expertise. (Eco, 1990: 198)

While wrapped in religious discourse about “cult objects” and “adepts of the sect”, this quote stresses the fact that loving a media work is not enough for transforming it into a “cult text”. For this to happen, the work must offer a dense narrative world that provides fans with opportunities for character consumption and narrative consumption. Discussing characters and episodes, fans create a “private sectarian world” in which they can “recognize through each other a shared expertise”. This world recognized by Eco, I would argue, is not fandom but a complex subcultural discursive and practical space linked to this field of consumption. In this subcultural world, fans share their knowledge and love towards particular media texts and characters. In the quote above, Eco mentions how fans “make up quizzes and play trivia games” in order to recognize their shared expertise regarding this world. This underlies the importance of shared expertise

within the subcultural world of fans. In this chapter, I explore the shared knowledge that characterizes fans of Japanese animation and other related media such as manga and videogames to uncover the subcultural formation that lies within anime fandom.

### **Japanese Animation Fandom: From Consumption to Esoteric Hierarchies of Taste**

The only prerequisite to becoming a Japanese animation fan is to watch anime. As discussed in chapter 4, fans of Japanese animation found something different and special in this media product. However, this discovery did not rest on an alternative mode of media consumption. Instead, the fans-to-be found anime on a mainstream medium: television. Indeed, most of my interviewees explained that they started watching Japanese animation on TV. They discovered anime on their television sets, although at the time, they did not know that these animations were not Western cartoons. The words of Dragneel who, as discussed in chapter four was a Canadian white male of twenty-two years that worked as a security guard, illustrate this situation:

The first time... oh man! I used to watch *Dragon Ball* on TV as a kid so that always kind of held a place near and dear to the heart, sort of deal; my dad and I used to get up and watch it on Saturday morning cartoons, so it all kinda stand up from there and I ended up watching a lot of cartoons, a lot of early morning television as a kid so I ended up stumbling across other shows (Dragneel)

As can be appreciated in this quote, anime fans often have their first contact with Japanese animation through anime series available on television. *Dragon Ball* is a prime example of this situation as many of my interviewees specifically talked about this series while explaining how they had started to watch anime. This is not a surprise, considering that this show was a staple of cartoon blocks for many years<sup>26</sup>. As such, it was an important gateway into anime. While Dragneel addresses his transition from *Dragon Ball* to other shows as “stumbling”, Edward, the Canadian white male of twenty-four years that worked as a voice actor and was introduced in chapter four, addresses it through a more passionate narrative:

Ah, say I was probably about eight or nine years old. I ... Saturday morning cartoons. Ah, probably the first one I watched was *Dragon Ball*. Um... and after that I was hooked, so just

kind of caught it on TV and *Dragon Ball*, *Pokemon*. Those sort of things, kind of like were the first things that really got me interested in it. [...] Um... I'd say especially for like, well *Dragon Ball* for me, was like again, probably like the biggest one that got me really interested further into anime. Cause *Pokemon* was like ... I was more interested in the cards at the time because you a kid and you're like, "oh it's so much fun." (Edward)

After being introduced to anime via *Dragon Ball*, Edward asserts that he was “hooked” on this form of entertainment. *Dragon Ball* engaged his interest in Japanese animation, an interest that eventually transformed him into a fan. This change, from casual viewer of anime to an enthusiast of this type of media, requires not only a move to other anime series but also a shift in terms of media platform. Television has only a limited number of options when it comes to Japanese animation, and a person who desires to keep consuming it, needs eventually to find other media sources that offer a bigger selection of anime shows. Nowadays, this media source is, perhaps with no surprise, the internet. Virtually all my interviewees asserted that they use the web to watch Japanese animation. However, this was not always the case. The words of Van, a Canadian white male of thirty-seven years who worked as a museum educator and was interested in Japanese culture and Victorian science fiction, take us to a time where Japanese animation was not as accessible as it is today:

Um, well, as a child watching it you know, it looks a little different but you don't know it from anything else really. It's just another character, another cartoon. It was only later on that I realized, "Oh this stuff is from Japan, that's its thing." [...] I would say probably... um, as I was getting into my teens. It dawned on me "Oh, *Robotech* is Japanese." Then as I got a little bit older, what, like finding the VHS tapes of like *Vampire Hunter D*, *The Fist of the North Star*, and stuff like that, and seeing it in Japanese, "Ah... now I get it." [...] Ah, well it was always like at that time because of course, basically the only exposure to anime in any mainstream, sort of any, was Saturday morning cartoons. So when you found like the one video rental store in town, that had the VHS tapes of anime, it was like, "Ah... ALELUYAH!" (Van)

A number of interesting points emerge from Van's words. In the first place, the continuous exposure to anime eventually leads fans to the realization that this medium is Japanese. This realization is often associated with a move in terms of media consumption that takes them outside television and into subtitled anime that retains its original language. Japanese animation is generally dubbed when broadcast on television. Stripped of its otherness, anime is presented to audience members as just another cartoon. Its art style, narrative and characters make it stand out, however, for certain individuals such as Van. These members of the audience eventually realize that anime is Japanese because their desire to watch more and more of this media product leads outside of television and towards subtitled Japanese animation texts that are available in less mainstream media. In the time when Van became an anime fan, the road to this discovery passed through VHS tapes. In a video rental store, he found anime titles not available on television that retained their original language. This situation opened for him a way outside the mainstream and into the more esoteric aspects of fandom.

The second point, closely related to this break with mainstream, dubbed anime, is the fact that Van names two anime series *Vampire Hunter D* and *The Fist of the North Star* that to my knowledge, have never been available on mainstream television because of their mature and violent content. The former is a gothic fantasy while the latter deals with a post-apocalyptic future. Neither of them could have been broadcasted on Saturday morning cartoons nor at any other cartoon block directed at children. They challenge the idea of cartoons as a comical, child-oriented media (Napier, 2007) which, paired with their use of Japanese language, makes them clearly other. This transition to more mature, complex anime also signals the break with mainstream cartoons performed by Van. He moved away not only from television but also from child-oriented cartoons.

A final point is that Van explicitly addresses the notion of "mainstream". This is significant because it positions anime in a different light vis-à-vis other popular media texts such as *Star Trek* or *Dallas*. While these texts were readily available in television, most of anime was not. It existed outside the mainstream and as such created a type of fandom that differs from the one discussed by Jenkins (2013) in *Textual Poachers*. It is no surprise that notions of "mainstream" and "underground" do not play a significant role for this author, as he centers his attention on fans of television, a mainstream media accessible to most people. While fandoms seem to focus on narrative consumption and character consumption of particular media texts, the nature of the media text as a mainstream or underground cultural product creates significant differences among these

fields of consumption. Being a fan of television series and Japanese animation is not as interchangeable as Jenkins (2013) asserts. Due in part to the esoteric nature of their consumption, Japanese animation fans have created an underground emotional community that differs from the flat subculture described by Jenkins (2013). The following excerpt from one of my field notes illustrates this fact:

While I watched the cosplay contest, I noticed that the three upper-class students, two men and a woman, that attended the convention the previous day were also among the audience. After a novice cosplayer dressed as Ichigo Kurusaki from *Bleach*, wearing an orange wig, a robe and a sword, left the stage, a young woman doing a cosplay of Yuki Cross began her participation in the contest. She wore glasses, a black short skirt, and also a black jacket with a big red ribbon in the chest area. Her facial features, form of laughing and the style of her glasses, indicated that she had a low middle-class background. The opening theme from *Vampire Knight*, the anime to which this character belonged began to play while she performed her routine on stage. This routine consisted in moving a large rod, the weapon of Yuki in *Vampire Knight*, following the opening song. However, this song was not in its original version in Japanese. Instead the cosplayer was using a version in Spanish. This fact was noticed by the upper-class young woman who complained: “It is in Spanish. And they translated it. How gross”. (Field Note IV)

The esoteric nature of Japanese animation as a foreign cultural product has resulted in the creation of hierarchies and distinctions among anime fans that have little to do with the communal and unitary subculture pictured by Jenkins (2013). As illustrated in the excerpt, anime fans value the otherness of Japanese animation and sanction those that take it closer to mainstream media. “How gross”, is a powerful aesthetic judgement against the translated opening song but also a critique against the Yuki cosplayer. While it could be argued that social class plays a role in the words of the upper-class young woman, her positionality as an anime fan committed to the cultural hierarchies that have emerged around anime fandom also influences this expression of distaste. This fact is further evident when taking into account that one of her companions, a young man cosplaying as Wolverine from the *X-Men*, had won a karaoke contest the day before by singing the opening theme of *Saint Seiya* in Japanese. The runner-up to this contest was a young woman

that sang the theme of *Tsubasa Reservoir Chronicles* in Japanese and belonged, as many of the participants in this convention, to the low middle-class. The winner of the cosplay contest, a young man dressed as Sasuke from *Naruto* was also a member of the low middle-class. Contrary to the cosplayer of Yuki Cross, the theme he selected for his performance was in Japanese and included lines from the original Japanese voice of Sasuke. From this perspective, Japanese as otherness was the defining trait that legitimated performances within this anime convention.

### **Anime Fandom as Taste Culture(s)**

The fact that the emotional communities that have emerged around anime fandom are guided by a taste born in the esoteric characteristics of Japanese animation parallels to a certain degree the nature of the club cultures analyzed by Thornton (1996). Like club cultures, anime fandom and its associated emotional communities are articulated around cultural hierarchies born in the mainstream-esoteric continuum. Both the clubber and the anime fan gain status by accessing certain esoteric cultural products and by “being in the know”, that is, by acquiring certain types of knowledge and practices related to such cultural products. These knowledge and practices problematize the relationship of clubbers and anime fans to class because, as Thornton (1996) explains, a taste culture’s cultural hierarchies are more closely aligned to other social differences: age and gender. Of course, access to the cultural products themselves is still linked to class in terms of economic capital. While clubbers’ media consumption focuses on the acquisition of “white label” records of dance music, anime fans originally made the consumption of VHS tapes of Japanese animation the central, physical element of their cultural hierarchies. While Van was fortunate enough to find a video rental store that had anime, access to these tapes in Mexico was often a complicated endeavour that required an investment of time and money that only a member of the middle and upper classes could afford:

Pues yo tenía todas las ganas de jeje, de... de proyectarlo porque dije, oye, ¡es padre! Es bonito el anime; pero, pus, no todo mundo tiene la posibilidad de irse a México a comprar un VHS deee toda esta serie y verlo, ¿no? Entonces, este, yo yo decía: sí tengo ganas de que... de mostrarlooo a la gente y que vean porque está padre jeje, o sea, realmente está muy padre. En esos tiempos era mucho más difícil conseguirlo. No había descargas, no había nada de eso. Todo estaba en VHS, no había, este, DVD ni Blu-Ray [...]. Estee y más... más

bien eraaa... mmm... ps, una, una aventura irse a México, buscar en las tiendas especializadas, los VHSses, que salieran, costaban un montón —como treinta dólares por cassette, mínimo jeje— Entonces, sí estaba muy muy cañón esteee conseguir esas series, ¿no? Y yo me pasaba ahorrando esteee, jejeje, toda, todo, todo lo que me sobraba de dinero lo agarraba para irme a comprar un mes, una una vez al mes irme a comprar un cassette. Y así: poquito a poquito fui haciendo la colección, entonces me quede con una mon... montón de series, y... y invitaba a los amigos y conocidos, esteee a que vieran anime. (Vash)

I had every desire of... of screening it [anime] because I said, hey, it's cool! Anime is beautiful; but, well, not everybody has the possibility of going to Mexico City to buy a VHS with all the series and watch it, right? Then, well, I said: I want to... showcase it to people and that they see why it is cool, like, it really is very cool. In those times it was much harder to obtain it. There were no downloads, nothing like that. Everything was in VHS, there was not, DVD or Blu-Ray [...] And it was... it was more... mmm... an adventure going to Mexico City, search in the specialized stores, the VHS cassettes that had been released, they cost a lot - like thirty dollars per cassette, minimum -. Then, it was really, really hard to get those series, right? And I was always saving money, everything, everything that I could save I took to go to buy one time per month, a cassette. And like that: little by little I made my collection, then I had a lot... a lot of series, and... and I invited my friends and acquaintances to watch anime. (Vash)

As we can see in this excerpt, in order to build his collection of anime, Vash who, as seen in chapter four, was a Mexican engineer of forty years that worked as university instructor, had to invest considerable time and money. Once a month he travelled to specialty stores in Mexico City to buy VHS tapes that were priced in American dollars. One by one, he built an anime collection that he began to show to his friends and acquaintances. The anime series he had were hard to get and made Vash a popular member of his local community of anime fans. His access to esoteric media gave him status among his peers and eventually allowed him to create an anime club in his school, an elite private institution in central Mexico. He used this club and his collection to showcase Japanese animation to other students interested in this media. In another part of the interview, Vash asserted that many of these individuals still watch anime and remain friends with

him. According to him, they still share “a common vibe” born from their consumption of Japanese animation.

This commonality marks the difference between fandom as a field of consumption where individual consumers appropriate a variety of texts and characters, and the emotional communities that have emerged from such narrative and character consumption. Vash is no longer just consuming anime, he is sharing his tapes with other fans, creating in this way a local space where consumers, who see each other as peers, create “a common vibe” articulated around such social differences as class, gender and age, and that also includes narratives and characters that they have watched together, as well as the common experiences that have taken place during their consumption of Japanese animation. In this sense, the narrative and character consumption of anime can lead to the formation of local groups of fans that congregate as a result of a cultural taste that has Japanese animation at its center.

These congregations of fans are no longer limited to elite schools because Japanese animation has become accessible to individuals with limited economic capital. This fact explains why upper-class, middle-class and working-class fans participate in conventions as the one described in the excerpt above. In Mexico this is not just a question of the many anime series available in the Internet but also of the economic phenomenon known as piracy. As Reguillo (2010) explains, piracy functions as a levelling form of consumption in terms of belonging and membership to certain social groupings. For Japanese animation fans, this means the possibility of acquiring a whole anime series for as low as ten pesos (less than 1 CAD). Interestingly, as the case of *Vampire Knight* indicates, this has not led to a segmentation of anime and related media in terms of class, as both a low middle-class and an upper-class woman like this anime text with the difference in their consumption running along the mainstream-esoteric continuum. This is always the case in anime fandom and its associated emotional communities: in them, social differences such as class and race are mediated by a particular taste that legitimates the consumption of Japanese animation through certain knowledges and practices<sup>27</sup>.

As with “club cultures”, emotional communities associated with Japanese animation fandom can also be conceptualized as a “taste culture” (Thornton, 1996). The narrative and character consumption of Japanese animation reveals a cultural taste that differs from the one found in fans of *Star Trek*, for example. Moreover, being composed of many sub-fandoms, anime fandom houses a number of cultural tastes that straddle the continuum mainstream-alternative. Being a fan of the



dubbed *Dragon Ball* broadcast on television is not the same as being a fan of *Vampire Hunter D*. While the fan of the former and of the latter can be considered members of the anime fandom, they occupy different positions within it: while the fan of the dubbed *Dragon Ball* is closer aligned to the mainstream, the fan of *Vampire Hunter D* is located more in the underground, and often belongs to a local or trans-local<sup>28</sup> group of fans. These local or trans-local groupings constitute subcultural congregations of fans that are similar to those that Thornton identifies as “club cultures”:

Club cultures are taste cultures. Club crowds generally congregate on the basis of their shared taste in music, their consumption of common media and, most importantly, their preference for people with similar tastes to themselves. Taking part in club cultures, builds, in turn, further affinities, socializing participants into a knowledge of (and frequently a belief in) the likes and dislikes, meanings and values of the culture. Clubs and raves, therefore, house ad hoc communities with fluid boundaries which may come together and dissolve in a single summer or endure a few years. Crucially, club cultures embrace their own hierarchies of what is authentic and legitimate in popular culture (1996: 3).

This excerpt from Thornton offers an important counterpoint to the reification of both fan and fandom advanced by Jenkins (2013) and Hills (2002). Club cultures have fluid boundaries and can easily disappear. They are a congregation of individuals with similar taste that consume similar products. These people take part in shared practices that build affinities and socialize participants into a specific kind of knowledge, and into the hierarchies that exist within the club culture. Becoming a member of a club culture is not a question of claiming the identity of a “clubber” but instead of practically participating in the culture and learning, through interaction with other members, the skills and knowledge needed to be, at the practical and discursive level, a “clubber”. This is a never-ending process as subcultural hierarchies and groupings change constantly. Japanese animation fans that congregate with peers appear to be similar to clubbers, as the words of Monokuma, a Mexican female of twenty-eight years who worked at an anime store, was both an industrial engineer and a fashion designer and was dating a male fan of twenty-years, illustrate:

Cuando me enteré que era un universo muy amplio fue en el noventa y ocho. Fue cuando empecé a jugar Yugi, porque —cuando yo me metí a jugar yugi— conocí a mucha más personas que les gustaba. Entonces, de ellos fue de no, mira, metete acá y me empecé a empapar con reviiiistas, con, como que fue uno de lo normal, de lo básico de la televisión, a ver series que, obviamente, no iban a pasar jamás en televisión. Fue cuando amplié mucho. (Monokuma)

When I realized that it [anime] was a very big universe was in ninety-eight. That was when I began to play Yugi, because - when I got into playing yugi - I met many more people that like it. Then, they were like, look, enter here and I began to soak myself with magazines, with, like I got from the normal, from the basic that was on television, to watch series that, obviously, were not going to be ever on television. It was when I broadened a lot. (Monokuma)

As can be appreciated in this quote, some anime fans associate with other individuals that share their passion for anime and learn in this way some of the knowledge and hierarchies that exist within the subcultural grouping. The case of Monokuma is telling because she met other fans through a game of cards based on a Japanese animation, *YuGiOh*. The fans that began playing with her helped her transition from the basic anime that she watched on television to much more esoteric anime shows. Through their advice, she also started to read anime niche magazines<sup>29</sup> which also increased her knowledge regarding anime. Monokuma did not claim the identity of an anime fan and join anime fandom; instead, she slowly become a member of her local taste culture associated with this field of consumption through her interaction with more experienced anime enthusiasts and through her learning of certain types of trans-local knowledge and practices as they were represented in anime niche magazines.

### **Japanese Animation Fandom and Subcultural Capital**

The knowledge and practices gained by Monokuma can be understood as “subcultural capital”. Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Thornton (1996) conceives of subcultural capital as a subcategory of capital which operates in the sphere of youth culture. In particular, she equates the

“hipness” of clubbers with a form of subcultural capital. Napier extends this concept to include Japanese animation fans:

The second common element that gives meaning to fan activity is what I have called subcultural capital - the knowledge and expertise that one gains about the object of one's enthusiasm that allows one not only to feel comfortable with other like-minded fans, but also to gain status among fellow enthusiasts. [...] In the case of anime and manga fans, subcultural capital can include a wide variety of “data” - experiences such as con-going, club attendance, or trips to Japan, expertise that allows one to win anime trivia contests online or at a convention, and the creative abilities that enable fans to make a remarkably accurate costume from a couple of pictures of their favorite anime character or to produce fanfiction so compelling as to develop its own set of fans. (Napier, 2007: 150)

For Napier, the expertise and knowledge that fans gain regarding their favorite texts and characters are at the center of “fan activity” and allow fans to gain status within Japanese animation fandom. I would argue, however, that partaking in this fandom only requires the consumption of anime texts and characters. From this perspective, the wide variety of data that anime fans gather, be they productive practices such as fan fiction or experiences obtained in Japanese animation conventions, become important in interaction with other fans. Only while engaged with peers can fans mobilize subcultural capital to gain a profit in distinction. In this sense, subcultural capital works exclusively within the taste culture(s) associated with anime fandom, and not inside the fandom as a field of consumption. A mainstream consumer of *Dragon Ball*, for example, cares little about knowledge that goes beyond her or his immediate enjoyment and understanding of the text.

Both Thornton and Napier's conceptualizations of subcultural capital offer a way out of the monolithic approach to fans and fandoms presented in the work of Jenkins (2013) and Hills (2002). As Thornton asserts, research on popular culture has tended to portray it “as a curiously flat folk culture” (1996: 8). Either as a community of intellectuals or as a cult, fandom follows this portrayal with limited attention paid to questions of hierarchy and status. The notion of subcultural capital allows us to bring these questions to the fore, and constitutes a useful analytical tool for linking narrative and character consumption with the study of the taste culture(s) associated with anime

fandom. Gaining subcultural capital requires that fans gather “data” about their object of enthusiasm. In the case of Japanese animation fans, and as illustrated by the words of Monokuma, this means, in the first place, collecting information about different anime and manga.

Subcultural capital as collection of information about anime and manga is closely related to Eco’s reference to fans making quizzes and playing trivia games. Narrative and character consumption often is accomplished by Japanese animation fans by collecting information about their favorite anime series, characters and genres. Fans enjoy gaining knowledge about their favorite “worlds of simulacra”. They memorize the names of characters, places, combat techniques or even the alien races that structure their favorite narratives. As Napier explained above, this knowledge allows fans to obtain status among their peers. For this to happen, such expertise has to be deployed in front of other fans; that is to say, it must be shared. Sharing information related to Japanese animation was often discussed by my interviewees as Kirito, a Canadian white male of twenty-seven years who worked in tech support and liked the dark and gritty elements present in certain anime, illustrates when discussing the activities related to anime that he undertakes with his friends:

Yeah, we discuss shows, we discuss games, talk about what we are watching, what we are playing, strategies, etc. um... and I like to keep up with news in regards to these kind of stuff so I’m usually the guy in my group of friends ‘cause nobody else has to bother ‘cause I’ll just tell them everything that’s going on, ‘cause I like to get news that I can share with people, you know so, that’s usually the kind of stuff we discuss. [I: Like news about the new shows that are going to...] Yeah, new shows, ah... new plot developments, like there’s usually magazine scans that tell you about ‘hey a new character is showing up soon’ or ‘some weird stuff is gonna happen’ that kind of thing. (Kirito)

In this quote, Kirito illustrates the way in which subcultural capital, represented in this case by data related to anime, manga and videogames, is shared by Japanese animation fans. Fans share their knowledge with other fans in informal discussions. These talks include not only what fans are watching at the moment but also news and anticipated developments of these texts. As the words of Kirito indicate, being in the know regarding these new developments confers status to fans. Being “usually the guy” that knows “everything that’s going on” regarding Japanese

animation and related media positions a fan as what we could call a “subcultural expert”, an individual to which other fans talk in order to gain knowledge regarding their favorite media texts. As we can see in the quote from Kirito, being a “subcultural expert” requires an important investment in terms of time and labor: in order to be in the know, Kirito has to keep up with news regarding anime through reading, for example, magazine scans. Thanks to this situation “nobody else has to bother”. Kirito acquires subcultural capital through an investment of time and labor. He then shares this knowledge with his friends gaining status as a “subcultural expert” in return. This investment of time and labor through which Japanese animation fans gather data related to anime, manga and videogames includes not only future developments of media texts and related news but also the amount of anime series that a fan watches:

Yea, I think out of my friends, I am the one who watches it the most because I have the most free time, and they would be like oh give me a suggestion and then I will know their preferences so like oh I watched this one I think you will like it, a lot of the times they don't end up liking it but whatever I like it, I just wanted you to watch it too. (Karui)

As we can see in the words of Karui, a Canadian black female of eighteen years who was working while waiting to begin university the following year, an important way through which fans gather information related to anime is watching a lot of Japanese animation, reading many mangas and playing videogames. These activities require an important investment in terms of time and labor. Karui presents this in simple terms when she says that she is “the one who watches it the most because” she has “the most free time”. She invests her time in watching a lot of anime and as a result her friends ask her for suggestions regarding which anime shows to watch. From this perspective, she can also be framed as a “subcultural expert”. Both she and Kirito seem to have gained this status among their friends through informal interactions; however there are more institutionalized ways through which a fan can share their expertise regarding anime, manga and videogames. The following excerpt from one of my fieldnotes illustrates one of these institutionalized practices: trivia contests.

The trivia contest was similar to Jeopardy. Six teams of anime fans, each composed of two members, stood in front of a screen that had different categories such as “brothers” and

“pets”. The hostess of the game, dressed as an anime character, presented all the categories to the teams. Each category had three levels of difficulty. The higher the level, the more points it gave if answered correctly. Starting in a predetermined order, each team had to select a category. A question related to the category was then shown to the team which had to answer correctly. If they did, they won the points assigned to the question. If they were unable to do so, another team could answer the question. After the first rounds, three teams began to take the lead. When the first contest was over, these three teams advanced to a second game of trivia that included categories of classic Japanese Animation such as *Dragon Ball*, *Saint Seiya*, *Mazinger Z* and *Nadesico*. A team made of two young women, who had mastery over topics related to *Dragon Ball* and *Saint Seiya* won this second contest and became the champions of the event. They received anime items as a prize.

The audience of these contests participated a lot. The fans that were there, yelled answers when some of the questions were revealed and approved, criticized and mocked the answers given by the teams. Some of them, raised their hands to answer questions that none of the teams were able to answer. This happened a lot, because many of the questions were quite hard and as a result, the hostess began to give anime posters to those members of the audience that were able to answer questions that the teams did not know. Interestingly, all the members of the audience that participated in this fashion were men and a certain rivalry between them and the two young women that finally won the contest emerged during the whole game. They criticized them especially hard and a couple of male fans complained that they should be the ones participating instead of the young women and the other members of the teams. (Fieldnote III)

Trivia games such as this allow anime fans to showcase their expertise regarding Japanese animation in front of their peers. They also facilitate the transmission of subcultural capital, as the people participating and watching the game are exposed to knowledge considered relevant by the trivia makers. This transmission of subcultural capital is not limited to the trivia makers, as both participants and members of the audience present their own answers. Taken as a whole, this brief vignette of a trivia game within an anime convention underlines the fact that the taste culture(s) articulated around Japanese animation constitutes a space of interaction and praxis where fans can

gain status and distinction by mobilizing subcultural capital. In a similar way to the clubbers analyzed by Thornton, anime fans partaking in the trivia game are also socialized “into a knowledge of (and frequently a belief in) the likes and dislikes, meanings and values of the culture” (Thornton, 1996: 3).

### **The Historicity of Subcultural Capital**

The case of classic anime is telling in this regard as not all old Japanese animation series are considered worthy of becoming part of trivia contests. While some fans possess old Japanese animation texts that no longer can be seen in conventions as objects of consumption, only a select few of these texts remain relevant within the taste culture(s) associated with anime. In Mexico for example, *Dragon Ball* and *Saint Seiya* have been embraced by contemporary anime fans as texts that can yield a profit in status and distinction. As has been discussed in this chapter, Canadian fans see *Dragon Ball* as mainstream and a gateway to more esoteric texts. In this sense, the show does not occupy the same position within the anime taste cultures of Mexico and Canada. Even when they are consumers that partake in the same field of consumption, Mexican and Canadian fans create, through localized interactions and practices, different cultural hierarchies of taste. In a similar manner to the club cultures described by Thornton, anime fans create “their own hierarchies of what is authentic and legitimate in popular culture” (Thornton, 1996: 3) by taking part in local or trans-local congregations of media consumers of common texts and characters.

The different hierarchies of taste that characterize Mexican and Canadian taste cultures associated with Japanese animation, underline the importance of not considering anime fandom and its associated subcultural capital as fixed. This is a problem present both in Thornton (1996) and Napier (2007). Both authors conceive the hierarchies and expertise that articulate a taste culture as if they were immobile structures: once a fan gains the subcultural capital that characterizes the taste culture, she can gain status among her fellow enthusiasts. However, the words of Karui and the excerpt from my fieldnote III reveal that things are not that simple. Her friends often do not like the series that Karui recommends to them; the two young women that won the trivia contest are criticized instead of applauded. The hierarchies and subcultural capital that constitute the taste cultures associated with anime fandom are contested arenas of symbolic and practical struggle.

The fact that I stressed the fact that “contemporary” Mexican anime fans have embraced *Dragon Ball* and *Saint Seiya* is not a stylistic choice. Thornton’s (1996) and Napier’s (2007) definition of subcultural capital is ahistorical and ignores many elements of Bourdieu’s theories. In particular, it ignores the fact that social definitions are always subject to struggle. For Bourdieu, the struggles that animate society emerge from a symbolic battle over the monopoly of nomination, that is to say, over the “creative act of designation which gives existence to what it designates in accordance with its designation” (Bourdieu, 1993: 250). More generally, the diverse confrontations between individuals, classes and class fractions are always symbolic struggles over the representation of the social world, over control of the principles of vision and division that organize and categorize social existence.

Symbolic struggles over principles of vision and division exist within the taste culture(s) associated with anime fandom. Fans constantly struggle over the definition of hierarchies, practices and subcultural capital. For this reason, local and trans-local taste cultures associated with anime fandom, understood as a discursive and practical spaces where fans can share their knowledge and love for anime and other related media, are always changing. New texts are added. New individuals become fans. New media technologies appear. The interaction over time of these and other factors transforms hierarchies, practices and subcultural capital to such a degree that knowledge that once granted status can become obsolete. The case of voice actors that dub anime in Mexico illustrates this situation: for many years, they were the main stars of anime conventions. They talked in panels and signed autographs for fans. Older fans refer to them with respect and admiration, and yet, my ethnographic research revealed that younger fans do not care much about them.

Within the trivia contest described before, there was a category about Mexican voice actors in which the participants were presented with a phrase for a dubbed anime. They had to identify who was speaking and say her or his name. Most of the questions in this category were answered incorrectly by participants and members of the audience, so the hostess had to reveal the name of the voice actor in question after everyone had guessed incorrectly. Another example comes from the biggest and most popular conventions in Mexico, “La Mole Comic Con” and “TNT”. Both of them take place in Mexico City and during my visits to them, featured huge posters of famous cosplayers that were the guests of honor of these conventions. They talked in panels, signed autographs, took pictures with fans and even judged cosplay contests. By contrast, voice actors



had a more modest presence within both conventions. The following excerpt from one of my fieldnotes illustrates this diminishing importance of voice actors within Mexican anime fandom and its associated taste culture(s):

Even when the presentation of the voice actor had already begun, the cosplayers kept interacting and chatting among themselves. Located in the bottom of the auditorium, they remained talking in small groups that continually changed when one of the cosplayers moved to another of the small groups to chat with other cosplayers. The voice actor began a performance that included three of the most famous characters that he had played. Two of these were anime characters that belonged to two classic anime series: *Sailor Moon* and *Dragon Ball*. One by one, he dressed as each of these three characters. Every time he dressed as one character, he adopted its persona and changed the way he talked. The people sitting in the auditorium enjoyed this performance but the cosplayers still appeared uninterested. While the voice actor was immersed in his second performance, several cosplayers had formed a circle and were paying attention to a middle age woman who was a member of the staff and was explaining something to them. All of these cosplayers later participated in the anime contest that took place after the panel of the voice actor.

The voice actor continued his performance. He asked a young man in the audience to join him. This young man was wearing a costume. The voice actor had revealed earlier that he did not know much about anime so he asked the audience who he was dressed as. “Ryoga!” screamed some people. The voice actor interacted with this young man as the third character in his performance. After this, he performed a serenade playing the three characters. At this point, the hostess interrupted him for a moment. After the voice actor stopped his performance, she asked the cosplayers that were located in the bottom of the auditorium to stop talking so loudly. They were still not paying attention to the voice actor and were still chatting in small groups. After hearing the words of the hostess, some of them left the auditorium, while others stopped talking and sat down to watch the performance of the voice actor. (Fieldnote VI)

As we can see in this account, taste cultures associated with anime fandom are not a static set of cultural hierarchies, discourses and practices. Voice acting, once an integral element of these taste cultures in Mexico, has lost its importance in favor of other fan practices such as cosplaying<sup>30</sup>. The young cosplayers did not care about the voice actor performing in front of them. The classic Anime series in which he acted were not as relevant to them as newer shows such as *Naruto* and *Bleach*. They preferred to talk among themselves instead of pay attention to an aspect of fandom that has become passé, in great part because subtitled anime has become more available thanks to the Internet. While classic anime series such as *Sailor Moon* and *Dragon Ball* were mainly watched by fans dubbed and on television, newer shows are experienced online by fans, only hours after their original transmission in Japan. In a sense, voice acting has become a relic of a different era of broadcasting.

While older generations of anime fans in Mexico, such as the organizers of the anime conventions described in Fieldnotes III and VI, consider attending panels of voice actors as a central practice of anime fandom and knowledge about such actors as legitimate subcultural capital, younger generations have moved to different practices and subcultural expertise. In fact, only a handful of my Mexican interviewees indicated that they still watched dubbed programs. Most of them revealed that they prefer to watch subtitled anime. Dubbed anime is viewed with contempt by many of these fans, particularly the younger generation. For them, watching anime in its original language is an important practice that seems to legitimize their status within the taste culture(s) associated with anime, a fact that was also advanced by some Canadian interviewees:

I'm a strong advocate of subs for life, if you watch anime in dubs I'll probably will judge you, I'm a nice person and everything but I just know the difference, it's not even that I judge you, I just pity you, I'm like "What are you doing with your life? you need to understand, you need to watch this in Japanese, you are just wasting your time, you think *Naruto* is good? it's actually ten times better in Japanese, you don't understand so I will pity you" (Konoha)

The words of Konoha who, as discussed in the previous chapter was a black female of eighteen years that attended university in British Columbia, indicate a strong aesthetic judgement against those that watch dubbed Japanese animation. She pities the taste of those that still watch anime in this way, as for her, the original Japanese version is "ten times better". We can recognize

here something akin to the subcultural authenticity among club cultures discussed by Thornton (1996). For this author, clubbers discover “originality and aura” (1996: 30) within certain records, dance genres and in the figure of the DJ. Anime fans, on the other hand, discover this originality within subtitled Japanese animation. In a way, they consider that the uniqueness of this media, its aura<sup>31</sup>, is tarnished by being dubbed. For them, media consumption of anime must center only in its original version and thus advance a position within the field of consumption associated with Japanese animation that makes subtitled anime a legitimate object of appropriation while constructing dubbed Japanese animation as illegitimate.

### **Historicity, Authenticity and Taste Cultures: The Case of Japanese Animation Fansubs**

While the question of authenticity is without a doubt an important one when discussing anime fandom as a field of consumption, I would like to emphasize here the historicity of this notion within the trans-local taste culture(s) associated with anime. As an interactional and practical virtual space where fans can gain and share knowledge and data about certain narratives and characters, this trans-local taste culture is a site of struggle between different subcultural discourses. Voice acting and the subcultural capital associated with it have lost legitimacy because a discourse that celebrates the authenticity of the original anime text has spread within anime online communities. This discourse depends on online practices that have made much more accessible the consumption of Japanese animation in its original language. Fans no longer need to look for subtitled anime in video rental stores, nor must they go to other cities to acquire it. Instead, some members of trans-local groupings have made anime available to most fans that have access to the Internet through a practice that has gained centrality within anime fandom: “fansubbing”, that is, fan subtitling of anime series:

The process begins with the work of the raw capper, who captures the “raw” untranslated episode via television broadcast or through a Japanese file-sharing site. The process then moves to the translator, who listens to the episode and generates an English script. One or sometimes two editors or translation checkers will check the script and then turn it over to the timer, who segments it and times how long each segment should appear on-screen. The typesetter then chooses fonts and creates any signs or special effects, such as karaoke for

songs. After the typesetting is complete, an encoder prepares an initial video for quality checking (QC). Most groups then put the episode through one or more rounds of QC and revision before turning it over to the encoder for a final encode and then to the distribution team, which releases the episode on IRC and through BitTorrent. (Ito, 2012: 186)

As can be appreciated in this account, fansubbing is an elaborate process. A number of anime fans, which are part of a fansub group, perform a variety of tasks in order to subtitle anime narratives that they later share with other fans using BitTorrent and other online-sharing technologies. Every member has a more or less formal role within the group and established fansub groups even possess formal procedures to recruit new members which include trial periods and tests (Ito, 2012). Integral to anime fandom, in as much as it gives access to anime in its original language, fansubbing is such a complex practice that Ito (2012) refers to it as the “fansub scene”. Unfortunately, I did not have access to this scene because none of the participants in my research practiced fansubbing. Despite this fact, most of my interviewees watched fansubbed anime, to the point that some of them consumed Japanese animation exclusively through fansubs. The words of Kentaro, a Canadian male university student of Filipino heritage of twenty-four years, illustrate the reasons that make fansubs popular among anime fans:

Uh they add translator’s notes and they also do better overall quality, in my opinion, it depends on the group but most groups are pretty high level stuff. [...] they do the karaoke really well, they also do subtitles in a way that’s easy to read and they also keep the speed at good pace; so it’s all these minor details. And then when there’s a technical reference they can also put in the subtitles, translate it; so they put a lot more effort into their translations. (Kentaro)

Fansubbers invest extensive effort in the creation of their fansubs. They go as far as doing translator’s notes and karaokes with such detail that often their work is considered superior to commercial translations of Japanese animation, such as the ones offered by legal streaming websites such as Crunchyroll. In fact, Kentaro was critical of this commercial streaming service as, according to him, it used to be a “pirate site” that he used and which in 2008 decided to go “legit” and stopped being a virtual community where users could upload episodes of their favorite

anime. In a way, Crunchyroll had “sold-out” and abandoned its origins as a virtual community that was part of the trans-local taste culture associated with Japanese animation, to become a commercial enterprise. While still part of anime fandom, it no longer belongs to the taste culture(s) that are at the center of this field of consumption.

Even when Crunchyroll partakes in the discourse of authenticity that constructs subtitled anime as the most legitimate form of media consumption within anime fandom, many members of the trans-local taste culture do not accept this website as legitimate. Again, the historicity of subcultural capital comes into play in this apparent contradiction. Confronted with the emergence of commercial streaming services that offer subtitled anime as fast as fansubs, members of the taste culture must deploy certain hierarchies of taste that maintain their profit in distinction. It is in this sense that Kentaro constructs fansub groups as having an overall better quality than commercial websites. This assertion functions not only as an aesthetic judgment but also as a symbolic boundary that inscribes fansubs within the trans-local taste culture and excludes Crunchyroll and other commercial websites.

Of course, Kentaro’s perception has some validity. As Ian Condry (2010) asserts, fansub translations are often far more detailed and with a superior quality than commercial releases. This should come as no surprise, given the fact that these translations are a work of fans for fans. Fansubs are uploaded and shared without cost and represent the love that their creators feel towards Japanese animation. As Ito (2012) suggests, creating fansubs requires an important amount of knowledge in terms of both technical expertise and Japanese language proficiency. This explains why fansubbers are among the most celebrated “subcultural experts” of the trans-local taste culture associated with anime. They provide Japanese animation texts to their fellow fans, and as Condry (2010) explains, have been responsible of the expansion of anime fandom in North America. While currently in conflict with Crunchyroll and other websites, these subcultural experts remain at the center of both anime fandom and its associated taste culture.

Through fansubbers, it becomes easier to understand the difference between fandom and its associated taste cultures. These fans employ their free time to create translations using advanced subcultural capital. This capital has been gained in interaction with other members of the fansub community that offer their knowledge to fans interested in becoming fansubbers. They are subcultural experts and have status and distinction within many of the trans-local taste cultures associated with Japanese animation. In contrast, anime fans can be exclusively consumers that do

not participate in any trans-local or local congregation of fans and have no interest in gaining distinction through their consumption of Japanese animation and related media. This situation stresses the importance of moving beyond a simple understanding of fandom as an “alternative community” with “shared values”. Even the notion of “taste culture” presented by Thornton is inadequate in this regard, as it misses the historicity of subcultural capital and the existence of multiple factions within any subcultural grouping articulated around taste.

### **An Always Changing Fandom**

While all fansubbers that work with anime texts are anime fans, not all fans are fansubbers. The same can be said by other practices such as cosplay or writing fanfics. Some anime fans perform these practices, while others do not. In a way, we can imagine anime fandom as a nexus of different “scenes” and “tastes cultures”. These groupings are articulated around different discourses, practices and knowledges that change over time. Old fansubbers, for example, call the new generation on the fansub scene, “digisubbers” and recognize their many mutual differences (Ito, 2012). The same can be said for my older interviewees, who saw the younger generation of anime fans as radically different from themselves, as can be seen in the words of Van:

Yeah, the main one has been that shift from one needing conventions to be about watching anime, cause you get that exposure online. But also that shift ... well sort of going with that, than hand in hand, that shift towards it being more about sort of the fan culture. So like the otaku, cosplaying, the AMV's, whatever else. And, that also shift now, now it has that step removed from the anime, it also has that step removed from actual Japan, and Japanese culture. So it's becoming sort of this more generic like sci-fi fantasy nerd culture, but really heavy on sort of this cultural practices of anime culture. So, cosplaying as the anime characters, that sort of thing. But you'll see, like right now in Otafest, you see Harry Potter panels and BBC panels. They're like Sherlock and Dr Who. And it's like, "what does that have to do with anime? It has nothing to do with anime." But it's part of that broader nerd culture that is being folded in. Now that the Otaku Culture is more looking inwards on itself, rather than say like, "I'm interested in Japanese culture and history. And you still see some of that but not as much. (Van)

Being in his mid-thirties, Van is a member of the first generations of anime fans. He discusses in this excerpt changes that he has noticed in anime fandom. He stresses how conventions have moved away from watching anime and more into what he calls “cultural practices of anime culture”. This transition has taken place as a result of a shift in consumption. Because anime fans now can consume Japanese animation online, the practice of watching this media in conventions is no longer important. Instead, the wide availability of Japanese animation has caused fans to move towards “fan culture”. For Van, anime fandom has progressively lost its specificity, becoming more and more a “generic like sci-fi fantasy nerd culture” that is not only “heavy” on these practices but that now includes texts that have “nothing to do with anime” such as Harry Potter, Sherlock and Dr. Who. This “broader nerd culture” has become estranged not only from anime but also “from actual Japan, and Japanese culture”.

We find here again the question of authenticity. This time, however, it is directed against the cultural practices of contemporary anime fandom which, to Van, seems to be losing its uniqueness. Thornton (1996) indicates that within Club cultures there are two types of authenticity in effect: one stresses the aura and originality of the work of art, the other “is about being natural to the community or organic to subculture” (30). She refers to this second type as “subcultural authenticity” which can be understood as a unique way of life (Thornton, 1996). Subcultural authenticity refers to the subcultural community itself, to the values, meanings, practices and happenings that constitute a taste culture as a unique world. I would argue that Van’s critique reveals the current relationship between anime fandom and its associated taste culture(s) as one where consumption of Japanese animation and subcultural authenticity are no longer homologous.

While younger fans enjoy certain subcultural practices such as cosplaying and creating anime music videos that correspond to the sphere of subcultural authenticity, Van believes that these practices have led anime fandom to loss its authenticity in terms of aura and taste. For this fan, the boundaries of this field of consumption are being eroded as a result of an expansion of legitimate cultural objects that can be appropriated by Japanese animation fans. In this, he advances a cultural hierarchy of taste that has anime at its center. The aura and originality of this media must be respected, a fact that was achieved, according to him, by watching Japanese animation at conventions. This is no longer case, however, as these local spaces of practice and consumption are becoming more and more part of a generic fan culture. From a congregation of consumers of

Japanese animation, the local and trans-local taste cultures associated with anime are becoming integrated into a “nerd culture”.

Particularly important to what Van perceives as the blurring of the symbolic boundaries of anime fandom is the fact that younger generations of fans do not appear to be interested in Japanese culture and history. Once a staple of anime fandom (Napier, 2007), this interest in Japan appears to have dwindled among certain sectors of anime fandom, a fact especially notorious in the younger generation of fans. Just as Van asserts, most interviewees in their twenties and younger showed little knowledge regarding Japan and Japanese culture. For many of them, this knowledge was limited to the language and popular culture of this country. In contrast to Van, who had substantial expertise regarding Japan, younger fans “know very little about the Japanese culture in general”, as Nell asserted about herself. Once a valuable form of expertise, knowledge about Japan, like knowledge about voice actors has lost currency.

While the aura and originality of Japanese animation as a work of art remains a central element of anime fandom as a field of consumption, notions of subcultural authenticity of the taste cultures associated with this fandom have shifted to the point where older fans like Van have become increasingly alienated from contemporary discourses, practices and happenings of this subcultural grouping. Contrary to Napier’s static conceptualization of subcultural capital, Van’s knowledge and expertise no longer allows him to gain status among fellow anime fans. It has become passé, data that younger fans no longer consider a valuable form of subcultural capital. Van and other older fans have not stopped investing their time and labor into what once was a popular subcultural practice, acquiring knowledge about Japan, and yet this expertise no longer commands “the respect and admiration of their peers, inspiring still more interest and enthusiasm” (Napier, 2007: 150):

Yeah, there was a couple of years where Otafest tried to do like an Asian arts festival. And they don't do that anymore. So I guess that it didn't work out so well. (Laughs) Now it's much more like, “Hey! Cosplay! Woo hoo!” Um, and then, like I've tried to do like a few panels at Otafest that are more in the Japanese culture. And those are very poorly attended, and other panels I've seen that are of Japanese folk tales and culture, have also been very poorly attended. To the point where I'm kinda not really bothering anymore, cause it's like all this



work and only two people show up. And it's just like this very clear thing, like anime fans aren't that interested in Japan. Which is really weird. (Laughs) (Van)

Despite all his work, “only two people show up” to Van’s panels on Japanese Culture. He asserts this is also the case for similar panels. He has decided “not really bothering anymore” as other fans do not seem interested in Japan and from his perspective, Otafest, the anime convention he regularly attends, has become mostly about cosplay. This is not a mistaken impression. My ethnographic work and interviews also suggest that cosplay has become the central practice among the younger generation of anime fans. Most fans below twenty-five years discussed how much they enjoy creating and wearing costumes. Some of these costumes are not even from anime series. In a way, the practice of cosplaying has become disjointed from anime fandom. This situation is exemplified by the case of Daenerys, a Canadian white female of twenty-two years who worked as a bank teller and had a degree in linguistics. Despite not liking anime anymore, Daenerys was a member of the staff in Otafest:

I stopped, I was probably in my late teens, It just like, when I would watch different Japanese shows I just wasn’t interested, I didn’t like the stories, I didn’t like the TV tropes, I didn’t like reading subtitles all the time and I tried to learn Japanese but by taking classes you don’t learn enough to understand a show, I just overall didn’t like it anymore. (Daenerys)

Daenerys stopped watching Japanese animation when she was in her late teens. Anime texts no longer appealed to her so she stopped her narrative consumption of this media. It was not only that she did not liked the stories anymore, she also did not like the consumption practice currently at the center of Japanese animation fandom: reading subtitles. In other words, this fan no longer found any aura or originality in anime. In contrast to Van, Daenerys did not have anime at the center of her cultural hierarchy of taste. However, she continued participating as a volunteer in Otafest, and later become a member of the staff. When I interviewed her, she was organizing two contests related to cosplay. At this point, she had also been a judge in other cosplay contests, at Otafest and in other anime conventions. From this perspective, Daenerys was thoroughly committed to subcultural authenticity as constructed in the local taste culture to which she belonged.

A fan of *Game of Thrones* at this point, Daenerys represented the “broader nerd culture” described by Van. She was not a consumer of anime and did not care about Japan. Instead, this fan was completely dedicated to cosplay, a practice to which she devoted most of her free time. Despite not being an anime fan, Daenerys was nonetheless a respected member of the local taste culture that had emerged around Otafest. This respect was motivated by her mastery regarding the craft associated with cosplay. Her passion for this practice was such that she asserted that even her interest in *Game of Thrones* had been born from her fascination with the costumes used by the actors of this TV show:

I started watching it... I’ve been cosplaying the whole time that I’ve been into anime, I make my own costumes, I saw the costumes and I was like “I need to watch this show cause I need to cosplay from it” so that’s why I got into it in the first place but I ended up liking it because of the world building in it, I like that there’s like war and like a whole culture that they made up for the books and for the show. (Daenerys)

As we can see in this quote, the interest of Daenerys in *Game of Thrones* began when she saw the costumes worn by the characters. As she says, she first watched it because of a “need to cosplay from it”. This wording reveals the degree to which cosplay is an essential practice within Daenerys’ life. Although she later became interested in the detailed narrative space of *Game of Thrones*, this fan did not begin to cosplay because she needed to feel a textual proximity with this fantasy text. On the contrary, she became interested in *Game of Thrones* out of a desire to wear the costumes from this TV series. This lack of narrative consumption within the fan practices of Daenerys is similar to the one discussed in the case of the famous cosplayer, Yaya Han. Like her, Daenerys cares more about costumes than narratives.

### **Character Consumption as a Catalyst of Subcultural Practice**

It would be tempting to see in Daenerys a free-floating nomadic reader that practices textual poaching (Jenkins, 2013). After all, this fan appears to care more about her creative practices than about the texts from where she gets inspiration. I would argue, however, that this is a mistake. Cosplayers like Yaya Han and Daenerys are not primarily engaged in active reading that “takes away only those things that are useful or pleasurable to the reader” (Jenkins, 2013: 24) but rather

in a faithful reproduction of certain characters and their costumes. In other words, their practice is articulated by character consumption and by what I have referred to as chara-moe:

If it's just a general character it feels like you are just wearing an outfit, whereas if it's a character that you really like you are like "Yeah! I represent this person, I really love this person", it feels cooler, that's the only way I can explain it. (Daenerys)

In this quote, Daenerys addresses the powerful connection between the cosplayer and the characters that she represents. As other practices within anime fandom, this connection is motivated by love, by emotional attachments that lead fans to appropriate their favorite texts and characters. The words of Daenerys, "I really love this person" bring to the fore the complex web of affections that constitute cosplay as a fan practice. Her love for certain characters guides her creativity in a way that has little to do with textual poaching. In this sense, subcultural authenticity and its associated knowledge, that is, subcultural capital, are not only a question of status and distinction but also of unabridged affection towards certain texts and characters that in many local and trans-local taste cultures associated with anime, have begun to include cultural objects from other fandoms.

Van's fears appear to be true, at least in part. The symbolic boundaries of local and trans-local taste cultures are becoming blurred as a result of chara-moe and character consumption. The case of Daenerys illustrates this blurring. Despite not liking Japanese animation, the source of authenticity within anime fandom, she is a member of staff in the anime convention that Van has attended for many years. As a cosplayer who is also a member of the *Game of Thrones* fandom, she represents the "more generic like sci-fi fantasy nerd culture" Van discussed. I would argue, however, that this is not a blurring of anime fandom per se. Instead, the field of consumption articulated around Japanese animation now shares with other fandoms the space of anime conventions. If a new form of subcultural authenticity occupies these conventions, the aura and originality of anime is maintained by fans such as Van. Indeed, many older fans remain loyal consumers of Japanese animation and even among younger fans these media texts still occupy a central place in terms of consumption and taste. Even when panels about *Harry Potter*, *Sherlock* and *Dr Who* evidence the many connections that exists between fandoms and their associated taste cultures, Japanese animation remains the axis of anime conventions – even if now the central

elements are not so much texts but popular characters, around which many fans organize their fannish practices.

Within anime fandom, media texts seem to be losing their centrality in favor of popular characters. Most fan practices have become about character consumption, with anime fans recreating their favorite characters through cosplay, drawing and Anime Music Videos. Fascination with these characters has reached such a point that on occasions, it becomes disjointed from the media text. Daenerys, for example, asserts that “it feels cooler” to cosplay as a character she loves. As she said in another part of our interview, this love requires that she relate in some way with the character. The case of *Game of Thrones* suggests that she is able to relate with characters even when she has not watched or read the narratives from which they originate. The way these characters are depicted, that is, how they look and how they dress appear to be enough to arouse her interest regarding them. Her words, “I need to watch this show cause I need to cosplay from it”, indicate a strong emotional response to characters in *Game of Thrones*, a response that goes beyond the text and into character consumption.

According to Yoshimasa Kijima (2012), liking characters exclusively because of their physical appearance has become common among Otaku<sup>32</sup>. Discussing the popularity, among anime fans, of Bincho-tan, the official mascot of Minabe Town in Japan, he asserts how, despite its popularity, this mascot did not have character traits at the beginning: it was just an illustration on a web page. Despite this fact, the “popularity of the design took off by itself, with data such as a personal history and a personality being added in the meantime, and ‘she’ progressively acquired a presence” (Kijima, 2012: 154-155). Here, we are in front of a different “adaptive response to postmodernity” than the one discussed in chapter four. Contrary to the semiotic excess of Lara Croft and Rintarou Okabe, Bincho-tan resonates with Japanese fans not because of a biographic excess but due to the lack of such biographical history. She is “empty”. A lovable character which fans can fill with their own meanings and desires.

Either by collecting data that already exists, or by creating their own, fans are deeply invested in the characters they love. This investment seems to go beyond the text and into the labor of creating “a presence” for these characters. In a way, many characters have jumped outside of texts and screens and into anime conventions and webpages. Through contemporary fannish practices they have gained substance. It is telling, for example, that the central reason why some fans do not like fanfics is because they feel that fanfic writers often do not respect the core of their

favorite characters. As Yuna, the Mexican female of thirty-three years introduced in the previous chapter explains through an example that references one of her beloved characters, Harry Potter:

A veces nada más lo manejan, le cambian la personalidad completa a cierto personaje. [...] pero si un personaje me gusta es por su personalidad realmente, tengo una cierta empatía con él... sería como ver a Harry haciéndolo de malo, o sea, si Harry fuera malo y quisiera destrozar a las personas y torturarlas, no va con la personalidad del personaje que yo amo, entonces la dejo. (Yuna)

Sometimes they only manipulate, they change the complete personality of a certain character. [...] but if I like a character really for its personality, I have a certain empathy with him... it would be like seeing Harry being evil, I mean, if Harry were evil and wanted to destroy people and torture them, it does not go with the personality of the character that I love, then I stop [reading the fanfic] (Yuna)

Yuna does not like reading fanfics where the personalities of her favorite characters have been significantly altered. She loves these characters as a result of their character traits and is not interested in any type of textual poaching that changes their personalities. Contrary to Jenkins's claim that fans read fanfics to explore "alternative conceptions of the characters and their motivations" (2013: 177), anime fans demand fidelity to the characters when reading fan fiction. For Yuna, Harry Potter must retain his character traits within the fanfic or else she simply stops reading. Harry cannot be evil as he would then not be Harry. This demand to respect the core of beloved characters has become a central element of contemporary anime fandom. Understanding the characters and depicting them in a proper way has become a source of status and contention among fans. The words of Lizzy, a Mexican female of twenty-seven years who was a friend of Yuna, studied psychology and worked in an administrative job, further illustrate this point. When asked if writing fan fiction required really grasping the characters used for the story, Lizzy said:

Yyy, pues dices: cada quien puede ver al personaje de manera distinta, ¿no? O puede darle su interpretación de cómo es y lo aceptas; pero no cambian el núcleo del personaje, ¿no? A mí, por ejemplo, una cosa que... no me ha gustado mucho —de algunos personajes— por

ejemplo, Armin de *Shingeki no Kyojin* es que lo dibujan y lo tratan como nena, ¿no? Ya sé que es un personaje muy... que tiene una apariencia muy femenina; pero no es así, ¿no? Es muy inteligente, tiene capacidad y demás. Y me choca que lo pongan como la nena desvalida de la historia, ¿no? Entonces, eso sí, cuando empiezo a leer un Fanfic y lo ponen totalmente como víctima, es así de, “¡ag! ¡no! Adiós”, ¿no? Por qué, porque lo cambian, ¿no? realmente, así, el personaje. No es fuerte, físicamente; pero es muy inteligente, ¿no? Entonces dices: ¿dónde queda su capacidad y su inteligencia? ¿Por qué me lo cambias, completamente? Entonces sí, creo que necesitas comprender a los personajes. (Lizzy)

And you say: everyone can see the character in a different way, right? Or can give it their own interpretation about who the character is and you accept it; but they do not change the core of the character, right? To me, for example, a thing that... I have not liked much -of some characters- for example, Armin of *Shingeki no Kyojin* is that some draw and treat him as a little girl, right? I know that it is a character very... that have a very feminine look; but he is not like that, right? He is very smart, he has competency and all that. And I hate that they put him as the damsel in distress of the story, right? Then, really, when I began to read a Fanfic and they put him totally as victim, is like “ag! no! bye!”, right? Why, because they change him, right? Really, like that, the character. He is not strong physically but he is very smart, right? Then you say: where is his competency and intelligence? Why you change it completely? Then yea, I think you need to understand the characters. (Lizzy)

In this excerpt, Lizzy denigrates those fans that do not understand the characters they are using in their fanfics. She feels that they only know Armin at a superficial level, thus writing him as a “damsel in distress” just because he has “a very feminine look”. The core traits of the character, competency and intelligence, are not included in the narrative and thus make these fanfics objects of contempt. Her expression “ag! no! bye!” transforms this contempt into open disgust. Fans that do not understand characters, that change their core, are given little status within fandom. In the quote, Lizzy addresses not only misguided fanfic writers that do not understand Armin but also fans that “draw and treat him as a little girl”. This indicates that her critique is also directed at fan artists who depict this character in ways that do not reflect his core. I would argue that we are here in front of a type of subcultural capital: one that is rooted in the characters themselves.

Characters, and their associated data, biographical information, traits, appearance; indeed their “presences”, have become an important source of subcultural capital within anime fandom. Fans that have accumulated information about certain characters; that understand and depict them in the proper way; that love and respect them, gain status among their peers. As the case of Yuna suggests, these characters no longer need to come from anime, manga and Japanese videogames: Harry Potter can coexist with anime characters such as Armin. As the case of Daenerys illustrates, however, the subcultural capital associated with fictional characters includes not only knowledge but also creative practices such as cosplay that require craftsmanship and mastery. Indeed, the practices noted by Eco in the quote at the beginning of this chapter, quizzes and trivia games, no longer adequately represent the many ways in which character consumption and subcultural capital interact to create local and trans-local taste cultures associated with fandoms that often go beyond Japanese animation and related media.

## **Conclusion**

I have explored in this chapter the shared expertise that Japanese animation fans mobilize to create emotional communities. I have equated this expertise with the notion of subcultural capital and proposed that it is guided by cultural hierarchies of taste born in the mainstream-esoteric continuum that focus on the otherness of Japanese animation for Western media consumers. Subcultural capital is always the product of localized interactions among anime fans. As such, this capital constitutes the axis around which local and trans-local taste cultures are constructed and maintained. It is through the acquisition of subcultural capital that consumers of Japanese animation become members of these local and trans-local taste cultures. It is also through subcultural capital that anime fans can gain distinction and status within these emotional communities.

In contrast to the ideas of Thornton (1996) and Napier (2007), I propose that subcultural capital has historicity and is always changing. Furthermore, I argue that due to the complexity of taste culture(s), there is never just one form of subcultural capital at play within such taste culture(s). The case of anime fandom is illuminating in this respect, as the diversification of associated local and trans-local taste cultures has given rise to competing forms of subcultural capital. While watching Japanese animation is still the central symbolic boundary of this fandom, older fans stress the aesthetic authenticity of anime. Younger fans, on the other hand, stress the

subcultural authenticity of their creative practices, which are articulated around character consumption and which often lead them to non-Japanese texts. The division of labor within anime fandom has also diversified the types of subcultural capital at play and created a multitude of scenes and taste cultures that occupy different positions in the cultural hierarchy of taste that structure this field of consumption. The next chapter will delve into this diversification through the analysis of the most significant subcultural happening of anime fandom: conventions.

## Notes

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<sup>26</sup> In Mexico, for example, *Dragon Ball* was broadcasted from 1996 till 2009.

<sup>27</sup> The case of *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, as discussed in chapter four, also leads to this conclusion. Yamato, the fan of Rei Ayanami belonged to the low middle-class, attended public university and worked as temporary worker in the Mexican government. Hetalia was a white, middle-class Canadian student doing her bachelor in a Western university. Inuyasha, belonged to the high middle-class, attended elite private university and worked as a design engineer in a transnational corporation. Maturi was a Brazilian middle-class exchange geology student. Other fans not quoted in that chapter, also addressed their love for Evangelion and its characters: Vash, middle-class instructor at the same elite university in which he obtained his degree in computer science; Gilgamesh, working-class vendor of game cards; Monokuma, working-class part-time vendor of anime that studied fashion design; Kaneki, low working-class part-time vendor of anime that attended public high school.

<sup>28</sup> I conceptualize the trans-local group of fans as an online community constituted by members that belong to different local spaces and that do not interact face to face.

<sup>29</sup> According to Thornton, Niche Magazines are essential for the emergence of subcultural formations as this type of media contribute to the cultural forms that characterize taste cultures, to the point that these magazines both cover and construct subcultural groupings (Thornton, 1996. See especially chapter four).

<sup>30</sup> This loss of popularity of voice acting is less marked in Canada where even when cosplayers have also become the center of anime conventions, voice actors remain popular. This situation seems to be a result of the many English-speaking fans that prefer to see Japanese animation dubbed. A pattern of consumption not uncommon in Anglo North America when it comes to foreign media products.

<sup>31</sup> Walter Benjamin defines the aura as a “strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be” (Benjamin, 2008: 23).

<sup>32</sup> Name given in Japan to anime fans.



## **Introduction**

In order to better understand the complex interrelations between anime fandom and the multitude of taste cultures and scenes that exist therein, it is useful to explore the subcultural happenings characteristic of this field of consumption. Discussing the Buffy fandom, Bloustien defines a subcultural happening as a symbolic appropriation of public space performed by media fan groups and other subcultural groupings seeking “to maintain and affirm their shared cultural identity against outsiders who do not share their lifestyle, enthusiasm or cultural interests” (Bloustien, 2004: 151). It is in this sense that subcultural happenings are privileged spaces for the performance of boundary work, understood as the process through which individuals develop group identities and memberships (Lamont, 1992). I argue that subcultural happenings enacted by media fan groups do not function only to maintain symbolic boundaries between fans and non-fans but also to create distinctions and hierarchies among fans themselves. In other words, subcultural happenings are spaces where subcultural members struggle with outsiders and with their peers in order to define their position within the local and trans-local taste cultures in which they participate.

The present chapter explores this boundary work within the confines of the anime convention. While anime fans engage in identity formation and boundary work in a variety of public spaces such as classrooms and the Web, anime conventions constitute the central subcultural happening of this taste culture (Lam, 2010; Napier, 2007; Tamagawa, 2012). From this perspective, studying these conventions and fans’ relationships with them presents an important opportunity to understand how anime fans create, maintain and transform their shared cultural identity and its associated subcultural capitals. Bloustien proposes that subcultural happenings are directly related to “the ways in which cultural products can be reworked and reinscribed with local meanings in a local setting” (Bloustien, 2004: 149). In order to understand an anime convention as a subcultural happening, it is thus important to begin the analysis with the discursive spaces that are reworked in an anime convention.

### **From a Knowledge Community to a Local Happening**

Japanese Animation fandom has grown considerably since the times when Van and Vash watched anime on VHS. As discussed in chapter five, the Internet has made this media product more available and facilitated a trans-local space where fans can interact with each other and gain knowledge about different elements and practices related to Japanese animation and its fandom. Jenkins (2006) refers to this and other similar virtual trans-local spaces as “knowledge communities”. According to him, these new forms of communities, “are held together through the mutual production and reciprocal exchange of knowledge” (Jenkins, 2006: 27). He calls this knowledge produced in a communal way, “collective intelligence”, “the sum total of information held individually by the members of the group that can be accessed in response to a specific question” (Jenkins, 2006: 27).

While notions of collective intelligence and knowledge communities are perhaps too utopian and devoid of conflict, they are useful for understanding trans-local taste cultures associated with Japanese animation and its corresponding subcultural capital. On the web, the aggregate of these trans-local taste cultures becomes a knowledge community: in forums and other webpages related to Japanese animation, fans are engaged in the production and exchange of the type of knowledge that I have called subcultural capital. From this perspective, the collective intelligence associated with anime fandom corresponds to an aggregation of all the data offered by individual fans regarding Japanese animation and its related media, practices and discourses. Indeed, many of my interviewees told me how they used the Internet to learn how to cosplay or to keep themselves informed about news concerning their favorite anime series and characters. For them, the web was a wellspring of subcultural capital that they could access whenever they wanted. Faye who, as discussed in chapter four, was a barista of Asian descent that was also part of the staff of Otafest, illustrates this situation while discussing her use of Reddit:

I’m on Reddit a lot, probably way too much and it’s probably unhealthy, I connect with a lot of people worldwide through Reddit, that’s another way of how I get my news source for what’s going on in the anime world, I go to Reddit for everything including recipes. I’m actually into, what I like on Reddit is sometimes people will post their food creations from an anime or inspired by that anime, and I’m a really big foody so I love seeing what people create. Someone had a blog where they recreated a whole bunch of food from the Ghibli

studios animations, like their films, so you had *Ponyo*'s ramen, the Fish Pie from *Kiki*, so that's interesting. (Faye)

Faye accesses websites like Reddit to obtain not only news from “the anime world” but also more elaborate subcultural capital, such as recipes inspired by anime texts. This availability of subcultural capital within trans-local anime communities runs contrary to the esoteric nature of this type of capital as discussed by Thornton (1996). While she asserts that “being in the know” is an important element of the subcultural capital used by clubbers, the current existence of knowledge communities and associated collective intelligence has made subcultural knowledge easily available to anyone with an Internet connection. The only thing that Faye requires for “being in the know” is entering Reddit and reading what other users write. For her, the anime world is just one click away.

The arrival of the Internet and “Cyberspace” has changed the way in which subcultural capital works within taste cultures. Discussing the goth subcultural grouping, for example, Hodkinson explains how, for goths, “the Internet’s most important function tended to be as an enhancer and concentrator of their existing ‘real life’ subcultural participation” (2003: 293). Through the web, goths were able to obtain knowledge “not just of forthcoming events, but also bands, CD releases, specialist retailers of music and clothing and printed subcultural fanzines” (Hodkinson, 2003: 293). In other words, goths used the Internet to obtain and increase their subcultural capital. Their knowledge about the goth subcultural grouping was no longer mediated by an underground articulated around word-of-mouth and fanzines (Thornton, 1996) but by their exploration of a goth knowledge community that concentrated the subcultural capital of individual members into a “subnetwork”:

Goth sites, then, were often linked to and from one another, creating between them a subnetwork, unlikely often to be stumbled upon unwittingly. The ability of goths effectively to navigate between their highly specialist Web sites was greatly enhanced by the numerous direct connections between them. [...] The cohesiveness of the goth subnetwork on the Internet was further enhanced by the gradual development of central or nodal points, in the form of well established Web sites that had generated for themselves a high subcultural

profile. Among other things, these usually contained extensive databases of links to other subcultural resources on the net (Hodkinson, 2003: 289-290).

Hodkinson discusses in this quote the emergence of a goth subnetwork that was constituted by many, interlinked Web sites. This subnetwork had nodal points that corresponded to well established, high profile webpages that also contained links to other goth virtual spaces. As a result of the many direct connections between nodes and other websites, the subnetwork offered a cohesive virtual world that goths could easily navigate in order to access a variety of subcultural resources. It is in this sense that for many subcultural movements, such as the goth grouping and the taste cultures associated with anime fandom, the underground has given way to virtual cultural clusters. Within contemporary “networked culture” (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013) subcultural knowledge has lost its esoteric nature to become a flow of information, open data that exists in subcultural networks that can be accessed by anyone with an Internet connection, interest, and time.

Equating the subcultural capital characteristic of anime fandom with data, or in other words, “the knowledge and expertise that one gains about the object of one’s enthusiasm” (Napier, 2007: 150), no longer seems adequate in an era where knowledge communities generate collective intelligence. I would argue that anime fans gain distinction and status not by accumulating knowledge but as a result of the performance of expertise. Subcultural capital is not only an “art of knowing” but an “art of doing”, that is, practice understood as schemes of action (De Certeau, 2007). Knowing vast amounts of data is not enough for gaining subcultural status at a time when this data is easily accessible through a computer, tablet or smart phone. In order to rise within the subcultural hierarchy, anime fans must display mastery over the practices and discourses associated with their fandom. They must be able to harvest the collective intelligence at their disposal on the internet or in their social network, and use it to enact a subcultural performance that proves their membership in, and expertise over, the anime world:

I look at a lot of different references and then I go to the store and see what is available and then I make a decision that way, so I do some shopping around. [...] you have pictures of the character and references of the character, so there’s no need to do your own sketch of it cause you’ve already seen how it look like. [...] I keep it on my phone and every time I need

to look it, like I need a reference, I just look it on my phone. [...] it takes a lot of time, and a lot of time to learn and watching a lot of tutorials online. There`s a few, but I mostly just use YouTube and there`s usually sewing videos and then there`s cosplay videos. People will make sewing videos specifically for cosplayers, but then other people will just make videos for people who sew, and you can use both. [...] I spend usually at least a month [making a costume], I`m really slow, I only work on stuff on weekends and usually do like three hours a weekend, so I made one thing in three weeks but I was kind of panicking whereas this [The costume of Daenerys Targaryen she is wearing] I did the embroidery for three weeks, so that one was like several months. (Daenerys)

Talking about her cosplay craft, Daenerys, the white female that worked as a bank teller introduced in chapter five, downplays subcultural knowledge in favor of subcultural practice. Her words depict this knowledge as easily attainable: she only needs to access her phone to watch pictures of the characters she wants to cosplay. In order to learn the techniques required for cosplaying, she simply enters YouTube and finds some tutorials for cosplayers. Her narrative emphasizes practice and performance: she looks at a lot of references, goes to the store, sees what is available there, and makes a choice about what fabrics and materials she should buy. For her, cosplay requires a lot of effort, not because knowledge is hard to get but as a result of how much work she invests to make a costume. Making her Daenerys costume, for example, took Daenerys several months.

By describing how much time she invested in her craft, this fan claims mastery over it. She presents herself as a committed cosplayer who has watched a lot of tutorials online and has spent many hours working on her costumes. This claim of expertise regarding cosplaying is further validated by the costume of Daenerys she is wearing and that she addresses directly during the interview which took place at an anime convention. This costume that took several months to finish and required vast amounts of labor is an insignia of her mastery over the practice of cosplaying and the practical achievement of her identity as a competent cosplayer. Her performance, elevated to an “art of doing”, validates in this way her membership and expertise over cosplay and its associated practices and discourses.

This emphasis on the practical and performative nature of subcultural capital exemplified by the case of Daenerys explains why subcultural happenings are essential for the current local and

trans-local taste cultures associated with Japanese animation fandom. While some practices of these subcultural formations, such as fan fiction and fanart, remain deeply rooted in cyberspace, cosplay and many others require participation within local settings. Central to these localized spaces is the anime convention. Although, as Bloustien asserts, fans also perform “more banal appropriation of public spaces” (2004, 149), it is within anime conventions, that fans’ spectacular appropriation of space, where the ritualistic repetition of Japanese animation fans’ practices and discourses can be most clearly appreciated. Anime conventions are not only liminal spaces where participants are encouraged to perform their fan identity (Napier, 2007) but also sites where anime fans like Daenerys can display their mastery over the subcultural capital characteristic of anime fandom. For a weekend, this happening transforms subcultural knowledge into practice, reinscribing anime fandom in a local setting through the actions of the fans partaking in the convention. As sites where anime fans spectacularly perform the practices and discourses associated with anime fandom and its many taste cultures, anime conventions are thus privileged spaces for the creation and management of the different boundaries and identifications that characterize this field of consumption.

### **The Anime Convention: Community, Boundary Work and Identity Formation**

Japanese animation fandom and its associated taste culture(s) have grown to the point of becoming a knowledge community, a huge discursive and practical space where fans accumulate knowledge and love for anime and other related media. Like an imagined community, the members of this fandom “will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them” (Anderson, 2006: 6). Bury (2003) assigns the term “culture” to the imagined community and indeed it is possible to see anime fandom in this way: a shared set of identifications, practices and discourses oriented towards the consumption of certain texts and characters. She differentiates between this set of beliefs and the community, the local or virtual formation created through “the consistent engagement of communal practices by a majority of its members” (Bury, 2003: 270). The local and trans-local taste cultures associated with anime fandom are precisely communal formations where anime fans can engage with certain common practices that not only yield a profit in distinction but also function as boundary work that creates a strong sense of belonging, as illustrated by Nell’s words:

It was different because I have never seen people dressed up outside of Halloween and I was like why? And some of these cosplays are amazing like I don't know when do they have the time or how they have the skill to put these things together. The more I got integrated into the community, the more I see how amazing these are and I aspired to be like them, it's interesting. It is amazing to see how many people there are with this similar interest to me all in one place. Now we have thousands of people come every weekend, like every Otafest weekend, it's impressive. (Nell)

Discussing her first time in an anime convention, Nell who, as discussed in chapter four was a white female that attended the religious program of a Canadian university, directly addresses the notion of community and how she got integrated into it. Her narrative depicts how she became a member of the communal taste culture associated with Japanese animation: from an outsider that had only seen people dressed up at Halloween, she grew into a member of the community that aspires to be like the cosplayers she has seen at Otafest. She uses the word “amazing” to describe both the cosplays at the convention and the fact of seeing so many fans within a single place. In doing so, she links this positive adjective with a fan practice and with fans themselves. Being in the convention as part of the fan community, surrounded by many other fans, witnessing fan practices, is amazing. Through her words, Nell asserts her place within her local community of anime fans, a taste culture that takes form around a particular anime convention, Otafest.

Cohen discusses how “community” is a relational concept articulated around boundaries, that is, symbolic elements that mark “the beginning and end of a community” (1985: 12). Born in interaction with others, through processes of similarity and difference, symbolic boundaries are used to create commonality but also exclusion (Cohen, 1985; Lamont, 1992). Using words such as “amazing”, “interesting” and “impressive”, Nell establishes symbolic boundaries that mark her as an insider, as a member of the anime community established around Otafest. Furthermore, asserting how she aspires to be like the cosplayers that she has seen at this anime convention, Nell manifests her identification with them. Her narrative functions as boundary work and a process of identity formation. She uses it to claim, in the interactional space created during the interview, the identity of the anime fan and her place within Japanese animation fandom as a cosplayer that belongs to the local taste culture associated with Otafest.

The belonging of Nell to the local taste culture that had emerged around Otafest, becomes clear when she asserts “we have thousands of people come every weekend, every Otafest weekend.” The use of the pronoun “we” indicates that Nell positions herself as a member of the fan community associated with Otafest. From this perspective, Nell possesses a “consciousness of community” (Cohen, 1985: 13) regarding her local anime taste culture. She is aware of the boundaries of this subcultural grouping and she positions herself within them. Other interviewees also had such an awareness. They talked about being part of local or trans-local anime communities. For some of them, this meant partaking in a particular anime convention and interacting with other participants. For others, it was about their involvement in groups of fan creators such as fanfic writers and cosplayers. Even the organizing committee of anime conventions was described as a community in itself by a couple of my participants. The words of Faye illustrate this situation:

It definitively changed, through Otafest I had a few different roles, I started out in special events, I went into Artist Alley, and then I did special guests, which is something I continue to do, and that’s how that evolved. A lot of people know me from my younger years when I was first volunteering and a lot of my friends are on that exact team, they started volunteering around the same time I did. I really liked it because the community was really close and I kept coming back, because I loved it, I loved the people so much. [...] It’s a very close-knit community, especially the staff, even the volunteers some of them, but it’s such a close-knit community, we all know each other, we are all very good friends. I actually moved to Ontario for school and almost every year I come back, because they’re my second family so that’s what keeps me coming back. (Faye)

Talking about her participation in the organizing committee of Otafest, Faye expresses love for the other members of the staff, and equates them with a family. For her, this committee is a close community to which she always keeps coming back. She stresses her strong connection with staff and volunteers and, in doing so, creates symbolic boundaries that, while including her within the local taste culture associated with Otafest, exclude fans that are not members of the close community to which she belongs. Faye is a true insider: she and her second family are in charge of Otafest. As the person responsible for the special guests that attend this anime convention, she



has considerable status within the community at large, that is, fans that attend Otafest. The fact that according to Nell, thousands of people come to this convention is an achievement of Faye and the other organizers.

According to Lamont, boundary work is “a way of developing a sense of group membership; it creates bonds based on shared emotions, similar conceptions of the sacred and the profane, and similar reactions toward symbolic violators” (Lamont, 1992: 11-12). The words of Faye function in such a way. They create a sense of group membership and strengthen her bonds with the other members of the organizing committee. This boundary work is much more complex than simply separating insiders from outsiders: it creates a web of differences and similarities that join and separate her from other fans and non-fans alike. Faye is an anime fan but not just any anime fan. She is a member of the organization committee of Otafest. While part of Japanese animation fandom, she belongs to a local community that possesses a defined historicity. Faye can clearly trace her trajectory within it, from a volunteer in her younger years to being in charge of special guests. Interestingly, while she loves her close community, this fan also recognizes a bigger community organized around Otafest and the value of anime fans that belong to groupings to which she does not have access:

Absolutely, part of it is because the convention is growing and more people know about it but a lot of people when they go to their first convention they're like “why are these people dressed up?”, but after they're like “that was amazing, I totally wanna do a costume now, I love this character, I should do this”. I've never been a cosplayer myself because a lot of people teach themselves how to sew but I don't have that kind of discipline, but it's incredible how much your first time coming to this event inspires you to want to participate and integrate yourself into that community. (Faye)

Discussing the growing number of cosplayers in recent Otafests, Faye parallels the words of Nell. It is almost as she is describing the experience of this fan regarding cosplay. Nell was first surprised by this fan practice and later began to see it as amazing. Although Faye is not a cosplayer, she can understand this type of fan. Even more, she ascribes to them positive attributes: they have the discipline to sew and create a costume, a trait that she lacks. Explaining how she was unable to teach herself how to sew, Faye distances herself from the identity of the cosplayer. She does not

identify with that community and its members even though she respects them. This fact is emphasized when she asserts “your first time coming to this event inspires you to want to participate and integrate yourself into that community.” The introduction of the word “that” before “community” constructs cosplayers as a distinct communal formation to which Faye does not belong. As such, it is possible to argue that anime conventions possess a number of different taste cultures.

While Nell and Faye belong to different local taste cultures, the former being a cosplayer and the latter an organizer, they nonetheless share a sense of group membership when it comes to Otafest. They both belong to the community organized around this anime convention. Their differences in terms of subcultural capital, social bonds and status are contained within the similarities that arise from the subcultural space that they share. Both of them identify as members of the Otafest community. They enjoy this convention, respect the participants and find cosplay amazing. From this perspective, Otafest itself functions at the same time as a material and symbolic boundary that separates anime fans from non-fans or in other words, as a site of belonging where Japanese animation fans enact “practices of group identity” (Fortier, 1999: 42).

Otafest and other anime conventions are sites where Japanese animation fans immerse themselves in the different practices that characterize anime fandom. For a weekend, university campuses, convention centers and even malls can become “spaces to play” that “can enable and legitimate the expression of individual and shared cultural identity” (Bloustien, 2004: 154) through practical performances articulated around narrative and character consumption. By playing and enjoying themselves, fans not only materialize their favorite shows and characters in public spaces but in doing so, they also appropriate these sites, transforming them into liminal places where they can proudly perform their fan identity:

I exited the subway station a little before noon. There were many more fans near the station than in the previous two days of the convention. Most of them wore shirts and other objects related to anime fandom such as backpacks. Some of them were cosplayers. Many of them were putting on their costumes or giving them the finishing touches. One of them, for example, was completely dressed in black and was putting on his back two wings which were also black. As in previous days, there were street stalls outside the station that featured merchandise related to Japanese animation. On this occasion, there were also stalls along the

road that led to the convention center. I noticed that in one of them, which was not yet completely set on the street, a middle age woman had laid some bootleg anime series. As I walked towards the convention center, I watched more cosplayers getting dressed. Near an old and ruined building, for example, a group of anime fans were chatting and putting together their Vocaloids cosplays. One young woman, for example, was laying a pink wing atop the black cap that she had placed over her head. As I approached the event, I noticed several anime fans already in full costume who also walked towards the convention center. I waited with them for the traffic lights to switch so we could cross the street and reach the anime convention. When the lights finally switched, I crossed the street surrounded by cheerful cosplayers. (Fieldnote IX)

As can be seen in this excerpt from my fieldnotes, contrary to the hermetic clubbers studied by Thornton (1996) who remained inside clubs and raves, hiding their subcultural rituals from the eyes of outsiders, anime fans often perform their fan identity in public. By dressing outside the subway or along the street that leads to the convention, buying anime merchandise and series or wearing anime products, they show mastery over their subcultural capital and practice boundary work. This performance is directed towards both peers and outsiders and as such can be understood as an enactment of symbolic boundaries that separate them from other members of anime fandom and from non-fans. From this perspective, putting on a pink wig or black wings within a subcultural happening showcases the subcultural capital possessed by the cosplayers, and also brings forward processes of identity and boundary formation that are both material and symbolic in nature.

Through these processes of identification and their associated practices, anime fans transform public space into a subcultural happening. According to Bloustien (2004), play is the central way in which space is appropriated within late modernity; by marking out spaces to play, media fans take part in the struggle over urban space and signal their communal identification. Japanese animation fans employ practices, such as wearing fan insignias and cosplaying, to appropriate local settings. Through these activities, a subway station and the street leading to the convention are transformed into spaces to play, where anime fans can engage in narrative and character consumption by buying merchandise or dressing as their favorite anime characters.

This temporary appropriation of space by anime fans repurposes university classrooms, convention centers, old buildings, streets and other urban spaces into what Napier calls “a fantasy

world” (2007: 153). She argues that anime conventions are locations in which fans can “throw off the burdens, responsibilities, and roles of ordinary life to take part in a liminal world” in where they have “the chance to assume a somewhat different identity than one’s normal workaday self” (2007: 153). In other words, conventions are sites of belonging created by subcultural practices where Japanese animation fans are able to enact identifications and symbolic boundaries that differ from those they use in everyday life. These processes of identity formation and boundary work cannot be easily grasped by outsiders (Cohen, 1985). They obtain their meaning from anime fandom itself, from its associated taste cultures, subcultural capital, practices and discourses. Because of this, only anime fans can perceive them and understand their value as markers of the many local and trans-local taste cultures to which they belong. The collective identifications created by these processes, as evidenced by the words of Nell and Faye, go far beyond the notion of an “interpretive community” as proposed by Jenkins (2013).

### **From Community to Individual Consumption: Public Versus Private Fans**

While it would be all too easy to call anime fandom a community or a “subculture”, assuming that such “an alternative social community” (Jenkins, 2013: 2) exists a priori is an analytical mistake that obscures the multiplicity of voices, taste cultures and practices that articulate “Fandom” as a practical achievement of media consumers. By the same token, we cannot assume the existence of “fan” as a stable identity that can be claimed and adopted by every individual consumer of Japanese animation. As can be appreciated in the previous discussion, becoming a fan is a complex process of boundary and identity work through which individuals engage with a multitude of common but clearly distinct practices associated with Japanese animation fandom. What emerges can be conceptualized as processes which nurture boundaries of similitude and difference, boundaries that may at times crystalize into what could call sub-fandoms, understood as fields of consumption centered on particular texts and characters, and taste cultures, that is, congregations of anime consumers that share certain affinities in terms of taste, discourses, subcultural capital and practices. While on some occasions these affinities can create a consciousness of community, as illustrated by Nell and Faye, this is not always the case as can be appreciated in the words of Reborn, a Canadian Asian female of twenty-three years who was a university student and liked fantasy-themed anime the most. Answering a question regarding how many fans she knows, she asserts that:

Not a lot, there's that one friend I'm talking about but she's not, she goes to Otafest but she's not and avid watcher of anime if you understand [...] Met her in high school, but I didn't know if she started watching anime then, I've been watching anime alone up until university, up until when I started watching it with my cousin. (Reborn)

Contrary to other interviewees that had many friends interested in Japanese animation and attended anime conventions, Reborn only knew three: two cousins and a female friend that went to Otafest. She watched anime by herself until university when she started to watch Japanese animation with one of her cousins, a male interested in action anime. During the interview, she also indicated that she did not buy merchandise related to Japanese animation and she did not care about cosplay. This fan had never attended Otafest, despite the fact that her only fan friend explicitly asked her to go. She explained that she refused because she did not like going out, especially to places with large amounts of people. Reborn was clearly not a part of any local taste culture associated with Japanese animation and yet, she was without a doubt an anime fan that loved Japanese animation:

I think you can't see stuff like that anywhere else, TV shows don't have stuff like that and it's really aesthetically pleasing to me, to see all the magic and the different fantastical creatures that they can come up with, I'm really amazed by the Japanese creativity, like "how can they think of stories like this?" their storylines are like "oh my gosh, I would've never thought of that", but that's another part I like about fantasy too, the storyline would be so surprising to me. (Reborn)

As with my other interviewees, Reborn is invested in anime narratives and sees them as unique. She is amazed by the creativity of the Japanese authors that make Japanese animation and finds the storylines surprising and imaginative. From this perspective, her attraction to anime is articulated around narrative consumption: Reborn enjoys inhabiting and exploring the surprising narrative spaces of anime. Even though she does not belong to a fan community, the fact that she asserts that anime is aesthetically pleasing to her suggests that she possesses a similar taste to other anime fans, a taste that sees in Japanese animation a unique and amazing media product. In this

sense, Reborn is without a doubt a consumer of Japanese animation, that is, an anime fan that occupies a position within Japanese animation fandom.

The positionality of Reborn within anime fandom is that of a media consumer that does not participate in local or trans-local taste cultures. She thus enacts boundary work differently than Nell and Faye: she recognizes the uniqueness of anime, thus inscribing herself within Japanese animation fandom. At the same time, she rejects the collective identifications mobilized by those two fans. Through her words, Reborn creates a representation of “fandom” and “fan” that is personal in nature. For her, being an anime fan means watching Japanese animation by herself. Her interactions with other consumers of anime are limited to sometimes watching anime with her cousin. She does not recognize a community made by fans nor does she care about any fan practice. Reborn is only concerned with narrative consumption, a trait that contrasts with fans that consider themselves more social:

But outside like as a normal anime fan to another anime fan, as opposed to like a voice actor to an anime fan, it's really hard to meet people sometimes, cause I know like a lot of anime fans aren't as outgoing. Ah, as I might be, necessarily. So, I uh, defi... I think that's the one thing in the anime community that, like I would love to... improve I guess. Is ah, like the ability to, not just like through conventions but to find ways for people to interact a little bit better. Um, because I know there's like some fantastic people out there who are huge anime fans. It's just that, it's almost like a personal thing very few people are like out there like completely like anime is my life sort of idea... (Edward)

Edward, the Canadian white male that worked as a voice actor discussed in chapters four and five, asserts that it is hard for him to meet other fans because, in contrast to him, most of them are not outgoing. He points out how for such introverted fans, among whom it is possible to include Reborn, anime fandom is a “personal thing”. In contrast, Edward presents himself as a social fan for whom anime is his life. I would argue that this distinction is at the heart of the analytical separation that I have been advancing in this work: on one side, anime fandom is a field of consumption constituted by individual consumers of media, many of whom understand this consumption as a personal endeavour. On the other hand, anime taste cultures are congregations

of fans that use consumption to create cultural hierarchies of taste and subcultural capital. For them, anime fandom is a social endeavour.

As a member of the second position, Edward refers to the anime community as a trans-local grouping composed by every anime fan. For him, his subcultural way of life corresponds with fandom as a whole. In this way, he creates representations of “fandom” and “fans” that are collective in nature. Edward sees anime fans as part of the same taste culture, a collective grouping that he would like to improve by finding ways through which introverted fans can interact a little better. Is in this sense that the boundary work enacted by Edward does not exclude any type of Japanese animation fan from the anime community: even when he constructs shy and extroverted fans as two distinct fan identities, he still sees every anime fan as a peer. This is not the case with other social anime fans as illustrated by the words of Tenma, a twenty-three-years-old male who was a master’s student in the computer science program of a Canadian university at the time of the interview:

Ah right... so am... Sort of mixture like, oh this is really cool and I am having a great time; it’s nice to be surrounded by this enthusiasm, on the other hand there’s... it’s a good time to practice for people who have no social skills, there are a lot of people who are am... some people get very excited and speaks with others with all their enthusiasm; some people who get really excited are extremely particular and that puts a damper on the whole experience for me but those people are fairly rare. [...] So very enthusiastic and then very awkward about the whole thing... maybe you’ve noticed, I guess... I don’t know how to say this without being fantastically brutal so... (Laughs) (Tenma)

Discussing his first time in an anime convention, Tenma asserts how the experience of attending this subcultural happening is a mixed bag. On one hand, it is “cool” and he has a great time because of other fans’ enthusiasm. On the other hand, however, some individuals put a damper on the convention because they get too excited and are very awkward. In contrast to Edward, this anime fan puts these individuals “who have no social skills” at the bottom of the fan hierarchy as he has experienced it in Otafest. For him, they are an embarrassment to the whole local taste culture associated with this convention. They are a hindrance to the experience but luckily, they are “fairly rare”. Using these words, Tenma makes this type of fan an exception to

the rule. Most Japanese animation enthusiasts, himself included, are not “extremely particular”. He stops before further delegitimizing awkward fans but in truth, saying that he cannot describe them “without being fantastically brutal” suggests the lowly status that they have in his eyes.

Through his words, Tenma creates symbolic boundaries that differentiate himself from what he considers to be awkward fans. He also creates a more hierarchical representation of “fandom” as a site where “cool fans” have to deal with “extremely particular fans”. These two fan identities advanced by Tenma are not equal for him, nor does he see awkward fans as peers. They are, on the contrary, a nuisance to anime fandom as a whole and a negative identity that should not have a place within anime conventions. While more understanding, Edward also depicts shy fans as a fan identity that needs improvement. In doing so, he establishes a hierarchy within Japanese animation fandom, albeit a more inclusive one than the one proposed by Tenma. Both fans grant introverted fans like Reborn a lower status than more extroverted fans such as themselves.

This creation of symbolic hierarchies within anime fandom goes against Jenkins’s understanding of media fandom as a utopian community that offers its members “an alternative reality whose values may be more humane and democratic than those held by mundane society” (2013: 280). While he accepts that feuds and conflict can happen inside this alternative reality, he argues that these struggles are the result of fans falling short regarding the ideals of the fan community. Strife stems from personal shortcomings and is viewed in a negative light by the community at large, which is always committed to democratic and communal values (Jenkins, 2013).

Nothing seems further away from the truth when one observes fans and talks with them. As Bury asserts, community must not be “naively celebrated” (2003: 270). Even a grouping articulated around play and joy like the taste culture(s) associated with Japanese animation fandom emerges from a symbolic battle over the monopoly of nomination, that is to say, over the “creative act of designation which gives existence to what it designates in accordance with its designation” (Bourdieu, 1993: 250). In other words, media fandom in general, and anime fandom in particular, are not alternative realities with more communal and democratic values. As with other social fields, fandom is a site where individuals and groups confront each other in order to impose their own definitions and meanings regarding the notions and practices that characterize this field of consumption.



Notions such as “awkward fan” or “outgoing fan” are constructed through diverse confrontations between fans and fan communities. These confrontations are always symbolic struggles over the representation of anime fandom, over control of the principles of vision and division that organize and categorize this field of consumption. Being an anime fan is not just a communal endeavor: is also a struggle to create hierarchies and definitions that improve one’s standing within anime fandom. Edward and Tenma, for example, advance definitions that grant members of local taste cultures associated with Japanese animation as themselves superior status. Reborn rejects such definitions, advancing a view that makes watching Japanese animation by oneself a legitimate practice, and belittling more social practices such as cosplay and attending anime conventions.

### **The Case of Yaoi Fans: Anime Conventions as Sites of Struggle**

Of course, the symbolic struggles that take place within anime fandom are not limited to those between members of taste cultures and media consumers. As I discussed in chapter four, the practices of narrative consumption and character consumption among anime fans often result in the formation of fandoms centered around particular texts and characters. I also addressed in chapter five the fact that subcultural capital creates different taste cultures and scenes within Japanese animation fandom that are articulated around generational lines or certain subcultural practices such as cosplaying and fansubbing. All these fandoms and taste cultures can be seen as fan groupings that take part in the struggles over control of the principles of vision and division that structure anime fandom as a field of consumption.

It is from this perspective that anime fandom can be thought off as fluid and complex, continually changing as different symbolic revolutions succeed each other in an interminable history of permanent struggle among fans and fan cultures. Hierarchies, practices and discourses have evolved through this symbolic struggle that has led away from a media consumption articulated exclusively around Japanese media and culture and into a taste culture centered around fan practices and welcoming of media fandoms associated with Western media products. The multiplicity of groupings and identifications that current anime fandom offers to its members can be seen most clearly in the performance of subcultural capital and the symbolic struggles mobilized by fans within anime conventions:

The hostess who called herself Athena, dressed in cosplay, asked for two people from the audience who wanted to participate in a game. Two male friends stepped up and walked up to the stage which was some ten centimeters above the rest of the room. The hostess explained that the game consisted in answering the questions made by her without using the words “yes” and “no”. One of the young men went first. The first question she asked was “Do you like anime?” to which the contestant answered, “Of course”. After this, with a smile in her face, the hostess asked him “Do you like Yaoi shows?”. The young man looked confused and after a second of doubt answered with a face that indicated disgust, “Negative”. (Fieldnote III).

Fans mobilize symbolic boundaries and employ subcultural capital within the confines of anime conventions to impose their definitions of “anime fan” and “subcultural authenticity”. While both the hostess Athena and the contestant are anime fans that understand the term “yaoi”, a word that designates stories that features homosexual love among male characters, they nonetheless enact opposite identifications regarding this genre. After the initial surprise, the male fan clearly states that he does not like yaoi. He thus refuses identification with this subgenre of anime, locating it outside of the symbolic boundaries of what he considers a proper anime fan and of his fandom. Even when this contestant answers that “of course” he likes Japanese animation, he subsequently excludes yaoi from the forms of anime he consumes.

This young man is thus a member of anime fandom but not of the taste culture associated with yaoi. While this may appear contradictory under Jenkins’s understanding of fandom, given that the latter is a subgenre of the former, this situation illustrates the complexity of the field of consumption that has anime at its center. It also underlines the limits of the notion of “interpretive community” as proposed by Jenkins (2013) and offers a different understanding of the subcultural movement articulated around Japanese animation. It reveals the multiplicity of identifications and groupings possible within this field of consumption, as well as the symbolic struggles which take place therein. Struggle and diversity can also be seen in the case of the hostess, who contrary to the male contestant, recognizes yaoi as a legitimate part of anime fandom in as much as she asks him if he likes it, immediately after inquiring if he likes Japanese animation. The connection she makes between anime fandom and the taste culture articulated around yaoi creates symbolic boundaries that include the later within both the cultural hierarchy of taste that constitutes Japanese

animation fandom and the proper identity of the anime fan. Her identification with the yaoi community opposes the identification enacted by the male contestant and constructs yaoi as a legitimate object of consumption.

This opposition between female fans of yaoi and male fans of anime series more firmly rooted in heteronormativity constitutes one of the central struggles within Japanese animation fandom, a symbolic battle which is especially visible in anime conventions as illustrated above. The question of the hostess to the male fan is not innocent: it has the objective of challenging the boundaries and identifications of the contestant, forcing him to recognize the existence of the yaoi community within the anime fandom that he likes so much. At the same time that he expresses his dislike for yaoi, he recognizes that he knows about it. The hostess has put him in an uncomfortable spot from which he cannot escape unscathed. This strategy of yaoi fans is not uncommon as illustrated by the words of Elsie, a Mexican female university student of twenty-three years that claimed that Saint Seiya was her favorite Japanese animation and was a novice yaoi enthusiast:

Pues se desatan con el yaoi. Es divertido; pero... por ejemplo, yo que —todavía me tienen como de primer nivel— si he visto varias cosas, este, ps me pongo roja, roja, roja. [...] Entonces... Sí son muy intensas. Es muy agradable el ambiente, claro, si estás entre mujeres. Y si... al chico le gusta el yaoi, ok., está bien. Es muy divertido; pero —si al chico, de plano— no le gustan esos gustos... Pero, también, es divertido. Porque se siente intimidado. Entonces jejejej. (Elsie)

They go wild with the yaoi. It is fun; but... for example, I -they still have me categorized as first level- have seen many things, that, well, I got red, red, red. [...] Then... yea, they are very intense. Is a very pleasant atmosphere, of course, if you are among women. And if... the boy likes yaoi, okay, is fine. Is very fun; but -if the boy, unmistakably- does not like those tastes... Well, it is also fun. Because he feels intimidated, Then hehehe. (Elsie).

Elsie paints here an interesting picture of the local yaoi taste culture to which she belongs, and its relationship with male anime fans. According to her, the more veteran yaoi fans go wild when partaking in the practices characteristic of this community. She stresses in particular how these fans show each other graphic depictions of homosexual love among male characters, a

situation that sometimes makes her really red as she is still a novice to yaoi. However, even when she admits to still blushing when watching this subgenre of anime, she also asserts how it is a very pleasant community. Elsie further adds that this is only the case when she is among women. This is an interesting clarification, as yaoi fandom as a trans-local field of consumption is mostly composed of female fans. Elsie thus emphasizes the boundaries not only of her local taste culture but also of the yaoi fandom, clearly positioning male fans as outsiders.

The symbolic boundaries that Elsie creates around the yaoi community further exclude men when, almost as an afterthought, she says that boys can participate if they like yaoi. However, this is only okay, not the pleasant atmosphere she described before even when it can be very fun. This idea is almost wishful thinking as male fans of yaoi are very rare. Because of this, Elsie jumps to a very different scene, a setting that includes a male fan that without doubt does not like yaoi. With glee, this female anime fan admits that it is fun to have a boy around when yaoi enthusiasts are partaking in their communal practices as “he feels intimidated”. Also of note is the fact that she refers to male fans as boys despite previously calling female fans women.

Although Elsie is describing interactions with her friends in spaces more private than an anime convention, such as coffee shops or small stores specialized in selling Japanese animation, the intimidation that she enjoys invoking in male fans that do not like yaoi is similar to the one caused by the hostess Athena. Asking the male contestant if he liked yaoi was not an isolated event. She inquired this to every young man that participated in that game and during her questioning she had the support of other yaoi fans that were in the audience and gleefully watched the reaction of male anime fans to a question they never expected to hear in such a public space. This collusion between the hostess and some female fans was something that I observed again and again during my fieldwork in the anime event hosted by Athena:

The cosplay contest continued. The two young women that I have previously seen in the vendors hall dressed in crossplay<sup>xxxiii</sup> did their performance. It was a comedy routine based on *Gravitation*, a popular yaoi manga and anime. “For those that like yaoi” said the hostess Athena and many female fans in the audience screamed with enthusiasm in response to these words. “Yaoi!, Yaoi!, Yaoi!”, they began to chant a moment later. At the end of their routine the two young women dressed as characters from *Gravitation* performed a

pantomime of a kiss. This action gained them applause and jubilant shouts from the audience.  
(Fieldnote IV)

While yaoi fans interact in more private spaces, such as web forums and specialized stores, it is within anime conventions where they most powerfully mobilize symbolic boundaries in order to claim a shared identity and differentiate themselves from other groupings and identifications existing within anime fandom. Lamont asserts that “symbolic boundaries are often primarily enacted at the discursive level” (1992: 18), however, as shown above, boundary work is also, perhaps even primarily, performative. Dressing as yaoi characters, screaming and applauding, yaoi fans enact boundaries and identifications that do not need words. Even the act of speaking by the hostess Athena and the fans chanting “Yaoi!” goes beyond the discursive level into the practical realm where enunciation becomes the performative enactment of a subcultural belonging, that is to say, a collective identification.

The two female crossplayers, performing their comedic routine in front of fans chanting “Yaoi!” in a cosplay contest hosted by a female anime fan that seemed to also like this subgenre of Japanese animation appears almost as a religious act of worship. Indeed, it is possible to interpret this event as a ritualistic celebration of yaoi fandom, understood as a field of consumption occupied almost in its entirety by female fans. From this perspective, it is possible to conceptualize the female fans in the excerpt above as enacting a ritualistic repetition of their identifications and consumption, a “stylised repetition of acts” (Butler, 1990: 140) that constructs a space of belonging where collective identifications are materialized not only by reiteration but also by marking the symbolic boundaries that exclude outsiders such as male anime fans. In this sense, the performance of inclusion and exclusion enacted by yaoi fans, that is, boundary work, functions as an intrinsic element in the principles of vision and division advanced by the yaoi community in its local struggle for legitimation within anime fandom.

The symbolic struggles of yaoi fans and the practical enactments they mobilize in order to create spaces of belonging and collective identifications articulated around symbolic boundaries, are not exclusive of the local and trans-local taste cultures associated with yaoi fandom. In chapter four, for example, I discussed the case of Yamato who also created symbolic boundaries within the “Evangelion fandom,” boundaries that included one of the characters, Rei, and excluded others such as Asuka. He created in this way a field of consumption that I called “Rei fandom”. It is in

this sense that it is possible to understand also subfandoms as sites where fans struggle with each other and create collective identifications. While these identifications perhaps are not as intense as those that emerge from continuous participation within local or trans-local taste cultures, they nonetheless create spaces of belonging that can be perceived in anime conventions. I move now to further analyze these spaces and their interactions and struggles, as they take form within these subcultural happenings.

### **Fan identifications: The Anime Convention as a Space of Fandom(s)**

As a local happening where Japanese animation fans appropriate space in a spectacular way, anime conventions are privileged terrains for the creation of collective identifications and their associated symbolic boundaries. They are also sites where struggles and alliances among different individuals and fandoms can be observed. Within these conventions, anime fans enact a number of identifications that connect them to particular fandoms, characters and media texts. Their fan identity is thus not an essential attribute they claim at the convention but something they construct through their participation in it. As Richard Jenkins asserts, identity “is not something that one can *have* or not; it is something that one *does*” (2008: 5. Italics in the original).

Within banal and spectacular local happenings and virtual spaces, anime fans constantly enact processes of identity formation and boundary work that materialize a multitude of fan identifications. These fan identifications are performative acts through which fans constitute their position within anime fandom, their place within what Bourdieu calls the “space of positions” of this field of consumption: “each position [...] is subjectively defined by the system of distinctive properties by which it can be situated relative to other; that every position, even the dominant one, depends for its very existence [...] on the other positions constituting the field” (Bourdieu, 1993: 30). As Bourdieu explains, agents and their positions within the field are not independent from each other. Instead, they are part of a complex system that is constituted by every position and by the distinctive properties that relate and differentiate each of them. In this sense, a field is a flexible practical and discursive space that constantly changes as new positions emerge and existing positions modify their distinctive properties.

The logic of the space of positions further explains and advances the argument that I have been making in this dissertation. Anime fandom is not a unitary community as imagined by Jenkins (2013) and Hills (2002) but a flexible social field, articulated around a particular taste: Japanese

animation. It is a universe of positions and possible positions where fans celebrate their favorite characters and media texts, positioning themselves within the space of positions that structures anime fandom both as a field of symbolic struggles and as a practical and discursive space of consumption always open to change. The positions taken by anime fans are defined by symbolic boundaries through which relationships of similarity and difference with other fan positions are established:

Boundary work is an intrinsic part of the process of constituting the self; they [boundaries] emerge when we try to define who we are: we constantly draw inferences concerning our similarities to, and differences from, others, indirectly producing typifications systems. Thereby we define our own inwardness and the characters of others, identity being defined relationally. (Lamont, 1992: 11)

Both Bourdieu and Lamont stress the importance of thinking relationally when analyzing processes of identification and boundary work. For Lamont, this relationality takes the form of boundaries through which individuals draw certain inferences regarding their similarities and differences with other people. It is through these inferences that individuals define their self and that of others. This parallel between positions in the field and identities, as discussed in the work of Bourdieu and Lamont, enables one to go beyond the notion of “identification” and introduce the notion of “identity” as both a performative act and a position-taking articulated by relationships of similarity and difference vis-à-vis other positions that exist within a particular social field. In this sense, it is possible to propose that the position occupied by a fan in the field of consumption articulated around Japanese animation is equivalent with her or his fan identity. For anime fans, this means that fan identities cannot be apprehended in an abstract way, as they exist only in relationship to other such identities. To better grasp this fact, the abstraction that is the concept of the field must be taken to a more grounded analytical realm: from field as symbolic to field as “multi-local terrains of belonging” (Fortier, 1999: 41):

We walked to the stairs that led to the second floor. I was accompanied by one of my informers, Yuna - whom I had run into the previous day in the convention - and one of her female friends. On our way there, I watched two cosplayers dressed as characters of *Dragon*

*Ball*, Gogeta and Great Saiyaman. They were posing for the cameras of other fans, touching each other's fingers in an inclined position. A pose known in the anime show as "Fusion". Further ahead I saw a young male crossplayer that was dressed as princess Serenity from *Sailor Moon*. He was wearing a long white dress with an open back. As we climbed the stairs, I noticed a boy wearing cat ears and accompanied by a male friend dressed in a casual way. The boy with the cat ears was wearing a shirt with an illustration of a voluptuous female anime character which I thought was from the show *High School DxD*. Also in the stairs, we met a male cosplayer who was using the uniform from the Akatsuki, a villain organization from the anime and manga *Naruto*. He was accompanied a young man who was dressed as Asuma Sarutobi from the same show and an individual who appeared to be a crossplayer wearing a kimono, although because of the make up in his or her face I was not sure if it was man or woman.

After arriving to the second floor, we headed to the stage named, "K-Pop, Idols and more". As we walked there, I watched two young cosplayers who seemed to be in middle school, dressed as Robin and Harley Queen from DC Comics. Close to the stage of K-Pop, I noticed a female cosplayer holding a road sign in her hands and wearing a white shirt and a black dress. Another female cosplayer was with her, dressed in a black coat and a short black dress. My informant explained to me that they were dressed as female versions of male characters from the anime and light novel *Durarara!!*. We finally reached the stage. Two young women were dancing on top of it. They wore colorful clothes and scarfs and were performing an Indian style dance. Two female cosplayers dressed as Vocaloids were in the area. One of them had a green wig and black cat ears and wore a black jumpsuit. The other was shorter and had a yellow wig with a white ribbon on top. She wore a large yellow robe and covered her ears with fake white headphones. Close to a column I also watched a pair of female cosplayers doing a couples cosplay. One of them was dressed as Queen Elsa from *Frozen*. The other was a crossplayer dressed as Jack Frost from *Rise of the Guardians*. I already had seen this pairing in this convention and on the internet before, despite the fact that these characters belong to different movies and are owned by different corporations. My informant explained to me that they were a very popular couple among the fandom as both of them have ice powers.



I left my informer and her friend for a moment and walked to a zone surrounded by a plastic wall that was around three meters high. There were five or six rows of chair inside this room where some fans where seated. They where watching an anime film called *The Disappearance of Haruhi Suzumiya* which was being projected on a big screen of white cloth. This film was dubbed in Spanish and had been made by fans of this famous anime franchise, not by professionals. Despite its amateur nature, the dub had good quality. After leaving this room, where they projected anime and videogame contests, I crossed a zone with computer screens where many young men were playing videogames, and joined up again with my companions. We then arrived to the stand where they sold Japanese food. Close to this stand, there was a small door open which had been open in my previous visits to Expo TNT. It led to a small terrace where some young cosplayers were singing anime themes in Spanish. A sign next to the door, read in big, handwritten letters: “Karaoke Party”.

A little further on, we came across another stand, which belonged to “Tanoshi Radio”. There were two television screens connected to videogames at this stand. Close to it there were two male cosplayers posing for the cameras of enthusiastic fans. One of them was dressed as Pyramid Head, a monster of the horror videogame *Silent Hill*. The other was doing a cosplay of Obito, villain of the anime *Naruto*. The cosplayer dressed as Pyramid Head was standing, with a huge sword in his hands, in front of the young man cosplayed as Obito who lay on the floor, as if just defeated by Pyramid Head. Close to them, near to a series of columns that led to the cosplay stage, I also noticed three cosplayers that were doing a team cosplay of the videogame *Mario Bros*. A man in his late thirties or early forties was wearing a red and blue uniform reminiscent of the one of Mario and had on his head a red hat that had the letters “SM” written in the front. A woman of a similar age was also wearing the red suit of Mario, but her hat, also red, only had the letter “M” on the front. They were accompanied by another woman, also of their age, that was wearing the red uniform of Luigi. Her hat was green and had a “L” on the front. (Fieldnote IX)

This vignette of an anime convention offers a glimpse into the many identity positions that exist within anime fandom. Indeed, Japanese animation conventions, as local happenings, offer

the possibility of understanding fan identities as practical enactments grounded in a physical space, a terrain of belonging: “Imagining a community is both that which is created as a common history, experience or culture of a group [...] and about how the imagined community is attached to places -the location of culture.” (Fortier, 1999: 42). The excerpt of fieldnote IX above depicts a particular location, a huge anime convention in Mexico City called TNT. The anime fans taking part in it possess a common culture that goes beyond that local happening into the knowledge community articulated around Japanese animation. Characters from *Naruto* and *Silent Hill*, for example, are as prevalent here as they were in the other anime conventions in which I conducted field work.

While in both Mexican and Canadian conventions it was possible to see some of the same characters, especially those considered emblematic in popular fandoms, the excerpt above illustrates how the common culture of anime fandom becomes localized into a terrain of belonging where fans embody identifications and symbolic boundaries to perform their fan identity, a position in the anime field always in the making. The knowledge community thus becomes embodied as a local happening where this imagined community is reworked in “locally specific ways” (Fortier, 1999: 41). The fans depicted in the excerpt, for example, inscribe themselves in the field as terrain of belonging that is the TNT using their bodies which they dress as their favorite characters. This fact inscribes them in specific fandoms, some of which are only characteristic of this convention. While some characters are omnipresent in anime conventions, some of them, such as the *Dragon Ball* characters that I first encountered in the narration above are almost exclusively seen in Mexican anime conventions. The same goes for certain taste cultures such as the one articulated around K-Pop which was prevalent in these conventions and absent in the Canadian ones.

### **Anime Conventions as Local Terrains of Belonging**

Despite being informed by collective intelligence created in the many trans-local virtual communities that exist on the Internet, the TNT is constructed as a local happening that includes both local and trans-local meanings and practices. The identifications and symbolic boundaries mobilized by fans in it are not a result of a global anime fan identity that they claim in the spaces of the anime convention, but rather a lived expression of the TNT as a terrain of belonging structured by identity positions that take the form of performances enacted by fans within this place. In the excerpt above it is possible to notice many of these identity positions: the fans of

*Dragon Ball*, for example, locate themselves within one of the more traditional fandoms in Mexico. Within this fandom, they occupy one of the most celebrated positions, that of the cosplayer. Moreover, even if they both belong to the *Dragon Ball* fandom, they have chosen to depict different characters, thus inscribing themselves in the Gogeta and Great Saiyaman fandom respectively. In a graphic way, we can understand their identity position in the following way:

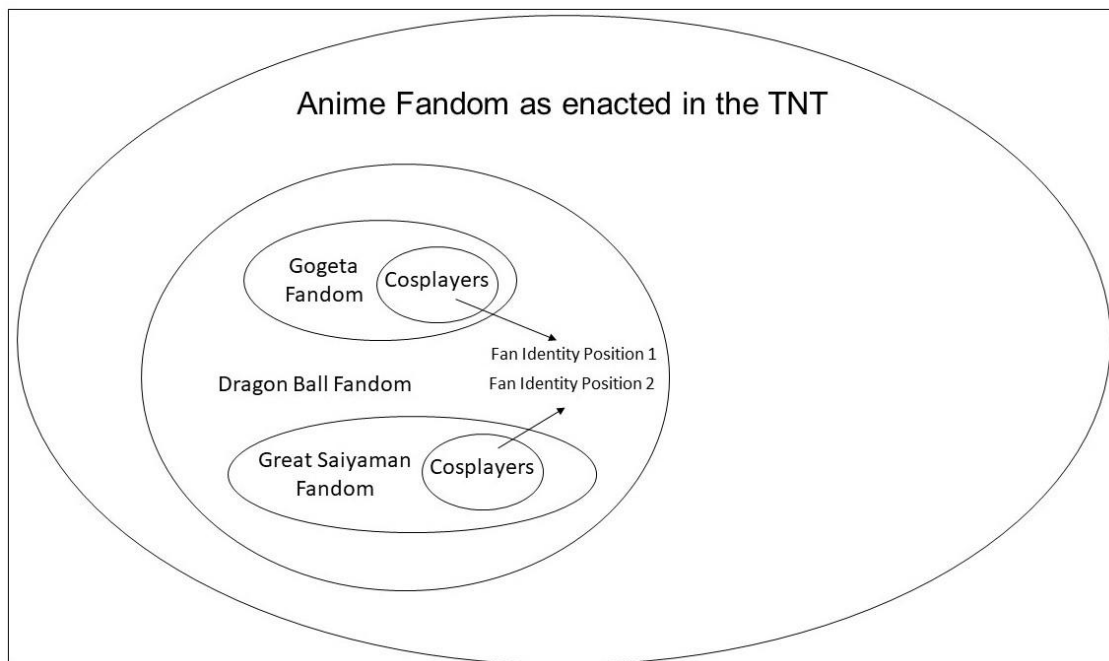


Diagram 1. *Dragon Ball* Fandom as enacted in the TNT.

The circles in this diagram, based in my observations in the TNT, depict the symbolic boundaries that separate fandoms from each other through relationships of similarity and difference. While part of anime fandom, members of the *Dragon Ball* fandom mobilize a series of identifications with characters of this anime that separate them from anime fans that are not consumers with emotional attachments to *Dragon Ball*. These identifications are articulated by character and narrative consumption and are enacted through practices that highlight the subcultural capital that characterizes members of this fandom. The two fans described above, for example, perform a pose that in *Dragon Ball* allows two characters to fuse and become one being of immense power. One of the characters, Gogeta, is in fact, already a fusion of two of the most popular protagonists of the show, Goku and Vegeta. The other is the superhero version of Goku's son, Gohan, known as the Great Saiyaman. Knowing about the pose and dressing as more complex

characters of *Dragon Ball*, both fans show their mastery over the subcultural capital characteristic to their fandom and prove their membership in it in a practical manner.

The complexity of the interrelationships between fandoms and taste cultures also becomes clear in this account. While the cosplayers dressed as Gogeta and Great Saiyaman can be seen as members of *Dragon Ball* fandom, they can also be classified as participants within the local taste culture associated with cosplay. However, my research suggests that *Dragon Ball* cosplayers are more closely aligned with this series fandom, as the simplicity of the costumes used by *Dragon Ball* characters make them unchallenging to full-time cosplayers that take part in competitions and excel at their craft. From this perspective, even when the two cosplayers have a high status within *Dragon Ball* fandom, they do not rank very high within the local taste culture associated with the art of cosplay. This situation illustrates the complex hierarchies that currently structure Japanese animation fandom as a field.

As I have discussed previously, these cultural hierarchies currently have cosplay at their center, given the importance that character consumption occupies within most local and trans-local communities of fans. It is in this sense that the pre-eminence of cosplayers within *Dragon Ball* and other fandoms is not a coincidence, even when the costumes worn by most fans do not have enough craftsmanship to yield a profit of distinction within the local and trans-local taste cultures associated with the art of cosplay. Even in its simpler forms, this subcultural practice requires knowledge about the characters being cosplayed, craftsmanship to make the costumes and showmanship to play them. As it can be seen in the discussion above, a significant number of fans express love for their favorite characters through cosplay. Identity positions are embodied in conventions such as the TNT. From wearing an anime shirt and cat ears to crossplaying, fans celebrate their favorite fandoms using their bodies. In a way, symbolic boundaries become the limits of the individual itself, identification and belonging experienced and inscribed in the body. The anime convention as a social field and terrain of belonging thus facilitates the construction and management of “typical expressions” of a variety of identity positions because it offers fans a place where they can embody practices that create communal identifications and symbolic boundaries that materialize each fandom within the confines of these local happenings.

Fan identities emerge through embodied practices that situate each fan in a specific position within anime fandom. The case of the TNT illustrates this situation. While *Dragon Ball* fans occupy a positive position within Mexican anime fandom, given the popularity of this show and

of the characters they are cosplaying, the *Sailor Moon* fan, in contrast, occupies a much more controversial position because male crossplayers remain a marginalized community within this fandom. Indeed, even when female crossplayers have become a common occurrence within conventions and often are members of local taste cultures associated with yaoi or cosplay, male fans dressed as female characters are rare, do not belong to local taste cultures, and are not welcomed by more mainstream fans who still subscribe to heteronormativity. This explains the fact that male crossplayers like the one dressed as princess Serenity, walk around the convention by themselves and not in groups like female crossplayers do.

This fact attests to the importance of taste cultures within local happenings and spaces of belonging. Because female fans have created their own subcultural communities, it is possible to see female cosplayers dressed as male characters, often in performances that challenge heteronormativity. The case of the couple cosplay integrated by Elsa from *Frozen* and Jack Frost from *Rise of the Guardians* exemplifies this situation. In the excerpt of my fieldnotes introduced above, Jack was being performed by a female fan. This cosplay couple was surrounded by other female fans with whom both members of the couple were talking. A little later, I saw another group of cosplayers, composed of these characters and Ice King from *Adventure Time* where Jack Frost was also a female fan. This group was posing, surrounded by fans taking photographs. In contrast to male crossplayers, in both cases the female cosplayer dressed as Jack was accepted and celebrated by other female fans. This is especially interesting because as one of my informants, Yuna, told me during this visit to the TNT, Jack Frost and Elsa are a popular pairing among certain segments of fandom. These fandoms include those female fans that like cosplay, animation and yaoi. From this perspective, a cosplay performance that included a romantic couple created by these fandoms and represented by two female fans not only challenged heteronormativity but constituted a reiteration of a female taste culture that celebrates alternative forms of sexuality.

This taste culture, as represented by Yuna and other female fans, is the segment of anime fandom that most resembles a subcultural formation. In this sense, it is perhaps not a surprise that Jenkins (2013) presents media fandom as a largely female subculture. In more than one sense, he confuses female taste cultures with this field of consumption as a whole. Certainly, Yuna is more similar than other fans to Jenkins's textual poacher. She does fan fiction, fan art and jumps around texts. She likes yaoi and also alternative depictions of characters. For example, when we visited the TNT together, this fan liked female versions of male characters such as Izaya Orihara and

Shizuo Heiwajima from *Durarara!* – an interesting detail because these male characters are a very popular pairing within the yaoi fandom and as a result, inverting their genders might be seen by some yaoi fans as an insult to their fandom and the genre also known as “boy’s love”. Despite this, Yuna liked such gender-swapped characters, an approach not uncommon among female yaoi fans.

She also liked, as discussed above, the characters of Elsa and Jack Frost which are not from any Japanese animation. They belong to American media texts -two different texts from two different corporations at that-, their only connection being that both have ice powers. Yuna liked them because these characters are continually shaped by fans that participate in local and trans-local taste cultures through fan art, fan fiction and other fan practices. It could be easy to conclude from this that female fans are more akin to textual poachers while male fans are closer to cultists that defend their favorite texts. I would argue that gender differences play an important factor within anime fandom, but as many cases in this work illustrate, female fans can defend original and beloved texts as much as their male counterparts and as the case of male crossplayers illustrate, men that are fans of anime can also participate in textual poaching.

Japanese animation fandom cannot be understood without taking into account the cultural hierarchy of taste that structure it at any given point in time. While social differences such as gender or age have a role in terms of the positions occupied by social actors within the field of consumption, these positions have meaning only in relation with the rest of positions that constitute the field at any given point in time. Also of essence is to comprehend this field of consumption’s interrelations with other media fandoms and the way in which together they constitute the “broader nerd culture” described by Van. As I have been discussing through this work, anime fans can adopt purist positions within Japanese animation fandom that defend the cultural hierarchy of taste that has anime at its center, or can adopt positions that blur the boundaries of this field and connect it with other media fandoms. The case of Elsa and Jack Frost illustrates this bridging of different fandoms as performed in a subcultural happening. These two characters were not the only outsiders to Japanese animation present in the TNT as evidenced by my fieldnotes above. Characters from American comic books, videogames and Western animation are all cosplayed in this and other anime conventions.

In contrast to the male crossplayer dressed as princess Serenity, those playing Elsa and Jack Frost were accepted and even celebrated by the fans attending the TNT. This fact suggests that anime conventions are attended by members of local taste cultures that blur the boundaries of

the different media fandoms. Indeed, I would argue that anime fandom's symbolic boundaries have weakened as a result of the many creative practices of the fans that have pushed the limits of this field of consumption to include media texts that are not related in any way to Japanese animation. Yaoi fans for example, write fan fiction about *Harry Potter* in the same way as they write for *Durarara!*; Japanese animation fans draw *The Avengers* in an anime style; cosplayers pose together even when one of them performs an anime character and the other performs a character from a horror videogame. From this perspective, it is possible to translate the excerpt of my fieldnotes above in the following way:

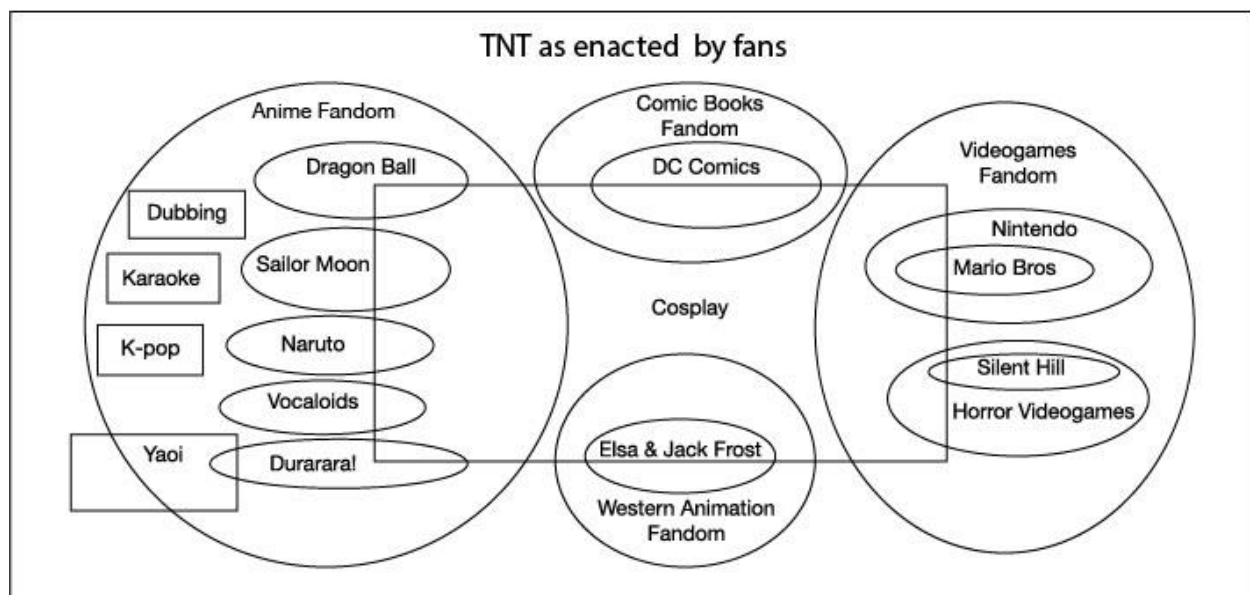


Diagram 2. The TNT as a Space of Fandoms

From a graphic that depicted only the *Dragon Ball* Fandom it is possible to move to a more complex representation of the TNT. The circular shapes represent the different fandoms observed while the rectangular shapes represent local taste cultures associated with particular fan practices. What emerges from this modeling is a Space of Fandoms that goes beyond Japanese animation and includes identity positions localized within the symbolic boundaries of Comic Books Fandom, Western Animation Fandom and Videogames Fandom. All of these fan identities partake in the practice of cosplay. From this perspective, I would argue that Anime Fandom's symbolic boundaries, as observed in the TNT, are being weakened mainly through the embodied character consumption of fans that perform non-anime identity positions in the TNT.

The boundaries of this subcultural happening are thus becoming blurred as a result of fan practices that connect local taste cultures with narratives and characters not related to Japanese animation. The symbolic struggles over the representation of anime fandom and its boundaries are thus a practical matter. Thus, it is possible to affirm that the cultural hierarchies of taste that constitute anime fandom and its boundaries are maintained mainly by fan practices articulated around narrative and character consumption. Some of them, like cosplay, increase relationships of similarity and weaken those of difference among media fandoms. Others that can be seen in Diagram two, such as dubbing, karaoke and K-Pop are exclusive of Mexican anime fandom and thus make its symbolic boundaries thicker. The case of Yaoi is interesting in this respect. As the graphic shows, even when this taste culture has its origins within anime fandom, it has begun to grow outside of Japanese animation to incorporate other texts that yaoi fans find alluring such as *Harry Potter* and Marvel Comics.

The TNT as a space of fandom(s) stresses the fact that fan identity is “formed and continually reinforced via individual practice within culturally defined spaces, which are themselves in turn continually constituted out of these same practices” (Martin in Fortier, 1999: 48). Japanese animation fans create their own identity positions within anime conventions through practices that connect them in relationships of commonality and otherness with other fandoms and their associated taste cultures. The anime convention is (re)created by these practices which are lived expressions of this local happening. It is, as a result, always changing. From a place where fans went to see Japanese animation described by my older interviewees, the anime convention has evolved into a space open to many different fandoms which are on occasion not related to Japanese animation. The cosplayers, in particular, have become the defining trait of the TNT and other conventions, together with a practice that has remained from the times that these places were mainly about watching anime series: buying merchandise.

While the performance of identity positions is of great importance for the creation, maintenance and transformation of anime fandom as a field of consumption, this is only part of the story. A terrain of belonging and the practical enactment of fan identifications and symbolic boundaries are as important for constituting fan identities as the belongings associated with these identities. As Fortier (1999) explains, these belongings refer to “possessions.” While this chapter discussed the practices of group identity that create terrains of commonality, I have not yet addressed the “possessions” associated with Japanese animation fandom. In the following chapter,



belongings, understood as the material possessions through which anime fans prove their subcultural membership, gain subcultural status and construct their identity, will be analyzed.

## **Conclusion**

I have discussed in this chapter Japanese animation conventions as subcultural happenings. I propose that these appropriations of public spaces allow anime fans to create, maintain and affirm identifications and symbolic boundaries that define them in opposition not only to outsiders but also in relation to other fans. In this sense, anime conventions both separate fans from non-fans and create hierarchies and distinctions among fans themselves. It is through processes of identity formation and boundary work, performed by anime enthusiasts within Japanese animation conventions, that local taste cultures are constituted and maintained. In these local settings, fans reinscribe trans-local meanings and knowledges into localized practices through which they perform fan identities.

Claiming mastery over certain practices that encapsulate subcultural capital characteristic to anime fandom, Japanese animation fans gain distinction and status within anime conventions. Because subcultural knowledge has become easily accessible to anyone with Internet access, Japanese animation fans now display their expertise through esoteric practices and discourses associated with anime fandom in order to prove their fan identities and gain a profit in distinction. This is a complex endeavour as different sub-fandoms, communities and individual media consumers advance their own boundary work to define not only the boundaries of anime fandom but also the cultural hierarchies of taste that create distinction and status. These symbolic and practical struggles result in a complex web of similarities and differences that join and separate fans from insiders and outsiders alike.

Given that anime conventions constitute public spaces where fans perform fan identities, they are privileged sites for grasping this complex web of boundaries and identifications. The cases that constitute this chapter illustrate this fact. Fans that believe they are part of an “anime community” and participate in anime conventions characterize solipsistic consumers of Japanese animation as shy and in need of social skills; yaoi fans publicly challenge boundaries created by male fans in order to inscribe their favorite narratives inside the cultural hierarchies of taste that characterize anime fandom; fans of a multitude of media fandoms use their bodies, dressed in costumes, to create spaces of play where character consumption reflects the assertion of identity

positions. It is in this sense that the struggles over the representation of anime fandom and its associated taste cultures are a practical, localized matter.

## Notes

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<sup>xxxiii</sup> Crossplay refers to cross gender cosplay. Both male and female fans participate in crossplay, although most crossplayers that take part in anime conventions are female.

### Introduction

Japanese animation fans are dedicated consumers of commodities. This fact becomes evident when walking around an Anime convention. In contrast to Jenkins' assertion that "Fandom's very existence represents a critique of conventional forms of consumer culture" (2013: 283), members of anime fandom regularly take part in processes of consumption and commodification. In this, they appear no different from individuals partaking in the mainstream social space that Jenkins (2013: 280) named "mundane society". Anime fans appropriate mass products in order to enact what Richard Jenkins calls, "assertive and very specific identity projects" (2008: 28). A far cry from anti-consumerism, anime fandom finds at its center consumer practices through which its members construct identifications and symbolic boundaries that define the cultural hierarchy of taste that constitutes this field of consumption.

Previous chapters have discussed narrative and character consumption. The present chapter integrates these forms of textual consumption with another important way in which Japanese animation fans use consumption, the appropriation of material products, to construct fan identities. In doing so, I go beyond understandings of media fandom that stress the productive and resistive characteristics of this type of social grouping while minimizing "the extent to which fandom is related to wider shifts within consumer culture" and reducing "the significance of consumption and commodification within fan cultures" (Hills, 2002: 28). As a field of consumption, anime fandom is closely linked with local and global flows of consumption, with a consumer culture within which "people are able to use commodities to express themselves and fix points of security and order in an amorphous modern society" (Spooner, 1986: 226). The links between Japanese animation fandom and consumer culture can be seen especially clearly in local spaces such as specialized stores and anime conventions. In these terrains of belonging, material products have always played an important role as objects through which fans prove their subcultural membership, gain status, and construct their fan identities. Before discussing in depth consumption within these local spaces, I will address the nature of consumption among Japanese animation fans.

## The Many Faces of Fan Consumption

While Hills (2002) focuses his discussion of fans' consumption on the acquisition of media products, consumer practices within fandom are not limited to the commoditization of media texts. In fact, fans consume a wide array of belongings related to their favorite narratives and characters. Understanding the consumer side of fandom as "commodity-completist" (Hills, 2002: 30) vis-à-vis "books, comics and videos" (Hills, 2002: 29) thus simplifies the complex ways in which members of media fandom approach consumption. This complexity regarding fans' consumer practices is especially visible in the case of Japanese animation enthusiasts, who often participate in material and expansive forms of consumerism:

There is something promising but also chilling in this capitalistic dreamworld. For, while the drive to progress is ever present – winning more battles, keeping tamagotchi alive longer, getting (and getting) additional Pokémon - one can never actually or definitively reach the goal, given that it is a frontier stretching continually further – into more Power Rangers toys, countless Pokémon Game Boy games, never-ending Sailor Moon play equipment. This is the formula for capitalism, of course: endless desire and deferment coming together in a cycle of consumptive repetition (Allison, 2006: 20).

As illustrated in the quote above, consumption is a central element of anime fandom. Allison's excerpt touches on the never-ending nature of this consumption, which goes beyond the commodification of media texts and into commodities such as *Pokémon Games*, *Power Rangers* toys and *Sailor Moon* equipment. Contrary to depictions of fans as members of an alternative social community which rejects consumer culture, enthusiasts of Japanese animation partake in cycles of consumptive repetition that are similar to those of the rest of the capitalist society in which they live. What differentiates anime fans from other members of their societies is not the fact that they are outsiders vis-à-vis consumerism, but rather the nature of their consumption. In other words, what differentiates Japanese animation fans from other individuals is taste, that is, "the propensity and capacity to appropriate (materially or symbolically) a given class of classified, classifying objects or practices" (Bourdieu, 2010: 169).

Anime fans have a propensity to appropriate objects and practices related to Japanese animation. This taste differentiates these fans from other individuals and groups that do not find

material or symbolic worth in the aforementioned objects and practices. Indeed, I would argue that this distinctive approach to cultural products and practices structures the mainstream view of anime fans in many capitalist societies. Jenkins himself addresses this situation during his discussion of the negative stereotypes often directed at media fans. According to this author, these stereotypes are a result of “fans’ transgression of bourgeois taste and disruption of dominant cultural hierarchies” which “insures that their preferences are seen as abnormal and threatening” (Jenkins, 2013: 17).

While Jenkins goes on to argue that nomadic readers create their own alternative social community through productive practices such as textual poaching, his remarks about the politics of taste, inspired by the work of Bourdieu, open a door to a more complex understanding of consumption among fans. Fans’ taste is seen as a transgression of dominant cultural hierarchies and constructed as abnormal as a result of the objects and practices appropriated by them. In other words, fans give extreme importance to the consumption of cultural products considered inappropriate from the perspective of bourgeois taste. Contrary to Jenkins, who includes among these improper cultural products only texts, I would propose that the narrative and character consumption enacted by fans extends to many “specialized fields of production” (Bourdieu, 2010: 227). The case of anime fans clearly illustrates this situation. Walking through an anime convention, one can notice a plethora of commodities:

“Look, a poster of Kirito and of Kirito and Asuna!” said a boy of eleven or twelve years that was walking near me in the company of a male friend of the same age. After hearing this, I decided to visit the commercial booths. In the ones located near the right wall, I saw a wide variety of commodities. In the first one I visited, there were, among other things, bags, caps, buttons and mugs. All these products were decorated with anime motifs; some of them had characters and others displayed symbols related to different narratives. The next booth in that side of the room sold several K-Pop related items, such as music videos, notebooks with pictures of members of famous bands and t-shirts also featuring images of bands or famous singers. An adjacent store was selling lava lamps and lighters with anime motifs. Left to this one, another booth had on display products from American franchises like *Angry Birds* and *Phineas and Ferb*. In the neighboring store, they sold very elaborate and colorful t-shirts. In there, I noticed t-shirts of Miku, *Death Note*, *Inuyasha*, *Bleach* and *Elfen Lied*, among others.

Passing this shop was a booth that sold various products, from bootlegged series to stuffed characters. The final booth on this side of the room had on display K-Pop books, and sold Japanese food such as drinks and ramen. (Fieldnote VI)

This is but a brief illustration of the cultural products being sold at anime conventions. As can be seen in the excerpt, only a fraction of them are texts. The rest are commodities that hardly invite notions of textual poaching or fan production: items such as mugs, notebooks or lava lamps. As will be addressed in this chapter, these items, that is, anime goods and merchandise, are important constitutive elements of Japanese animation fandom and its associated taste cultures. It is no coincidence that in every convention, there is a complete hall occupied by vendors. In the TNT, the largest convention in Mexico City, line after line of commercial booths fill the first floor while the second one hosts a number of fan practices and even more shops. Narrative and character consumption are everywhere in Japanese animation conventions. As the words of the boy in the previous quote illustrate, this consumption is not a passive endeavour but an active practice through which fans perform boundary work and transform commodities into belongings.

Surrounded by a sea of cultural products, the boy announces to his friend that he has seen a poster of a character he appears to like, Kirito from the anime *Sword Art Online*. An instant later, he calls attention to a poster of Kirito and Asuna, the female lead of the series. This fact reveals that he does not like only Kirito but other characters of this show. He thus claims for himself the identity position of a fan of *Sword Art Online*, marking boundaries that separate him from fans of other anime series. While he only signaled to his friend the existence of the poster, this act is enough for changing this commodity into a belonging that links him with other fans of *Sword Art Online*, and helps the boy construct his fan identity. The other cultural products described in the extract above help other members of anime fandom with their identity projects. K-Pop items are especially interesting in this respect, as they are the physical manifestation of a local change of taste within anime fandom.

Fieldnote VI belongs to my fieldwork in a convention in Mexico. In every Mexican anime convention, I noticed the presence of K-Pop items. This was not the case in Canada, where this type of cultural product seemed to be absent. K-Pop merchandise was also not present during my previous research regarding Japanese animation fans in Mexico (Robles Bastida, 2011, 2012). These commodities were a local and recent development of Mexican cons which had become

legitimate objects of consumption within anime fandom as a result of the increased appeal that K-Pop itself had gained among younger generations of fans. By virtue of liking and consuming this type of music, these young anime fans had broadened the classifying objects and practices of Japanese animation fandom to include new material and symbolic elements of belonging that have their origin in Korea and not in Japan. For Canadian fans, this inclusion of Korean culture within the “system of classificatory schemes” (Bourdieu, 2010: 169) characteristic of Japanese animation fandom went beyond K-Pop, as can be appreciated in Konoha’s words:

I like the animation, I feel like I’m a kid at heart, I’m also really into Korean dramas, so Korean dramas and anime kind of take up my social life. [...] I really just like Korean culture, it’s very very interesting to me, I just love learning about Asian culture in general, I watch Chinese movies, Filipino movies, Taiwanese movies, movies from Thailand, everything.  
(Konoha)

Konoha who, as discussed in chapters four and five was a Canadian black female that attended university in British Columbia, asserts how, besides anime, she is really into Korean dramas. Besides K-Pop, some anime fans like and watch this type of televised drama, to the point where they are aware of the name of certain actors and actresses. Furthermore, one can notice a Pan-Asian approach to Konoha’s fandom. She likes Korean culture, but she also watches movies from places such as China, Philippines, Taiwan and Thailand. This Pan-Asian approach to fandom was expressed in different degrees of clarity by some of my younger interviewees. Konoha, for example, was only eighteen at the time of the interview. Her taste was different from what older fans considered proper. For them, only Japanese culture should be appropriated by anime fans. Contrary to Konoha who was interested in cultural products from “Asian culture in general”, this latter type of fans focused their consumption on Japanese texts and commodities:

But yeah, the toys [from *Galaxy Express 999*], I had to, when I was in Japan, I went to the Akihabara, which is the mayor nerd, otaku center in Tokyo and just going through all of the stores in there and just finding little toys [...] It was overwhelming because it's just ... you have like multistory department stores full of all of these little shops. There are all devoted to anime, stuff like that, it is very loud and very colorful. Exactly what you think it would

look like, neon everywhere. Actually I went a couple of times because I got so overwhelmed at some point it's like, you have to go and come back tomorrow, or something like that. (Van)

Being from the first generations of anime fans, Van, the Canadian white male of thirty-years that worked as a museum educator and was introduced in chapter five, had a very different approach to consumption than younger fans like Konoha. During the interview, he constantly addressed Japan. His interest in this country and its culture informed his taste regarding anime fandom to the point that during a trip to Tokyo, he bought original anime merchandise in Akihabara, considered the otaku center of Japan. As he discusses in the above excerpt, he went there to acquire toys from his favorite Japanese animation, *Galaxy Express 999*. In other parts of the interview, he discussed other commodities that he purchased in this visit to Japan such as videogames and mangas in Japanese, despite the fact that he was not proficient in this language. His description of Akihabara, as an overwhelming, loud and colorful place full of anime shops that was precisely “what you think it would look like”, confers a powerful aura to this place of consumption that compels visitors to leave overwhelmed only to come back the next day.

### **Consumption as a Profit in Distinction**

Two different systems of classificatory schemes are at play in here. One of them, represented by Van, centers around Japanese texts and objects while the other, represented by Konoha, has incorporated objects and practices from other cultures. As discussed in chapter five, this incorporation does not stop with Asian cultures but has come to include also American texts and objects. In fact, the changes regarding subcultural capital and the struggles among a variety of local and trans-local taste cultures and media consumers have altered taste to such an extent within anime fandom that many objects and texts are fair game when it comes to consumption. The case of cosplay as it appears at anime conventions clearly illustrates this situation:

The intermediate category, named Journeyman, began. The costumes in this category were clearly of better quality than those of the contest for beginners. The first participants were a cosplay couple composed of a woman and a man. They wore clothes that seemed to be inspired by a videogame. The young woman had golden armor while the man wore a black and green outfit. His face was covered by a black mask which glowed with a green light.



They performed some individual poses and then in front of the three female judges, enacted a combined routine. The next participants were also a couple cosplay. In this case, both man and woman were dressed in medieval clothes. The audience yelled and applauded when they performed their routine on stage. I did not recognize the costumes of any of these contestants, but I knew they were not anime characters. I knew the next character that paraded in the cosplay contest. Darth Maul, a character from *Star Wars*. A young man wore a full costume of him complete with red face, protuberances emerging from the head and a black robe. The cosplayer also had in his hands the double red saber of Maul which he moved while advancing. He also received applause, and while he paraded, the audience started to clap rhythmically while he continued his fighting routine.

A young woman dressed as Zelda from the videogame *The Legend of Zelda* was the next participant to appear. There were many enthusiastic shouts when she appeared. She had a wig with long, blonde hair and spiky ears. The shouts continued while she performed her routine. This cosplayer was followed by a young woman dressed as Thorin Oakenshield, a character from *The Hobbit*. She also received a lot of applause. She was holding a sword and shield made of wood. She used both weapons in her routine. The next cosplayer that entered the stage was a young man dressed as Edward Scissorhands. He also generated a lot of enthusiasm among the audience. His performance was very faithful to the original character, including the corporal movements and facial expressions. (Fieldnote XV)

None of the characters described in this excerpt belong to anime texts. Some of them are from videogames while others come from Western texts. Despite this fact, the audience enthusiastically celebrates them. From this perspective, these characters have become part of the system of classificatory schemes that is otaku taste. While the cosplayers parading in the contest can be framed as producers, given the fact that they manufacture their own costumes, audience members are consumers, watching the cosplayers on stage. Both seem to have a propensity to appropriate narratives and characters from a variety of non-anime texts. Whether they come from fantasy narratives, such as Thorin Oakenshield, or from Sci-Fi stories, such as Darth Maul, non-anime characters have been increasingly adopted by fan producers, as illustrated in the excerpt above. Fan consumers have also incorporated non-anime characters into their consumption, a fact

that can be appreciated in the applause and shouts given to cosplays of such characters within the contest.

This diversification of taste among producers and consumers is further illustrated by the fact that there were no anime characters during the intermediate category of the contest. Besides the characters described in the excerpt, this category also saw cosplays of Wonder Woman and Fionna from the American animation *Adventure Time*. This was also the case for the Master category where most cosplays were not inspired in Japanese animation. The majority of cosplayers from the Novice category, by the contrary, were dressed as anime characters. Taken together, these facts suggest a learning curve among cosplayers that takes them away from Japanese animation and into a more diversified taste regarding texts and characters. According to Bourdieu, cultural products can function as cultural capital. They offer to those that acquire them “a profit in distinction, proportionate to the rarity of the means required to appropriate them” (Bourdieu, 2010: 225). From this perspective, non-anime narratives and characters, being rarer cultural products when it comes to the field of consumption associated with Japanese animation, yield a higher profit in distinction than fan production and consumption of anime narratives and characters. This pursuit of rarity among anime fans also explains the popularity of K-Pop, as illustrated in the words of Kaneki, a male, Mexican high school student of eighteen years who worked in an anime store:

Este, bueno, yo —en un principiooooo— este, nada más escuchaba a K-Pop. Ora sí [sic], como que, en español, este, inglés yyy coreano. Este, y una amiga, fue la que meeee... comenzó a... como que a decir no, ps [sic], es que mira, son estas bandas. Son éstas, son éstas, son éstas. Entonces, deberías de escucharlas. Entonces, ya, así fue así como que... este, empecé a conocerlos y fue de... bueno, realmente... vale la pena lo que están haciendo. [...] las canciones, las letras, este... Igual, por lo mismo, meee alejé un poco acerca de eso, porque, comenzó a ser muy popular. [...] Se ha vuelto demasiado popular, entonces —una de las ventajas que se tiene, todavía—, es de que [sic] —la moda japonesa y todo ese estilo Visual Kei— eh, todavía, eeeh, todavía, nnno está bien visto. Entonces, dicen que —las personas que hacen eso— ps [sic], sí. Les dicen raros, Freaks y todo eso. Prefiero que mmm... mmm... denominarme así ahora sí que me digan no, ps [sic], es uno más del montón. Prefiero así como que... Quitar mi piedrita de las demás. (Kaneki)

Well, at the beginning, I only listened to K-Pop. Like in Spanish, English and Korean. And a female friend was the one that began to say to me no, look, these are the bands. It is those, those and those. You should listen to them. Then it was like that how I began to know them and well, really is worthy what they are doing. [...] the songs, the lyrics and well, because of that, I walked away a little bit from it because it started to be very popular [...] It has become way too popular and then, one of the advantages that are still there is the fact that Japanese fashion and all that Visual Kei style, is still, still not well seen. They say that the people that do that, well yes. They call them weird, freaks and all that. I prefer to call myself that instead of being told, he is just another one among the many. I prefer like... take away my little stone from all the others. (Kaneki)

The importance of distinction for anime fans can be clearly appreciated in these words of Kaneki. This young man addresses how he was interested in K-Pop until it became too popular. At that point he felt that he needed to find a new source of distinction, in this case Japanese fashion and the Visual Kei style. His narrative not only illustrates how otaku taste is guided by a pursuit of rarity and distinction but also the historicity of subcultural capital from an individual perspective. As the account suggests, Kaneki first became interested in K-Pop in a very general way. It was not until a female friend introduced him to the proper taste in terms of bands that he became inducted into K-Pop fandom. In an echo of the discussion in chapter five regarding taste cultures, this young man became a fan through his interactions with a more experienced fan that taught him the subcultural capital associated with the identity of the K-Pop fan. He became in this way, a member of one of the most recent groupings that have emerged within Japanese animation fandom.

However, Kaneki relinquished the identity of the K-Pop fan and his membership in K-Pop fandom when this grouping became too popular. As he explains, he did this because he does not like to be “one among the many”. His following assertion about taking his “little stone from all the others”, further elaborates in his desire to not be part of something popular, that is, of the mainstream. This rejection, paired with his embrace of labels such as “weird” and “freak”, indicates an “alternative” or subcultural approach to fandom. Kaneki is not only willing to walk away from K-Pop but also from all the subcultural capital associated with it if that means maintaining his distinction and subcultural authenticity.

Discussing club cultures, Thornton asserts that the dichotomy mainstream/alternative is not related with the objective reality of this subcultural grouping, but instead with “the means by which many youth cultures imagine their social world, measure their cultural worth and claim their subcultural capital” (1996: 96). However, I would argue that this dichotomy is not so much a question of belief but of taste and distinction. Kaneki and other subcultural participants do not simply use the mainstream as an imagined other to be denigrated in order to create group solidarity (Thornton, 1996). They are willing to abandon their subcultural capital and the worth they have bestowed into certain practices and cultural products to escape the risk of losing their distinction and subcultural authenticity as a result of the increase in the number of individuals that like anime in general and K-Pop in particular:

Because the distinctive power of cultural possessions or practices - an artifact, a qualification, a *film culture* - tends to decline with the growth in the absolute number of people able to appropriate them, the profits of distinction would wither away if the field of production of cultural goods, itself governed by the dialectic of pretension and distinction, did not endlessly supply new goods or new ways of using the same goods (Bourdieu, 2010: 227. The emphasis is mine).

As Bourdieu suggests in this quote, the distinctive power that belongings and practices yield for members of media cultures gradually disappears as more individuals appropriate them. As a result, fans that want to preserve their subcultural status constantly move to new texts, commodities and activities offered by an always growing field of production. Jenkins’ proposal that media fans are nomadic readers because they travel through texts, constantly “appropriating new materials, making new meanings” (2013: 36), ignores not only that some fans are not nomads but also the fact that nomadic behaviours among media fans often are motivated by a pursuit of distinction. From this perspective, Kaneki and other anime enthusiasts with alternative leanings move between different texts, cultural possessions and practices with the objective of avoiding the mainstream and expanding their profit in distinction, not because they want to make intertextual connections among a multitude of narratives.

Also forgotten in Jenkins’ argument is the importance that the field of production plays in regards to the nomadic practices of Kaneki and other Japanese animation fans. As Bourdieu asserts

in the previous quote, the field of production of cultural goods is essential when it comes to nomadic consumption behaviors among fans. This field supplies the new commodities necessary to maintain a profit in distinction. I would argue that it also provides anime fans with belongings that they can use to enact identifications and symbolic boundaries. The next section will explore local spaces where the field of production of anime goods comes into contact with the field of consumption of Japanese animation and related media. The point where supply meets demand constitutes a central location for the enactment by fans of processes of distinction, identification and boundary work.

### **Japanese Animation Merchants as Subcultural Entrepreneurs**

In order to ground the discussion about the interrelations between the field of production and the field of consumption of anime goods, it is useful to concentrate on two spaces of consumption: the specialty store and the anime convention. These terrains of belonging are also spaces of exchange in as much as they supply goods to Japanese animation fans. In them, the act of selling is as important as the act of buying. Despite this fact, as is the case with much research on subcultural movements in general and media fandom in particular, the central role that subcultural merchants play within anime fandom has been largely ignored. The stress on creativity and resistance advanced by Jenkins and other authors has not only worked to conceal consumption practices among fans but also those practices enacted by subcultural entrepreneurs and their employees. The case of the specialty store is especially notorious in this regard, as it remains scarcely analyzed as result of the anti-commercial ideologies that inform much fandom research (Hills, 2002).

As a private space of consumption where merchants supply anime fans with commodities, anime stores underline the relationships of Japanese animation fandom with consumer culture. Notions of community and creativity do not have, in these stores, the prominence that they hold within anime conventions. On the contrary, these specialized retail shops offer fans the possibility of fulfilling individual desires through character and narrative consumption. In other words, anime stores are about selling narratives and characters to fans, in the form of a variety of cultural goods and texts. The following quote from my interview with Hetalia, the Canadian white female that created AMVs and belonged to yaoi fandom who was first introduced in chapter four, elaborates the function of specialized anime shops as providers of commodities:

Sometimes I'll buy manga and anime DVDs kinda, whenever I guess, in the different stores around Calgary, but um... the *Togainu no Chi* figure was actually um... I was in San Diego, just kinda on convention, not on convention, on vacation, we happen to go into a shop and I saw it, I was super excited about it, I did bought it like for 15 dollars and it was originally for 200 dollars, yeah... they didn't know. (Hetalia)

Hetalia asserts in this quote that she has bought anime texts such as manga and anime DVDs in different specialty stores in Calgary. There is no description of these stores, nor any indication that these acquisitions were in some way a "critique of conventional forms of consumer culture" (Jenkins, 2013: 283). In fact, her narrative about the purchase of an anime figurine has nothing to do with textual poaching or other forms of fan production. Rather, it is an account of consumption where the economic value of the *Togainu no Chi* figure is stressed. Hetalia indicates that she became "super excited" when she saw this figurine because it was being sold for fifteen dollars instead of its anticipated price of two hundred dollars. The acquisition of the *Togainu no Chi* figure becomes in this light an economic exchange, detached of any connection with fan productivity or any local or trans-local taste culture in as much as this commodity has been transformed, in Hetalia's account, into an "economic object" which exists in the nexus "between pure desire and immediate enjoyment" (Appadurai, 1986: 3).

Despite the fact that Hetalia's narrative stresses the economic nature of the *Togainu no Chi* figurine, its social qualities are still visible in her account. Offering an explanation regarding the difference between the anticipated price of the anime figure, two hundred dollars, and the price that the shop in San Diego had assigned to it, around fifteen dollars, this fan argues that the merchants simply "didn't know" the proper economic value of this commodity. It is in this sense that the "regiment of value" that Hetalia uses to assess the figurine is not the same one employed by the vendors. Even within what appears to be an economic exchange commonplace in capitalist societies, there exists an interplay between two social worlds, that of the buyer and that of the seller. It is from this perspective that for anime fans, as is the case with consumers in mundane society, "consumption is eminently social, relational and active rather than private, atomic, or passive" (Appadurai, 1986: 31).

While the anime specialty store is a place where texts, figurines and other objects related to Japanese animation function as commodities to be acquired through economic exchange, it is

also a milieu where fans' and merchants' worlds come together to create a "refined economy of taste" (McRobbie, 1994: 140). This economy of taste requires the active participation of buyer and seller in as much as both of them must mobilize their knowledge regarding the products being sold in order to obtain the best result in terms of economic value. In the case of anime retail shops, this knowledge constitutes a special type of subcultural capital centered on merchandise related to Japanese animation. Even though on occasions the consumer can have a superior amount of this type of subcultural capital than the vendor, as illustrated by the narrative of Hetalia, more often than not, anime retail stores are owned and managed by subcultural entrepreneurs that possess significant amounts of knowledge regarding the products that they sell:

Eeeh... Bueno, principalmente, se le... ora [sic] sí como que se les pide la opinión y comoooo yo no soy tan... esteee, conocedor de... este, o no conozco muchas series de anime, ora [sic] sí como que fue de... ya sea que leeee pida ayuda a mi novia, a mi jefa. Ya que me digan... no ps [sic], cuál le puedo recomendar, este... busca este estilo de trama, busca este estilo de.... Este, personajes, más o menos algo así. Entonces ya, así como que ya vaaaa... ya voy así como que aprendiendo y voy... ubicándome más. (Kaneki)

Eeeh, well, you ask for their opinion and because I am not so knowledgeable about, I do not know many anime series, well, it is like, either I ask for help from my girlfriend or from my boss. And they tell me which one I can recommend to them, like, is searching for this style of plot, is searching for this style of characters, something like that. And then, it is like that how I keep learning and keep settling myself more and more. (Kaneki)

Discussing the way in which he recommends anime shows to his friends, Kaneki indicates that he does not know many Japanese animation series and as a result, he generally asks the assistance of his girlfriend and his boss. Given that the three of them work in a small anime retail store, this situation illustrates the fact that anime merchants often possess a significant amount of subcultural capital. This capital is not limited to anime products but, as the words of Kaneki reveal, can also include knowledge about the many texts and characters that populate Japanese animation fandom. From this perspective, it can be argued that vendors are at the forefront of narrative and character consumption when it comes to anime. They are the links that connect "the universe of

possibles which each of the fields of production offers” (Bourdieu, 2010: 227) and the different cultural hierarchies of taste contained within Japanese animation fandom.

Understanding anime merchants as interested only in economic gain is an analytical mistake akin to seeing in fans passive consumers of commodities. Just as consumption is an active practice that requires the mobilization of subcultural capital, vendors’ choices regarding the products that they acquire and decide to display are also informed by this type of capital. Anime retail stores are almost invariably owned and managed by anime enthusiasts that have become entrepreneurs. Kaneki’s boss, for example, was not just the manager of the small store in which he worked but also the owner. A full-fledged member of anime fandom, she was both an anime merchant and a talented cosplayer. Morrigan who, as discussed in chapter four was a Mexican female of twenty-six years that studied in the department of languages of the public university of her city and was both a co-worker and the girlfriend of Kaneki, addresses in the following quote this dual role performed by her boss:

Ahora sí, el empeño que se le pone. Es-te... por ejemplo, mi jefa, le ha puesto tanto empeño a sus cosplays que me da mmm... mmm... la veo así como que muyyy... enamorada de su trabajo porque, realmente, sí se ve el empeño que le ha puesto a sus cosplays. Sus disfraces son muy bonitos y le quedan muy bien. Incluso hasta una... unaaaa... actriz deeee... cosplay, también, ha venido aquí y le elogió su traje. (Morrigan)

Well now, the effort that is put into it. I mean, for example, my boss, she has put a lot of effort to her cosplays, and I feel, I see her like very much in love with her work because really, you can see the effort put in her cosplays. Her costumes are very beautiful and very well-made. Even an actress of cosplay, too, has come here and she praised her costume. (Morrigan)

Morrigan discusses in this quote her admiration for her boss in terms of her commitment to cosplaying. According to Morrigan, her boss’s ability is such that even an “actress of cosplay” that “has come here” praised her craft. The emphasis in the fact that this actress attended either the store itself or the second floor of the mall where this and other anime retail shops are located, underlines the importance of “subcultural entrepreneurs” (McRobbie, 1994) for anime fandom as



a whole. Fans that have become merchants such as the owner of the specialized retail store in which Morrigan and Kaneki worked, are largely responsible for connecting the field of production of anime goods with fan consumers of Japanese animation. They offer to fans not only commodities but also belongings through which the latter could create an identity and a life-style. Even further, because often they are producers themselves, merchants attract to their shops other fan producers such as the “actress of cosplay” referenced by Morrigan.

As Angela McRobbie (1994) explains, subcultural entrepreneurs are crucial to understanding how a subcultural movement is produced. In the case of Japanese animation fandom, merchants and other entrepreneurs finance certain subcultural happenings and activities, offer jobs to anime enthusiasts, and provide the material and symbolic elements through which fans construct their identities and life-styles. Morrigan and Kaneki’s boss, for example, contributes to the practice of cosplay at the same time as she gives employment to younger fans that are still learning the cultural hierarchies of taste that constitute anime fandom. In both roles, she can be seen as a subcultural expert that has decided to invest heavily in Japanese animation and its related practices, discourses and objects. By selling anime merchandise, this entrepreneur can remain indefinitely in what Jenkins (2013) terms fans’ “weekend-only world”, despite the fact that he claims that this world is a transient space of play:

Nobody can live permanently within this utopia, which becomes recognizable as such only against the backdrop of mundane life; fans must come and go from fandom, finding this “weekend-only world” where they can, enjoying it for as long as possible, before being forced to return to the workaday world. Within the few short hours spent each month interacting with other fans, they find something more than the superficial relationships and shoddy values of consumer culture (Jenkins, 2013:282-283).

Henry Jenkins’s “romanticisation of powerless fan ‘poaching’” (Hills, 2002: 40) can be clearly appreciated in this quote. For Jenkins, fandom is a temporary space where fans escape an unsatisfying mundane life and the rigors of the workaday world. In such space, they create relationships and values that are superior to those that can be found in consumer culture. There is no place in this interpretation of fandom for entrepreneurs that have made of their “weekend-only world”, a workaday world grounded in consumer culture. While the transformation of fandom into

an online knowledge community took away any validity that the notion of “weekend-only world” may have had, I would argue that the lack of attention paid to the entrepreneurial element of fandom by Jenkins already had missed the fact that many fans spend a large amount of their time inside fandom, involved in “the network of small-scale entrepreneurial activities” (McRobbie, 1994: 144) that have shaped this field of consumption in important ways.

### **Anime Conventions as Spaces of Consumption**

This network of entrepreneurial activities becomes especially clear while walking in an anime convention. Buying and selling merchandise is one of the defining traits of this local happening. Within Japanese animation conventions, fans can acquire a vast number of commodities that far supersede the ones that they can obtain in any given anime retail shop. This does not mean that the convention functions as a gigantic supermarket or a department store where fan consumers can acquire anime commodities through a self-service “marked by an individual, touristic compulsion to explore, rather than an obligation rooted in interpersonal contact” (Straw, 1997: 39). On the contrary, Japanese animation conventions work in a manner similar to street markets. They are constituted by a variety of stalls that sell not only new merchandise but also second-hand commodities, and objects handcrafted by the vendors themselves. In these stalls, buyers and sellers establish interpersonal contact that is not limited to an economic exchange of money and goods:

In one of the stalls decorated with yellow cloth, military style jackets from *Attack on Titan* were being displayed in the company of the green cloaks that are used by the scout division in this Japanese animation show. Also on display there were a variety of skirts, ears of furry animals made of fabric and headbands, and necklaces. On a plastic box located on the floor, a number of garments were also being sold. All these products appeared to be handmade. A young woman dressed as Yoko from the anime *Tengen Toppa Gurren Lagann* approached this store, she was wearing black shorts, a bikini bra with red flames and a red wig. A young man was with her. He had his face painted black and wore a white robe and a huge yellow hat that was shaped as a mushroom. “Oh my Gosh” said the young woman while crouching to see a small wooden chest that was located in the left side of the booth. After looking at the chest for a moment, she got up and began to look at other products in the store. After this, she talked with the three female vendors that were sitting at the back of the stall, on the

other side of a table where they had placed many products. These female vendors were also wearing cosplays. One of them wore a military jacket from *Attack on Titan* and a pink wig. Another had a purple wing. The third one had put on her head a headband with two black horns that seemed to be those of a deer. She also wore glasses. The young woman began to laugh while she talked with the vendors and after this conversation, she left in the company of the male cosplayer without buying anything. The three female vendors remained there, talking among themselves while people walked nearby the booth. (Fieldnote XVI)

This excerpt from fieldnote XVI illustrates the social interactions that take place between anime vendors and fans attending a Japanese animation convention. The social and relational aspects of the selling and consumption of anime merchandise come into play at the point where the young woman dressed as Yoko approaches the booth. Her words, “Oh my Gosh”, are not only directed to her male friend but also towards the three female vendors that manage the stall. “Oh my Gosh” is as much an expression of excitement for finding the wooden box as it is a compliment toward the craftsmanship used to create this chest. The conversation they have next is not simply about making a purchase as revealed by the laughter of the female fan and the fact that she leaves without buying something. The wooden chest and the other handmade products, paired with their mutual belonging to anime fandom, have opened the door for a personal interaction between the potential buyer and the female sellers.

Discussing the record shop, Will Straw (1997) addresses the modern approach to commerce as articulated through the departmental store. For him, consumers’ relationship to commodities was radically altered when they no longer encountered the vendor when entering the store. They became free to wander, with no obligation to buy something. According to him, this move towards self-service “has appeared to empower customers by making them, rather than the salespeople, the bearer of knowledges about goods on offer” (Straw, 1997: 42). While useful to understand certain aspects of modern commerce, this account ignores the fact that the rise of departmental stores also brought with it a new impersonality associated with the acts of buying and selling. From an interpersonal relationship that brought together the worlds of customers and merchants, commerce was reduced to an economic exchange that took place on “an institutional field of mass consumption” (Zukin and Smith Maguire, 2004: 176).

The anime convention offers, to both vendors and buyers of Japanese animation, the possibility of escaping the impersonality characteristic of modern commerce. As illustrated above, this space of belonging not only facilitates the interaction of customers and merchants, but also encourages personal exchanges between them. The amiable conversation among the three female shopkeepers and the young woman dressed as Yoko, as well as the laughter of the latter, reveal a commercial environment that clearly differs from the self-service store as represented by the department store and the supermarket. Conventions also stand in contrast to boutiques, understood as “narrowly specialized and niche-targeted retail outlets whose inventories are regularly remade in response to rapidly shifting tastes” (Straw, 1997: 40). While tempting to see in anime conventions simply a place where boutiques specialized in Japanese animation can sell their products, the fact is that the vendors’ section of these events resembles much more a street market as conceptualized by Angela McRobbie:

The street market functioned, therefore, as a daytime social meeting place as much as a place for transactions of money and goods. It lacked the impersonality of the department stores and thrived instead on the values of familiarity, community and personal exchange. This remains the case today. [...] There is now more of these stalls carrying a wider range of goods than before in most of the market places in the urban centres. There has also been a diversification into the world of new technology, with stalls offering cut-price digital alarms, watches, personal hi-fis, videotapes, cassettes, “ghetto-blasters” and cameras. The hidden economy of work is also supplemented here by the provision of goods obtained illegally and sold rapidly at rock-bottom prices. (McRobbie, 1994: 141).

Often absent from discussions about consumer culture<sup>34</sup>, the informal commercial environment of the street market brings together contemporary consumer culture and traditional modes of exchange. As discussed by McRobbie in the quote above, these traditional modes of exchange include the values of familiarity, community and personal exchange. In the street market, consumers become part of a communal space where they can develop interpersonal relationships with merchants and other customers. The personal nature of these relationships strongly contrasts with the impersonality that characterizes economic exchanges in department stores, supermarkets and even boutiques. The street market is not just a place for buying a wide range of goods but also

for meeting other people, a gathering of vendors, shoppers and wanderers that exists at the point where consumerism meets a hidden economy of work. As McRobbie asserts above, this liminal commercial space is full of commodities that in some cases have been acquired illegally, a fact that contributes to the low prices that characterize this form of commercial environment.

While not identical in every respect to a street market, anime conventions share many of its characteristics. Anime cons also celebrate pre-modern modes of exchange and their associated values of familiarity, community and personal exchange. The female fan dressed as Yoko and the female merchants interact with each other with a closeness that is only possible because all of them belong to the same local taste culture associated with Japanese animation fandom. Their interaction is personal enough to make the young woman dressed as Yoko laugh in an enthusiastic manner. However, mirroring again the mode of exchange characteristic to the street market, this personal interaction does not create in her an obligation to buy the wooden chest or any other object on display at the stall. After talking with the three female shopkeepers, this fan and her male companion simply leave to keep exploring the vendors' hall. As Angela McRobbie explains, this way of shopping is one of the essential elements of the street market:

By midday on Fridays and at weekends the atmosphere is festive. Markets like these retain something of the pre-industrial gathering. For the crowd of shoppers and strollers the tempo symbolizes time rescued from that set aside for labour, and the market seems to celebrate its own pleasures. Differences of age, sex, class and ethnic background take on a positive quality of social diversity. The mode of buying is leisurely and unharassed, in sharp contrast to the Friday afternoon tensions around the checkout till in the supermarket. [...] In this context shopping is like being on holiday. The whole point is to amble and look, to pick up goods and examine them before putting them back (McRobbie, 1994: 142-143).

The parallel between this account of street markets by McRobbie and my ethnographic observations in anime conventions is striking. The atmosphere of these fan gatherings is festive and pleasurable. Japanese animation fans wander around the vendors' hall with leisure and curiosity, stopping at stalls that catch their attention to examine the merchandise on display. Often, they pick up these commodities in order to look at them better. While they examine the goods in a booth, fans sometimes talk with the vendors, as illustrated by the excerpt of fieldnote XVI above.

While not always as outgoing as the young woman dressed as Yoko, in general, anime fans appear to respect merchants and their opinions. These shopkeepers are also part of the festive gathering. They offer to potential customers the possibility of buying without pressure, in a commercial environment markedly distinct from that of the supermarket and its tensions.

### **Anime Conventions and Illegal Consumption**

As McRobbie explains in the quote above, in this festive and unharassed context, the act of shopping becomes a holiday. From this perspective, anime conventions are not weekend-only worlds where fans can escape consumer culture (Jenkins, 2013), but rather a holiday grounded in consumption and taste. Indeed, anime cons can be understood, first and foremost, as celebrations of the belongings and material culture associated with Japanese animation narratives and characters. In them, fans can acquire an impressive variety of objects that belong to different moments of the cycle of consumption. Official merchandise coexists with crafts created by fans themselves, old toys and used games are sold next to new commodities. The illegal aspect of the street market is also present in some of the goods in display, a situation especially clear in Mexican conventions:



**Figure 1.** A booth in a Mexican anime convention that sold bootlegged Japanese animation series. Photograph by the author.

The photograph above, taken during my ethnographic research in Mexico, depicts a booth that sold exclusively bootleg anime series for the low price of 40 pesos (around \$3 CAD) per three discs. Booths like this one were a common occurrence in anime conventions that took place outside Mexico City. In the convention where this photograph was taken, another two stalls also sold bootlegged Japanese animation. Even in the capital of the country, where the organizers of cons tried to avoid this prevalence of bootlegged media texts, fans could still get them through the

myriad of peddlers that had set up shop around the convention centers that hosted these events. On the streets, the price of bootlegged anime was even lower than inside provincial conventions as the one illustrated in figure one, a fact that is not surprising given the enormous hidden economy of work that characterizes Mexico City.

While the amount of illegal goods present in Mexican anime conventions may be unique to Mexico, given the centrality that the hidden economy of work has for the subsistence of many of its citizens, the truth is that Canadian anime conventions also have illegal aspects. As is the case in Mexico, these illegal elements take the form of violations of copyright. In Canada, however, the unauthorized use of copyrighted material takes subtler forms than in Mexican conventions where bootlegged media texts and merchandise are available in an overt manner: it is presented as art and self-expression. This connection between creativity and copyright infringement is especially clear in one space that is characteristic of Canadian anime conventions, the Artist Alley:

After waiting in a long line, I finally entered in the Artist Alley. I noticed that this was a space where fans displayed and sold their fanart. There were many styles represented in this art. In one of the booths located in this place, there were paintings that used watercolors; in another, I saw big posters that featured popular characters from One Piece, Free and Attack on Titan. In another of the stalls, in which a man of around forty years was seated, there were cartoon drawings of characters from Adventure Time, A Nightmare before Christmas and My Little Pony. In the booth next to this one, there were drawings of a minimalist and simple style. There were illustrations of Free and Avatar: The Legend of Korra, among others. Besides paintings, the Artist Alley featured also a variety of crafts such as rings that represented pokeballs, necklaces, glasses, pins, stained glass, embossed bronze and little bottles that had inside Japanese animation characters painted in small papers. All these crafts were decorated with symbols and characters from anime and other fandoms. (Fieldnote XIII)

As can be appreciated here, the unauthorized use of copyrighted material is allowed within Canadian conventions as long as it is constructed as a creative form of self-expression. Contrary to the overt commerce of illegal goods that takes place inside and around Mexican anime conventions, the Artist Alley functions as a buffer that mutes the illegal appropriation of copyright materials by presenting it as artistic creation. The merchant that profits on the property of others

becomes in this way the artist that makes a living by creating derivative work. The key to this transformation is the process of cultural appropriation enacted by fans that Jenkins (2013) conceptualizes as textual poaching. However, I would argue that in this case the symbolic interpretation and appropriation of media texts is also “commodity poaching”. By calling their poaching fanart, Canadian fans not only gain access to alternative textual interpretations but to the field of production and its associated economic benefits.

Ian Condry connects this illegal access to the field of production of anime goods with what he terms “dark energy”. For him, piracy and other unauthorized uses of copyrighted material are the result of “the energy that drives the circulation of media and the devotion of fans” (Condry, 2010: 193). He calls this energy “dark” because it operates in part “through the darknet of peer-to-peer file sharing networks” (Condry, 2010: 195). While this author centers his discussion on fansubs and their free sharing of Japanese animation, it is clear that merchants and fan artists are also part of the dark circulation of content and goods that fulfills the desire of fans for appropriating objects related to their favorite narratives and characters.

The devotion that fans feel for certain narratives and characters leads on occasions to illegal forms of production and consumption. Paired with the other elements discussed in this section, this fact reveals that commerce works in a subcultural fashion within anime fandom. Merchants are subcultural experts that not only distribute but also produce content and goods that are offered to fan customers through exchanges inspired in the street market. While the self-serving consumer exists, particularly when it comes to fans that buy anime products on the internet, most commerce within this fandom has a social nature. Fan consumers are not just consuming subjects, that is, “autonomous individual subjects exercising choice in a world of goods” (du Gay in Straw, 1997: 42), they are members of a field of consumption that find in commodities and texts a collective identity that offers the possibility of affiliation and community. The final section of this chapter will address this relationship between consumption and fan identity.

### **The Consumption of Communal Identities**

As has been discussed before, identity is not something that individuals have but instead a practical achievement. However, identity work often relies on material objects and cultural goods. Belongings are central elements of the construction and performance of identities (Fortier, 1999). These cultural possessions represent the sedimentation of identifications and symbolic boundaries



that, in a way, materialize identity into things. In the case of Japanese animation fans, this means that the commodities they acquire in anime stores, conventions, the internet or as gifts from friends, become physical manifestations of their fan identity and of the position they occupy within anime fandom. From this perspective, the possessions of anime fans are indicative of their commitment to the distinctive life-style<sup>35</sup> of certain local and trans-local taste cultures associated with Japanese animation.

This connection between commodities and commitment to certain positions within anime fandom becomes clear when engaging fans in conversation regarding their consumption practices. My interviewees, for example, expressed a varied array of interest in anime merchandise that often paralleled their immersion in certain taste cultures, notably those related to cosplay. This was especially the case for younger fans, for whom appropriating anime goods was almost ritualistic in its intensity. For them, buying commodities at anime conventions and other places was an enactment of their strong emotional attachment to Japanese animation. The words of Karui, the Canadian black female that was working while waiting to begin university discussed in chapter five, illustrate how this love of anime becomes passionate consumption:

I think Otafest was the first time when I bought anime merchandise and I just I recently had my first job and I had a lot of money and I spent all of it, kept withdrawing and withdrawing and I spent \$300 and now and then I started ordering online and getting posters and now my room is just covered in posters and I have a lot of random objects and sometimes I would be wearing clothes and I don't even realize that it has like an anime thing on it because it is so common to me even now I am wearing a Naruto belt like under, you can't see it, I wear it a lot [...] I have gadgets, watches, apparel like t shirts, hoodies and lots of stuffed animals and maybe some sort of jewelry and maybe some cosplay things. Like if I cosplay one character and I really like one part of their outfit then I would keep it and maybe I would wear it casually [...] I buy them, just whenever I see, mostly online nowadays but there is a store in Chinatown, Dragon City Mall, there are multiple stores and I go there regularly.

Karui discusses the many anime goods that she has acquired over time. Although this fan asserts that Otafest was the first time that she bought anime merchandise, her consumption of these commodities takes place nowadays mainly online and in Japanese animation retail stores that she

visits regularly. Of note in her consumption of anime objects is the fact that Karui has integrated them into her everyday life. As she says, they have become so natural to her that she wears them even without realizing that they are “anime things”. No longer commodities, these objects have become “singularized by being pulled out of their usual commodity sphere” (Kopytoff, 1986: 74). They have been turned into means to produce the fan identity of Karui and as such, these anime products represent the physical boundaries of her life-style as a Japanese animation fan.

As a given class of classifying objects that indicate a certain taste and life-style, Japanese animation merchandise is an essential element of the fan identity of Karui and others. Through commodities that become unique objects, Japanese animation enthusiasts construct strong identifications and symbolic boundaries. Their belongings give them the possibility of being closer to their favorites characters and narratives in a way that parallels practices associated with textual poaching such as cosplay. In the excerpt above, for instance, Karui discusses her consumption practices both in terms of anime merchandise and “cosplay things”. In doing this, she reveals the close connections that exist between production and consumption within anime fandom. These connections are especially clear in the practice of collecting, as illustrated by the following excerpt from my fieldnotes:

I entered the anime panel<sup>36</sup> called “Nyaa Figurines: Collection 101”. The panelist was a young woman in her mid-twenties that wore glasses and was dressed in a casual way. Her presentation was in PowerPoint. She began by saying that her collection included more than three hundred figurines and that these collectibles were not for children despite what many people outside fandom believed. After this initial comment, she began to explain the different types of figurines that were available to collect. The first ones that she discussed were the figurines with joints. While showing images of them, the young panelist said that she preferred personally the statues as the audience could see in the figurines that she had put in a table near to her. Despite this fact, in her opinion the jointed figurines were popular and had good quality. She continued by saying that a very famous brand for this type of figurines was named Figma. Following this, the panelist addressed the chibi figurines which is an style that depicts Japanese animation characters with big heads and small bodies. The young woman looked very enthusiastic while talking about this type of figurine and she explained how many famous characters had been released in chibi version. According to her

she got very excited upon learning that a chibi figurine of Sakura from the anime *Card Captor Sakura* was going to be released, “I think I was going to die”, she asserted before continuing with her presentation. (Fieldnote XII)

This brief vignette from my fieldnotes reveals the important place that anime merchandise holds for many fans. The fascination that the female panelist feels for anime figurines is encapsulated in the words “I think I was going to die”, an expression of the intense excitement that she felt upon learning about the release of a figurine based on one of her beloved characters. Far away from creativity and textual poaching, this excitement emerges from the powerful emotional attachment that this fan has for the character of Sakura. Despite being rooted in affect, her consumption of Japanese animation figurines is also informed by subcultural capital. Not all figurines of her favorite characters are bought by this female fan: she prefers statues and is familiar with the best brands and types of figurines. As a consumer, this young woman has the necessary knowledge to navigate “the various distinctions conferred by the use and possession of different commodities” (Zukin and Smith Maguire, 2004: 187). This particular type of subcultural capital allows her to select the most suitable options among the many figurines available.

The panel itself was a lesson in subcultural capital. As a collector with more than three hundred figurines, the female panelist presented herself as an expert eager to teach other fans about the collection of figurines. Besides discussing the different types of these collectables, she also addressed topics such as prices, sizes, ways of preserving them, places to acquire them, how to budget the consumption of figurines and how to avoid bootlegs. Organized as a lecture with questions from the audience at the end, the presentation underlined the active nature of collecting and consuming anime merchandise. The many practices required to construct and preserve a figurine collection were as complex as the activities required to make a costume or draw fanart. Indeed, the investments in terms of time, money and knowledge that fan consumption practices require are often more intensive than the ones allocated to fan production. This appears to be the case even with fans that do not see themselves as collectors such as Karui. Her investment in anime merchandise, as illustrated in the excerpt of her interview above, is also very intensive, a fact that paralleled the experiences of many other of my interviewees:

Pues mangas, libros de arte de Yaoi [sic] jaja. Principalmente libros de arte Yaoi. Este, figuritas —que me he comprado, que me han regalado, también—, peluches, almohadas... este, collares, joyería, [...] lo que últimamente he estado comprando más: figuritas, porque ya me... ya me obsesioné con ellas. [...] De hecho —entrando— hay uuuun... me hizo mi papá uuun exhibidor en forma como de escalón, y ahí tengo todos mis muñecos. Y todos mis peluches de anime, entonces, es lo primero que entras, ya, das vuelta y está la ventana cubierta de posters, entonces, pues, todavía más. [...] Tengooo, principalmente, deeee personajes masculinos que jejeje me gustan mucho que es Makoto, este Sebastian de *Kuroshitsuji*. Estéee, el único personaje femenino que tengo, creo, es esta... Sakura y Miku. (Lizzy).

Well mangas, Yaoi artbooks haha, Mainly Yaoi artbooks. Figurines that I have bought, that have been gifted to me too, plushies, pillows, necklaces, jewelry, [...] what I have been buying more lately: figurines, because I have, I have become obsessed with them [...] In fact -entering [her room]- there is an, my dad made a display rack in the shape of a step and there I have all my figures. And all my anime plushies, then, it is the first thing when you enter, you turn and there is the window cover in posters, then, even more [anime merchandise]. [...] I have mainly of male characters that hehe I like a lot like Makoto, Sebastian of *Kuroshitsuji*. The only female character I have, I think, is Sakura and Miku. (Lizzy)

As can be seen from my interview with Lizzy, the Mexican female fan introduced in chapter five that worked in an administrative job and wrote fan fiction, the acquisition of anime merchandise is an intensive practice, deeply rooted in the emotional attachment that fans feel for characters and narratives. Of note in this regard, is the use by Lizzy of the word “obsessed” to describe her consumption of figurines. Driven by passion and even desire, as suggested by the fact that this fan mainly owns posters of male characters that she fancies, Lizzy embraces her consumption of anime merchandise in an unapologetic way. She is obsessed with figurines and this fact is not something to be ashamed of. Her affection regarding Japanese animation commodities is instead, a sign of her involvement with anime fandom.

Lizzy’s deep connection with anime merchandise is further evidenced by the fact that her room is completely decorated with Japanese animation goods. They occupy central locations in

this private place: the anime pillows in her bed, the Yaoi artbooks in the bookshelf, the figurines in the rack, the posters near the window, construct a personal space of belonging that resonates and materializes her identity as an anime and yaoi fan. From this perspective, the private display of character and narrative consumption located in her room works as a performance of affect directed towards herself that reinforces the identifications, symbolic boundaries and attachments that link Lizzy with other fans and make her a member of certain local and trans-local taste cultures articulated around Japanese animation, most notably the yaoi community.

This materialization of identifications, symbolic boundaries and attachments, brought forward by anime merchandise, connects fans so strongly with Japanese animation fandom and with its associated taste cultures that individuals that wish to move from one fan position to another or even abandon fandom entirely, need to perform a change in their material possessions. From this perspective, while fans that constantly try to avoid the mainstream such as Kaneki must always upgrade the anime merchandise they own, those that are tired of Japanese animation and its associated fandom have to relinquish their anime goods in order to successfully move on and gain a new identity position:

I don't buy it [anime merchandise] anymore, I used to collect figurines, action figures and I would keep them in the box. [...] I actually still have a few in my room, the ones that I haven't gotten rid of, they're still there. [...] I bought posters before, I don't have any anymore, I don't like having stuff on my walls. [...] It was pretty gradual, I had a few years where I would watch anime all the time, that would be how I passed the time but then I will slowly realize "this isn't fun, I'm not interested in these shows", so once in a while I would try to find a show that I liked, and I would be like "not this one either". (Daenerys)

This excerpt from my interview with Daenerys, the cosplayer and staff of Otafest introduced in chapter five that no longer was interested in Japanese animation and had joined the *Game of Thrones* fandom, illustrates a very different approach to anime merchandise than the one from the other fans discussed in this section. Daenerys no longer buys merchandise of any type, in fact she has been gradually getting rid of it. This fact coincides with her loss of interest regarding Japanese animation. As she asserts, after a certain point this media text was no longer fun for her. Her loss of interest in narratives and characters thus led to a loss of interest in consumption of

anime goods. The classifying objects that she owned became, again, commodities. They no longer represented her taste and as a result, they were disposed of in order to give way to new identifications, symbolic boundaries and attachments, in this case related to *Game of Thrones*.

Kopytoff (1986) explains that commodities can move in and out of the “sphere of personally singularized things” (80). Once they enter this sphere of sacred singularity, they become protected from further commoditization. This is especially the case when the singularization of commodities is made not by isolated individuals but by groups: “[b]ecause it is done by groups, it bears the stamp of collective approval, channels the individual drive for singularization, and takes on the weight of cultural sacredness” (Kopytoff, 1986: 81). I would argue that this collective approval of certain objects and the cultural sacredness it produces, is at the center of the cultural hierarchies of taste that guide consumption among Japanese animation fans. As a classification system, taste is integrated by singularized, sacred objects that organize identifications, symbolic boundaries and emotional attachments into an identity position.

However, as the case of Daenerys indicates, taste, at least among members of Japanese animation fandom, is always in flux. Not only it can include new objects and exclude old ones; it can also be left behind in its entirety. From this perspective, taste appears to be much less structured than proposed by Bourdieu (1984). Collective approval and individual desires affect the sacred singularity of the classifying objects in complex ways. At the extreme, there is always the possibility that the sacred, singular nature of these objects may be lost. They become in this case commodities once again, sold or given away by the same individuals that used to treasure these items as central elements of their identity.

## **Conclusion**

I have discussed in this chapter the fact that anime fans take part in processes of consumption and commodification. Contrary to Jenkins’ (2013) depiction of fans as opposed to consumer culture, I have proposed that they focus much of their fan activities around the appropriation of material products within this consumer culture. Either as commodities or singularized objects, it is clear that anime merchandise plays a significant role in the life of Japanese animation fans. As is the case with other sectors of contemporary society (Zukin and Smith Maguire, 2004), Japanese animation fans employ consumption to produce their identity and express collective identifications, symbolic boundaries and attachments that make them members of the sub-

fandoms, taste cultures and scenes that constitute Japanese animation fandom. From this perspective, they are participants in consumer society. They buy, sell, and, through practices of narrative and character consumption, create not a critique of consumer culture but new flows of consumption and production that connect the profane and the sacred, community and market, mainstream and underground.

The field of consumption that has emerged in this way is a complex practical and discursive space that cannot be reduced to an interpretive community or a bounded subculture. It is a site of struggle where texts, characters, knowledges, local happenings and commodities are used by fans to define identity positions through which they gain distinction and construct their place in the world. This field of consumption constantly diversifies as a result of (1) transformations in the distinctive power that certain belongings and practices yield to fans, and (2) entrepreneurial activities undertaken by anime merchants and other subcultural entrepreneurs. Both of these causes of diversification within anime fandom have been overlooked by most research centered on fans, despite the fact that the two of them greatly influence the cultural hierarchies of taste that constitute Japanese animation fandom at any given point in time.

As illustrated in this chapter, transformations in the distinctive power of certain belongings and practices can account for nomadic behaviours among fans. Instead of a focus on production and textual poaching, I argue that these behaviours must be understood in terms of consumption. Anime fans jump from one text to another in order to gain a profit in distinction that is constantly lost once certain belongings and practices become mainstream. Appropriating novel texts, characters, objects, practices or knowledges thus allows fans to maintain and increase their distinction and subcultural status. Anime merchants facilitate this nomadic consumption as they continually provide fans with new objects to appropriate. These vendors are at the center of Japanese animation fandom because they offer fans a wide array of commodities to be used to create fan identities. The diversification of goods that they facilitate is not motivated exclusively by economic interest. Anime merchants are also committed fans that often participate in the practices characteristic of anime fandom. As subcultural experts, these entrepreneurs finance certain subcultural happenings and activities, offer jobs to anime enthusiasts, and provide the material and symbolic elements through which fans construct identities and life-styles.

The construction of identity positions and life-styles through commodities acquired from merchants constitutes an essential element of contemporary consumer culture. In this sense, it is

problematic to depict media fans as somehow resistive to consumption and commodification. Fans are consumers of texts and material objects. The difference between them and participants in other fields of consumption is a question of distinction and specialization, not of resistance to consumer culture. As a given class of classifying objects that indicate a certain taste and life-style, Japanese animation texts and merchandise are the core elements of fan identities constructed by anime enthusiasts. Through commodities transformed into unique objects, Japanese animation fans construct strong identifications and symbolic boundaries. Their belongings give them the possibility of being closer to their favorite characters and narratives to the point that they can even incarnate these characters through practices that combine production and consumption such as cosplay. The materialization of identity into things represents, in this way, the final proof of one's commitment to Japanese animation fandom and its associated taste culture(s).

## Notes

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<sup>34</sup> Will Straw (1997), for example, limits his discussion about consumption spaces to Fordist models of commerce such as the department store and post-Fordist models of commerce like the boutique. For this author, there is a symmetrical opposition between these two models. Excluded from this dialectic of consumption is the street market and other alternative forms of commercial exchange. In a similar vein, in an otherwise complete discussion of consumers and consumption, Zukin and Smith Maguire (2004) ignore the existence of informal forms of commerce in favor of a discussion articulated exclusively around mass consumption.

<sup>35</sup> According to Bourdieu, the notion of life-style corresponds to “a unitary set of distinctive preferences which express the same expressive intention in the specific logic of each of the symbolic sub-spaces, furniture, clothing, language or body hexis (Bourdieu, 1984: 169).

<sup>36</sup> Every presentation in Canadian anime conventions was called a “panel”, even when they included only one presenter.



## Chapter 8: Conclusions

The previous chapters have advanced a picture of anime fans as media consumers that are connected to each other by practices of appropriation of a particular class of texts and objects, that is, Japanese animation and its related cultural products. These practices have generated, in turn, a sense of belonging among some of these media consumers which, articulated around narratives, characters, knowledges, spaces and objects, has resulted in the emergence of taste cultures. From this perspective, fandom is not an interpretive community that encourages viewer activism but a field of consumption where fans transmute “things into distinct and distinctive signs” (Bourdieu, 1984: 170) that are an expression of their particular life-style. Being a fan is thus not a matter of poaching and resignifying media texts but of enacting a specific taste, understood as “the propensity and capacity to appropriate (materially or symbolically) a given class of classified, classifying objects or practices” (Bourdieu, 1984: 169).

The emphasis placed upon this definition of taste throughout this work has the objective of opening new avenues of study regarding media fandom. While the construction of the analytical category of fans within cultural studies is closely related to the concept of the resistive subculture as developed by the CCCS, Bourdieu’s conceptualization of taste as the propensity to appropriate of a set of classified objects and practices that in turn classify those that appropriate them leads to an understanding of fans that centers around consumption. Instead of seeing fans as textual poachers, a position reminiscent of the semiotic guerrilla warfare that the CCCS saw in working-class youth cultures, this dissertation has argued that media fans are first and foremost consumers.

This somewhat broad definition of fan has the objective of escaping any simple association of media enthusiasts with a bounded and homogenous subculture. As my research on anime fandom has showed, while every fan appears to partake in narrative and character consumption, not all of them are part of fan communities or engage in textual poaching. Indeed, there are many ways of being an anime fan and it is not production but consumption that connects Japanese animation aficionados: all of them find value and enjoy watching this type of media text. Anime fandom has emerged from this shared taste; it is a space of positions articulated by cultural hierarchies of taste that have Japanese animation at its center. Its complexity cannot be reduced to a community of faith or of textual nomads as it includes an ever-increasing array of material and symbolic classificatory schemes.

### **Japanese Animation and its Taste Culture(s)**

Understanding fans as consumers that occupy different positions within the field of consumption articulated around Japanese animation, however, does not mean that anime fandom is devoid of forms of community life. There are too many shared practices and discourses present among Mexican and Canadian anime fans, too many of the same characters and narratives consumed regardless of location or country. In other words, there is a communal culture at play within Japanese animation fandom. These are precisely the local and trans-local taste culture(s) discussed in this work. Born from a shared taste and its associated forms of consumption, these taste cultures do not include every fan nor can they be equated with anime fandom as a whole. They represent a coming together of individuals who want to share their love for narratives and characters with other, like-minded people. From this perspective, the local and trans-local taste cultures articulated around Japanese animation are constructed through emotional attachments that anime fans establish towards characters, narratives and each other.

What emerges from these emotional connections are different emotional communities where these same characters and narratives, paired with particular knowledge, that is, subcultural capital, and also certain spaces and objects, become resignified through consumption into fan identities that constitute both material and symbolic materializations of fans' passions and commitment regarding Japanese animation. While not open symbolic resistance, these emotional communities nonetheless possess divergent politics of taste that represent a transgression to dominant cultural hierarchies. As seen in chapter seven, this transgression can even become "dark energy", that is, an open defiance to copyright and the institutional field of mass consumption. In this sense, the taste cultures articulated around Japanese animation are not simply spaces of play where fans can accumulate subcultural capital, but communities that have moved consumption away from the impersonality that characterizes most economic exchanges within contemporary consumer culture.

The fact that both consumers and vendors of Japanese animation are fans attests to this situation. They share the proclivity to appropriate anime texts and goods, display subcultural capital, and partake in practices such as cosplay. They are connected by anime and interact with each other not only as buyer and seller but as people with similar tastes. It is in this sense that, within anime taste cultures, consumption of narratives and characters constitutes the basis of

belonging. As chapter five explains, however, this belonging is not a natural, inevitable development of enjoying Japanese animation. It requires an active engagement with other fans. Without this engagement, watching anime remains an individualistic practice no different from other forms of mass consumption.

The transformation that makes a consumer of Japanese animation a member of the anime taste culture requires active engagement with other fans. By interacting with people with similar tastes that already partake in some of the practices of anime fandom, the individual fan gains subcultural knowledge and is exposed to the meanings, values and practices that characterize the local iteration of anime taste culture. As discussed in chapter five, this subcultural capital has an historical nature. It changes and evolves as a result of the complex interactions between factors such as the struggles over the definition of the practices, hierarchies and subcultural practices that constitute Japanese animation fandom; the unending pursuit of distinction that is the basis of anime taste culture(s); and the actions of the cultural producers that participate in the creation of Japanese animation and thus offer materials to be used and appropriated by fans.

The never-ending displacement of anime fandom as a space of possibles continually changes the narratives, characters, knowledge, spaces and objects that can yield a profit in distinction within this field of consumption. Because media consumers and members of anime taste cultures advance their own understandings regarding Japanese animation and its associated cultural hierarchies of taste, practices and objects that constitute elements of legitimate taste not only change from one period to another but also between different positions within anime fandom. It is in this sense that instead of presenting a bounded grouping with clearly defined practices and narratives that can be described and catalogued, the empirical chapters have painted a picture of this fandom as an ever-changing field of consumption. If voice acting and Japan were considered important elements of what can be called “Mexican anime taste” at one point in time, they no longer hold this position. For younger Mexican fans, practices associated with K-Pop, cosplay and Visual Kei have taken center stage. The confrontation between this new anime taste and the old one, as well as among communities that privilege and appropriate certain objects and practices, leads to a never-ending updating of the material and symbolic classificatory schemes that constitute Japanese animation fandom and its associated taste cultures.

This does not mean, however, that any practice or object can be included within anime taste. This belief, present in post-modern theorizations of youth and subcultural movements like

Ted Polhemus' *Supermarket of Style*, obscures the fact that despite its continuous changes in terms of practices and objects, taste cultures and other subcultural formations are still bounded by history. This is perhaps, the most important contribution that the work of Bourdieu can make to a reconceptualization of media fandom. As he argues in *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, forgetting the historicity of individual and collective practices leads only to a blind choice between individual and structure, that is, between "the creative man of subjectivism" or "a man subjugated to the dead laws of a natural history" (Bourdieu, 1977: 84).

The field of consumption articulated around Japanese animation is thus bounded by its own history, sedimented into practices of consumption articulated around characters, narratives, knowledges, spaces and objects. While it changes through the multiple symbolic struggles that take place within, it remains itself as long as it remains guided by anime taste. This is achieved through identity and boundary work. Fans enact identifications that connect them with anime narratives and characters through a variety of practices such as cosplay, fansubbing, and the creation of music videos. As long as Japanese animation fans display emotional attachment to these narratives and characters, symbolic boundaries that inscribe them within local and trans-local anime taste cultures are created and maintained. Again, these boundaries are not fixed. They continually change as a result of the narrative and character consumption enacted by fans.

As has been discussed in this work, character consumption is precisely one of the most important changes that the field of consumption articulated around Japanese animation has experienced. Anime characters have increasingly become the center of this field of consumption, to the point where fans have come to consume characters from narratives that do not originate in Japan. This emphasis on character consumption is not only related to recent changes in media consumption, but appears to be also motivated by the unending pursuit of distinction that is the basis of local and trans-local anime taste cultures. While these emotional communities remain bounded through a common history, the desire for distinction on the part of some of its members is the reason that their boundaries are becoming blurred.

This pursuit of distinction constitutes one of the central reasons why fans struggle against each other. This is the case, according to Bourdieu, for any field. The orthodoxy always confronts newcomers that want to gain distinction and accumulate symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1993). Because taste cultures and other youth formations are oriented toward the pursuit of distinction (Thornton, 1996), this confrontation always favors newcomers and their "heretical" taste. As a

result, anime taste cultures appear to be moving towards what one older fan quoted in this work called a “generic like sci-fi fantasy nerd culture” centered around Japanese but also Western media that includes the likes of Harry Potter and Doctor Who.

### **Japanese Animation Fandom: Between Resistance and Subjection**

This account of Japanese animation fandom offers a very different interpretation regarding fans than the one advanced by Jenkins (2013). No longer understood as an interpretive community, fandom has been instead theorized as a field of consumption constituted by the appropriation of Japanese animation and its related media that has been created by a changing number of media consumers. This appropriation takes the form of what I call “narrative consumption” as it centers on the consumption of texts. The introduction of a related notion, “character consumption” has the objective of underlining the centrality that characters now have within anime fandom. The interaction between these two forms of consumption has created a complex space of possibles articulated by antagonistic and collaborative positions that constitute anime sub-fandoms, each of which represents a field of consumption centered on specific characters and texts.

These complex spaces of possibles, however, are not a subcultural community. Cultural hierarchies of taste that have at their center subcultural capital, that is, knowledge and practices to be mastered, have to be established before any sub-fandom can become an emotional community. In this sense, this type of capital is the first requisite for the emergence of anime taste culture(s). Through subcultural capital, fans interact with their peers and, central to the creation of a taste culture, gain a profit of distinction by interacting with other fans. It is in this sense that to create a community, fans must be together. Without interaction between anime enthusiasts, there can be no communal knowledge, that is, subcultural capital, nor any shared set of classificatory schemes, that is, taste. It is only through the localized engagement of Japanese animation fans that a taste culture can be created and maintained. Being together (in place or online), anime fans give rise to local and trans-local taste cultures.

This knowledge is not fixed, but rather is always changing and evolving. In this, subcultural capital has historicity. It is in this sense that chapter five addresses the fact that the very nature of taste cultures as emotional communities articulated around taste and distinction contributes to the blurring of the boundaries of these subcultural groupings. As knowledge changes as a result of the struggles over the definition of anime fandom, and the constant incorporation of new fans, what

some of them consider the authenticity of their local communities, such as the centrality of Japan and anime itself, has been replaced by other legitimate objects of consumption. These objects, perhaps with no surprise given the logic of the field of consumption, have been introduced by younger fans that have no access to the cultural and economic capital required to travel to Japan or to learn about its culture and history. Instead, these younger anime enthusiasts have turned to creative practices such as cosplay that yield a profit in distinction related to characters, and to mastery over knowledges valued by local and trans-local taste cultures.

Currently, as discussed in chapter six, the accumulation of data enabled by the Internet has shifted the nature of subcultural capital. From being information, it has become a practical enactment of the accumulated capital of anime fandom and its associated taste cultures. Instead of expertise regarding information, fans now privilege mastery over it in the form of practices such as cosplay and fan art. Watching anime and knowing everything about its narratives and characters has become secondary to the craft involved in creating a costume or painting artistic renditions of popular heroes and villains. This emphasis on mastery has changed anime taste to the point where practices have become more important than Japanese animation itself for some participants in local and trans-local taste cultures. Instead of being anime fans, they have become, through identity and boundary work, cosplayers and fan artists.

This emphasis on mastery also explains the current use of spaces by anime fans. If in the past Japanese animation conventions were sites for watching anime and buying merchandise, nowadays they are places for wearing colorful costumes and taking photographs. Cons have become spaces of play and performance where anime fans can show their love for narratives and characters using their body and creativity. While there was a time, according to my older interviewees, when cosplay was an oddity performed by a few con participants, it has now become so common that some fans even use their costumes outside of the convention halls. Using wigs and foam armors, cosplayers appropriate streets and subway stations near the convention centers. They also appropriate classrooms and food courts when the con takes place on a university. They display, for outsiders and insiders, creative practices that underline their emotional attachment to certain narratives, characters and fandoms.

This appropriation of local spaces is essential to understanding not only the movement within the anime taste culture from expertise to mastery but also the construction of communal identifications and symbolic boundaries that link the members of this subcultural grouping and

create among them a strong sense of belonging. From this perspective, mastery over subcultural capital, as enacted in local spaces such as anime conventions, functions as practical performance of identifications and boundaries that creates through material and symbolic reiteration “cultural and historical belongings which mark out terrains of commonality that delineate the politics and social dynamics of ‘fitting in’” (Fortier, 1999: 42). Although these terrains of commonality are subject to redefinitions as a result of the constant struggles that take place between fans, currently they privilege creative practices that powerfully contribute to the blurring of symbolic boundaries that can be seen in many local and trans-local anime taste cultures. In these subcultural happenings, contemporary fans often deploy practices that underline their interest in narratives and characters from non-anime texts.

Chapter six delves into these creative practices, particularly cosplay, and the way in which mastery regarding them has to be performed in front of peers. It is for this reason that subcultural happenings such as anime conventions are essential for the formation and maintenance of local taste cultures. They allow fans to perform their subcultural capital in front of other fans, gaining in this way distinction and the opportunity to participate in the struggle over cultural hierarchies of taste that define Japanese animation as a whole. Because conventions are mostly attended by young fans that perform their mastery over creative practices such as cosplay in order to gain a profit in distinction, these subcultural happenings have increasingly welcomed new practices and objects of consumption, losing in this way their subcultural authenticity. As a number of excerpts quoted in this chapter illustrate, anime conventions have become a haven for many different fandoms and some of them have nothing to do with Japanese animation.

The interviews with fans that self-identified as consumers of anime and related media forms, however, reveal that this blurring of the boundaries of many local and trans-local taste cultures does not correspond with the disappearance of Japanese animation fandom as a field of consumption. These fans, as illustrated by the case of Reborn, remain deeply committed to Japanese animation and its associated taste and life-style. Indeed, the most committed among them explicitly addressed the superiority of this type of media text. As was the case with Reborn, some of these consumers of anime did not interact with other anime enthusiasts. These fans were strong defenders of an anime taste that included only Japanese animation and its associated media such as manga. In contrast, those fans that became deeply engaged in communal practices such as

cosplay and the creation of fan art often moved increasingly away from this more purist anime taste and into a broader geek culture.

This dichotomy between consumers of anime and participants in local and trans-local communities articulated originally around Japanese animation is especially useful to understand the distinction that makes Japanese animation fandom and anime taste culture, two separate analytical terms. While Japanese animation fandom designates a field of consumption guided by the propensity and capacity to appropriate anime and its associated texts, practices and objects, anime taste cultures are a translocal congregation of fans articulated by cultural hierarchies and a pursuit of distinction. From this perspective, every anime enthusiast is part of Japanese animation fandom but membership within local and trans-local taste cultures is restricted to those fans that congregate in local or virtual communities.

This analytical distinction allows scholars to move away from models that construct fandom as an interpretive community. The notion of taste culture enables us to understand this analytical distinction in a much more flexible way than the reified notion of subculture introduced by Jenkins (2013) and other media scholars. It also offers the possibility of questioning Thornton's (1996) conclusion regarding the power of communications media to create subcultures. In fact, media industries are but one participant within Japanese animation fandom, and their influence over local and trans-local anime taste cultures is limited to offering media texts and a discourse of legality that some fans adopt to oppose the dark energy characteristic to this type of subcultural formation. These fans, however, do not adopt this legalistic view because they have been coopted by the mainstream. Owning original products and texts offers them a profit in distinction among segments of the taste culture more devoted to consumption and to collecting items.

Chapter seven advances the importance of consumer practices to anime fandom and its associated taste cultures. In doing so, it rejects any simple opposition that sees either resistance or subjugation as the central axis of popular culture. In line with Hall (1982), the complexity of consumption within popular culture cannot be reduced to the simplistic dialectic as represented in one side by Jenkins (2013) and in the other by Thornton (1996); instead, fans both align with and defy consumer culture in their passionate pursuit of beloved characters and narratives. As chapter seven illustrates, consumption is as much a battle for distinction as a search for a collective identity and a community that offers the possibility of participating in values such as familiarity and personal exchange.



At the center of these quests, ignored by much work in subcultural studies, is the network of entrepreneurial activities performed by a myriad of Japanese animation merchants and other subcultural entrepreneurs. They are the subcultural experts that create and maintain the economy of taste that remains at the core of Japanese animation fandom. The spaces of consumption created by these subcultural entrepreneurs not only resemble street markets, but also possess many of the characteristics of this pre-modern form of exchange. They promote familiarity, community and personal exchange, and in doing so, have established themselves as the one constant within anime conventions and other subcultural happenings. Again, it is taste as propensity and capacity to appropriate objects and practices that structures anime fandom and its associated taste cultures.

The merchandise and crafts offered in Japanese animation conventions represent the material appropriation of characters and narratives. It is through objects, be they clothes, figurines or media texts, that anime fans maintain the cohesiveness of their emotional communities and of anime fandom as a whole. If the pursuit of distinction tends to blur the identifications and boundaries that define local and trans-local Japanese animation taste cultures, anime goods, in contrast, work in the other direction. They are belongings that represent the sedimentation of taste and history. In other words, they are things that function as a position in the field of consumption, that is, an identity. From this perspective, the possessions of anime fans also possess them, in the sense that they are classified objects that in turn classify those that have appropriated them. Owning Japanese animation goods thus is the most important element of belonging as it creates a permanent performance of identifications and boundaries directed at oneself.

While Japanese animation conventions last only a couple of days, anime objects are displayed proudly in private spaces until fans leave behind their emotional attachment to certain characters and narratives. It is in this sense that belongings represent the most visible form of the practical commitments that transform a consumer of Japanese animation into a member of the anime taste culture. Anime possessions are the most powerful version of the identifications and boundaries that inscribe fans within this taste culture. As discussed in chapter seven, anime objects materialize identity into things. Perhaps for this reason, those consumers of Japanese animation that did not participate in taste cultures were fast to distance themselves from the acquisition of any type of merchandise. On the contrary, those fans more committed to the taste culture were avid collectors of anime products. In a way, the material appropriation of cultural goods was the most important enactment of boundaries. Owning Japanese animation objects was a display of

anime taste only rivaled by cosplay, a fan practice that also centers on a cultural product: clothes. From this perspective, consumption appears again as the guiding principle of anime fandom and its associated taste culture(s).

This consumption, as has been proposed through this work, should be understood as practical appropriation of objects and practices. If objects are a material appropriation of characters and narratives, fan practices can be understood as the other side of the coin, that is, they are mainly a symbolic appropriation of the same characters and narratives. In this sense, the practices articulated around Japanese animation that have been illustrated in this dissertation can be understood as textual poaching as conceptualized by Jenkins (2013) in as much as they are a type of narrative and character consumption that is also a form of production. I would argue, however, that the word “textual” is deceiving and must be abandoned. It emphasizes a type of appropriation and creation that centers on narratives when the current centrality of characters has been one of the most important findings of my research on anime fans.

It is also important to remember that poaching as practical appropriation does not equal a struggle over meaning. Much fan art and cosplay have the objective of faithfully representing characters, not of creating new interpretations of them. Again, understanding fan practices requires paying attention to the history of anime fandom and to the struggles that take place within. Any simple equation of fan production with subversion must be avoided. The practical construction and maintenance of the anime taste culture is much more complex than fans engaging in poaching. It requires also the creation of subcultural capital, spaces and objects. Without these subcultural axes and the identifications and boundaries that they facilitate among anime enthusiasts, there can be no community of fans and certainly no shared set of classifying schemes through which individuals can construct a life-style.

The opposition between grassroots movements and coopting cultural industries proposed by the CCCS and taken up later by media scholars such as Jenkins is but a simplification of the complex interactions that take place between mass media and fans. Poaching and cooptation occur at the same time within Japanese animation fandom. Consumer culture is both celebrated and subverted through practices and spaces of play that are not concerned with material or symbolic resistance and nonetheless oppose contemporary capitalism through politics of taste that find value in practices and objects deemed irrelevant by most members of the everyday world. Through the

creation and appropriation of knowledges, spaces and objects, anime fans have given rise to a world where their love of narratives and characters is embraced and accepted.

### **Beyond Fandom-as-Community**

I have problematized in this work existing approaches to the study of fandom. Using a new approach based on the social theory of Pierre Bourdieu to modify the Bourdieusian framework developed by Sarah Thornton to analyze subcultural groupings, I have proposed that anime fandom is not a subculture or an interpretive community. Instead, it is a field of consumption, a space of possibles as complex as the field of cultural production. Emerging from a multiplicity of consumer positions, among which Japanese animation fans are just one possibility, this field is integrated by positions that taken together, create a symbolic and practical structure, always susceptible to change as a result of newcomers and of constant struggles to define the objects and practices that can offer a legitimate profit in distinction. Within this theoretical framework, consumption becomes a fluid yet structured practical and symbolic appropriation of classified and classifying objects and practices defined by the complex interrelations between the dispositions of individual agents participating in the field and the many positions that, at any given point in time, interact to create the field of consumption as a space of possibles.

The complexity of this space of possibles, where change and permanence are always at play in a refractive relationship, can be glimpsed by analyzing a specific group of consumers such as Japanese animation fans. By understanding the way in which these fans compose a field of consumption and local and trans-local taste cultures, the logics that animate the field of consumption as a whole can be better grasped. The importance of consumption and taste for current identity projects becomes evident, as well as the analytical abuse of reducing them to forms of production. We are as much the objects and practices we appropriate as the things that we produce. The ethnography that I conducted makes evident this complex interrelation between consumption and production, a fact better expressed by fans themselves:

Yes (laughs). I'm sure almost every anime fan has at least like a few things. Ah, I'm a huge GunPla person. So I love building the *Gundam* models. Ah, I've got a bunch of them just sitting on top of my desk right now. Ah posters. I'm not huge into figurines. I've got a couple but like ah... outside of like DVDs and stuff like that. (m-m) Most are just GunPla because I

like building models. [...] *Gundam Wing* was probably the reason why I started that, and then I didn't start... I didn't build them very much when I was younger. (m-m) I got like a couple of them. (m-m) And then... later on. Ah, I started to get more serious, when I was having my own money to be able to buy them. (Edward)

Far from the notion of nomadic reader or cultist, what Edward who, as discussed in the empirical chapters of this dissertation, was a voice actor, a participant in his local taste culture and a consumer of Japanese animation texts, characters and merchandise, brings to the fore through his words is the complex relationship between his creative practices and his consumption. Edward began constructing Gunpla, that is, a plastic model of a mecha robot from the anime franchise Gundam, because he had emotional attachments to Gundam Wing, one of the shows within the franchise. He could not enjoy this practice much and more seriously master it until he had his own money to buy the models. Consumption was a pre-requisite for his productive practices, a fact that underlines the need to resist the romantic framework proposed in *Textual Poachers*. Fans are not participants in a nomadic, poached culture (Jenkins, 2013). They are, first and foremost, narrative and character consumers that can either participate in, or resist, consumer culture.

### **Ethnographic Research and Media Fandom**

In this sense, the need to move away from understandings that construct consumption as a form of production, or that see in the former a simple negative practice, is central to opening new roads to the study of fandom. Jenkins (2013) argues that the most important function of ethnographies is to disprove or challenge certain theories and notions. This is certainly the biggest contribution of my ethnographic research. Through a nuanced and rich ethnography of the social worlds of anime fans in Mexico and Canada, I have constructed a comprehensive critique of current approaches to the study of fandom, moving away from the notion of fandom-as-community and into a depiction that underlines the fluid and ever-changing nature of this field of consumption and of the identity positions that exist within its symbolic boundaries.

It should be clear that this fluid depiction of fandom and fans can only be achieved through a multi-situated ethnography such as the one that informs this work. Grasping the lived experiences of anime enthusiasts requires a level of immersion in the field that cannot be achieved through ethnographic research in one location or by conducting interviews as a proxy for field work. As I

hope to have proven, the complexity of Japanese animation fandom as a field of consumption requires the ethnographer to visit anime conventions, malls that sell Japanese animation and related merchandise, and houses of anime enthusiasts. The researcher has to talk with members of Japanese animation clubs, anime merchants and their employees, organizers of Japanese animation conventions, fan artists and performers, and isolated consumers of Japanese animation. Otherwise, it is easy to fall into the illusion of subcultural fixity. Performing research exclusively in an anime club, for example, will result in the methodological error of (mis)taking the part for the whole, of assuming that the feelings of community and cultural hierarchies of taste present in this particular grouping also characterize anime fandom in its entirety.

Of course, my research was not able to cover all the identity positions that constitute North American anime fandom. Central to these omissions are producers of Japanese animation and related media, as well as members of media corporations that have brought anime to North America. While I attended panels that featured some of these producers, I did not have the opportunity to talk with them directly. From this perspective, the creators and corporations that influence anime fandom as a field of consumption, what Bourdieu (2010) calls the specialized fields of production, are an important blind spot in the current dissertation. In this sense, this work is better understood as an analysis of fans, their consumption and taste cultures within Japanese animation fandom as a field of consumption. The interactions of this field with fields of production are limited in this framework to the figure of the anime merchant. As such, other interactions taking place between anime fandom and fields of production related to Japanese animation remain outside the scope of this work.

### **Towards a new approach to media fandom**

I have argued through this dissertation for a new approach to the study of fans of media texts. This proposal has followed the work of Sarah Thornton in terms of moving away from any simple equation of taste cultures with resistance. At the end of *Club Cultures*, she asks for future studies that research “the generation, evolution and dissolution of subcultural distinctions” (Thornton, 1996: 168) in order to better understand popular culture. This dissertation analyses the generation, evolution and dissolution of taste and its associated distinctions within Japanese animation fandom. It offers a different approach to understanding popular culture and its relationship with those individuals that enjoy it. Perhaps the most important contribution of this dissertation to the

understanding of media audiences is the re-evaluation of consumption as an active process that allows individuals to create and maintain a taste culture. This thesis advances a picture of fans as consumers guided by a particular taste that runs contrary to classic interpretations of media fandom as poachers and producers that resist the culture industries.

Expanding the notion of taste culture through the incorporation of additional concepts from Bourdieu, this work has shed light upon the complex and ever-changing nature of this type of subcultural formation. It also has proposed that fandoms and media taste cultures are separate analytical concepts. While the first constitutes a field of consumption that includes every text, character, subcultural capital, object and space that has been at one time or another relevant to consumers of media, the second is a subcultural grouping that emerges from the interactions among fans, their pursuit of distinction, and their creation of cultural hierarchies.

This complexity regarding the relation between fan and popular culture requires one to abandon any simple equation of fandom with community. Indeed, while Henry Jenkins's influential theorization of media fandom is still useful for understanding particular phenomena related to fans, such as textual poaching, his depiction of fans as members of a utopian community of nomadic readers has to be seriously questioned. This is also the case for Matt Hills's conceptualization of fandom as a cult. While the introduction of the dimensions of affective play and emotional attachment that characterize fans' relationship to media texts has been central to the ideas advanced in this work, the notion of cult fandom remains blind to the complex nature of contemporary media fandom. The important omission of character consumption in the work of both authors testifies to the dangers of reifying fandom as a stable community that shares an immutable set of practices and narratives.

Through research in two countries, this dissertation has advanced a more flexible depiction of fandom and its associated taste culture(s). The case of anime fans clearly illustrates the many changes that have taken place through the history of Japanese animation fandom and its associated taste cultures. The research also reveals astounding similarities between local communities, a fact that suggests that being a fan is articulated around practices and narratives that transcend localities and even countries. From this perspective, it becomes possible to argue that a particular taste guides the character and narrative consumption of anime fans and constitutes the base of each of their practices and narratives. This taste, however, can change as a result of the many struggles that Japanese animation enthusiasts enact within anime fandom and its associated taste culture.

Future research should continue to explore anime fandom in terms of taste and distinction. In particular, it would be enlightening to analyse fandoms articulated around other subcultural practices. While I discussed some of them in this text, I could not fully address most of them. I talked with a creator of Anime Music Videos, a maker of mecha models and a couple of panelists in anime cons, to name a few. However, given the small sample sizes involved, generalizing these interviewees' experiences to those of other members of those fandoms would be highly inappropriate. The female creator of Music Videos was also a Yaoi fan and she suggested that the individuals that liked Yaoi and made Anime Music Videos were a close community opposed by other members of anime fandom. Researching this community, for example, could advance our understanding of the material and symbolic struggles that modify this field of consumption.

Another interesting field of study would be what one of my interviewees called "the creepy side of anime". There is a dark side of fandom that deals with violence and sexuality in ways that are considered taboo by the mainstream. It includes such genres as hentai, pornographic anime and lolicon, a fandom centered on the consumption of narratives that sexualize underage characters. As expected from the interview process which generally leads interviewees to present a sanitized version of themselves, these topics rarely came to light during the interviews. They nonetheless constitute practices and narratives that influence Japanese animation fandom and its associated taste cultures. Understanding, for example, the violence and sexuality that often appears in radical ways in fan art and fan fiction is essential to better apprehend the complex relationships between fans and media texts and characters. Narrative and character consumption can sometimes be acts of violent possession.

Japanese animation fandom is neither determined by media nor resistive to its contents. It is a field of consumption that sees value in a type of text often excluded from the mainstream. Future research can further expand upon the characteristics that nonetheless made it a proper subcultural formation with practices and approaches to violence and sexuality that are not those of capitalistic society. Even though they are not a community that resists consumption, anime fans, or at least some of them, have constituted communities that are not aligned with consumer society in as much as they value communal consumption. Local and trans-local taste cultures bring together those that love Japanese animation and want to share this love with their peers. For some of them, this being together has become so important that they have found ways to remain inside their subcultural world, either through becoming subcultural entrepreneurs, experts, or masters of

the many practices that have been gradually created within anime fandom and its associated taste cultures. These individuals keep appropriating the narratives and characters they love, and in doing so practically create and maintain their identity as Japanese animation fans.

Finally, research on producers, creators and members of corporations that manufacture Japanese animation and its related media and merchandise is also an important avenue of future research. The interactions between anime fandom as a field of consumption and the many specialized fields of production that influence and are influenced by it, constitute a fertile area of research, given the fact that research on media fandom has centered on the discourses and practices of fans. Just as is the case with anime merchants, the role of producers, creators and members of corporations has been underplayed in current research about fandom in order to underline its resistive and anti-commercial characteristics. The approach to media fandom proposed in this work, however, requires that participants within specialized fields of production are reintegrated into the analysis of fandom as a field of consumption. Only in this way, the world of fans, a space that neither refuses nor completely accepts the values and relationships that constitute mundane society and its associated consumer culture, can truly be apprehended as a field of consumption always in the making through the actions of individual fans, members of local and trans-local taste cultures, merchants, creators, producers, and even corporate employees.



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## **Appendix A: Interview Guide**

### **Introductory questions**

- What is your age?
- What is your gender?
- What do you do?

### **Japanese animation**

- How did you start watching anime?
- What do you like about anime?
- How do you watch anime these days?
- Please name five anime shows that are very popular today.
- What is one of your favorite series? Why?
- What is one of your favorite characters? Why?

### **Other media**

- Do you like video games?
  - What kind?
- Do you read manga?
  - What is one of your favorite manga?
- Do you like other types of stories besides anime?
  - Which ones?

### **Products**

- Do you have any objects related to anime?
- What things do you have?
- Where did you get them?
- Discuss if they use these things, how they are placed in their room, and so on.

## Community

Do you know other people interested in Japanese animation?

Where did you meet these people?

What do you do with these people?

Have you gone to anime conventions?

With whom do you go to these conventions?

What do you do in these conventions?

What do you like most about these conventions?

Have you participated in panels and concerts within the conventions?

## Cosplay

What are your opinions about cosplay?

Cosplayers at conventions. What kind of cosplay do you like to see? What kind do you not like? What do you think makes a good cosplay?

Do you take pictures of cosplayers?

Have you done cosplay at a convention?

Have you worn a simple costume or hat within a convention?

Would you like to do cosplay in the future?

Of which character would you like to do a cosplay? Why?

## Internet

What anime-related activities do you do on the Internet?

Webpages related with anime.

Do you interact online with other people interested in anime? What do you talk about with them?

Virtual communities.

Have you read fanfics?

Where?

About what topics or shows?

Have you written a fanfic?

Would you like to write a fanfic?



Have you seen fanarts?

Where?

What were these fanarts about?

Do you draw?

Have you seen AMVs?

Where and what were they about?

Do you know about Yaoi?

What do you think of Yaoi?

Themes, characters, practices.

## Japan

Would you rather see anime shows dubbed or subtitled? Why?

Voice actors and Seiyuus.

Do you speak Japanese?

Are you interested in learning Japanese? Why?

Have you bought Japanese products at conventions or elsewhere?

What did you buy?

Japanese Food, swords, clothes, ornaments, postcards.

Have you visited Japan?

Would you like to visit Japan? Why?

## Subcultural Capital

Do you know and can you explain the following words?

Shonen

Shojo

Seinen

Cosplay

Crossplay

Genderplay

K-Pop

Vocaloids

Idol  
Moe  
Kawaii  
Neko-Girl  
Maids  
Lolita  
Lolicon  
Hentai  
Ecchi  
Yaoi  
Yuri  
Bishonen  
Light Novel  
Garage kits

## **Appendix B: Interview Guide (Spanish)**

### **Preguntas Introductorias**

- ¿Cuál es tu edad?
- ¿Sexo?
- ¿A qué te dedicas?

### **Animación Japonesa**

- ¿Cómo fue que empezaste a ver anime?
- ¿Qué es lo que te gusta del anime?
- ¿Cómo ves anime actualmente?
- ¿Cinco series que sean muy populares en la actualidad?
- ¿Cuál es una de tus series favoritas, por qué?
- ¿Cuál es uno de tus personajes favoritos, por qué?

### **Otros medios**

- ¿Te gustan los videojuegos?
  - ¿De qué tipo?
- ¿Lees manga?
  - ¿Cuál es uno de tus manga favoritos?
- ¿Te gustan otro tipo de géneros e historias además de anime?
  - ¿Cómo cuáles?

### **Productos y Mercancías**

- ¿Tienes objetos relativos a la animación japonesa?
- ¿Qué cosas tienes?
- ¿Dónde las obtuviste?
- Discutir si usa las cosas, como están colocadas en su cuarto, etcétera.

### **Comunidad**

- ¿Conoces a otras personas interesadas en la animación japonesa?

- ¿Dónde conociste a estas personas?
- ¿Qué actividades llevas a cabo con estas personas?
- ¿Has ido a convenciones de anime?
- ¿Con quién vas a estas convenciones?
- ¿Qué haces en estas convenciones?
- ¿Qué es lo que más te gusta de estas convenciones?
- ¿Haz participado en paneles y conciertos dentro de las convenciones?

## Cosplay

- ¿Cuáles son tus opiniones acerca del cosplay?
- Cosplayers en las convenciones. ¿Qué tipo de cosplay te gusta ver? ¿Qué tipo no te gusta?
- ¿Qué piensas que es lo que hace bueno a un cosplay?
- ¿Tomás fotos de los cosplayers?
- ¿Has hecho cosplay o usado algún disfraz simple o gorro dentro de las convenciones?
- ¿Te gustaría hacer un cosplay en el futuro?
- ¿De qué personaje harías un cosplay, por qué?

## Internet

- ¿Qué actividades relacionadas con el anime llevas a cabo en Internet?
- Webpages relacionadas con el anime.
- ¿Interactúas con otras personas interesadas con el anime online? ¿De que hablan?
- Comunidades virtuales.
- ¿Has leído fanfics?
  - ¿En dónde?
  - ¿Sobre qué temas?
- ¿Escribiste o te gustaría escribir un fanfic?
- ¿Has visto fanarts?
  - ¿En dónde?
  - ¿Sobre qué eran estos fanarts?
- ¿Dibujas?
- ¿Has visto AMVs?

¿En dónde y sobre que eran?

¿Conoces el Yaoi?

¿Qué opinas del Yaoi?

Temas, personajes, prácticas.

## Japón

¿Prefieres ver series dobladas o subtituladas? ¿Por qué?

Actores de doblaje y Seiyuus.

¿Hablas o estás interesada en aprender japonés? ¿Por qué?

¿Has comprado productos japonés en convenciones o en otros lugares?

¿Qué compraste?

Comida japonesa, espadas, ropa, ornamentos, postales.

¿Has visitado o te gustaría visitar Japón? ¿Por qué?

## Capital subcultural

¿Conoces y puedes explicar las siguientes palabras?

Shonen

Shojo

Seinen

Cosplay

Crossplay

Genderplay

K-Pop

Vocaloids

Idol

Moe

Kawaii

Neko-Girl

Maids

Lolita

Lolicon

Hentai

Ecchi

Yaoi

Yuri

Bishonen

Light Novel

Garage kits

## Appendix C: Recruitment Poster



# Do You Enjoy Japanese Animation?



If you are a  
**Japanese Animation Fan**  
who would like to share your  
experiences, ideas and stories regarding your hobby

Please Contact  
Nazario Robles Bastida, PhD Student  
Department of Sociology, University of Calgary  
Phone: 587 719 1793  
Email: [nroblesb@ucalgary.ca](mailto:nroblesb@ucalgary.ca)

This study has been approved by the CFREB. Provided that you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked questions about your experiences and activities as a Japanese animation fan. This interview will take approximately 45 minutes. Participation in this study is completely voluntary, anonymous and confidential. You are free to discontinue participation at any time during the study.

## **Appendix D: Glossary of Terms**

**Anime:** Abbreviated form to refer to Japanese animation.

**Anime Music Videos:** Abbreviated as AMVs, these videos are created by anime fans. They consist of anime scenes that are edited together into a music videoclip that often includes popular songs. Through the combination of the edited anime scenes and the music, they communicated different feelings and ideas.

**Cosplay:** Abbreviation of Costume Play, the practice of dressing up as characters of Japanese animation, manga and videogames. Currently it includes costumes from Western media.

**Crossplay:** Variation of cosplay where fans dress up as characters of the opposite sex. Currently, the practice of crossplay is mostly performed by female fans.

**Fansub:** Abbreviation of fansubbing. Fansubs are groups of anime fans that obtain Japanese animation series and movies broadcasted in Japan and through a complex division of labor, add subtitles to these anime series and distribute it for free in the Internet.

**Fan Art:** Term used to describe works of art created by fans. Fan art is based on preexisting characters, worlds, objects, etcetera, taken from Japanese animation texts, mangas and videogames.

**Fan Fiction:** Term used to describe works of fiction created by fans. To count as fan fiction these works must be based on Japanese animation series, mangas, videogames, etcetera. Although derivative in nature, fan fiction is popular among certain sectors of anime fandom. Interestingly, during my interviews, some fans referred to their original works also as fan fiction, even when they were not based in particular Japanese animation texts, mangas or videogames.

**Fujoshi:** Japanese female fans of yaoi. Certain Western female anime fans refer to themselves using this word.



Hentai: Pornographic Japanese animation, manga and videogames.

K-Pop: Abbreviation of Korean Pop.

Manga: Japanese comic books.

Otaku: Japanese fans of Japanese animation. Certain Western anime fans refer to themselves using this word.

Yaoi: Narratives about homosexual love among male characters. Often these narratives employ characters that are depicted as heterosexual in the original texts.