Foreword

GARY CROSS

Those of us who work in the often uncharted jungles of American and European popular and commercial culture are continually encountering the “monsters” of Japan—those often cute and cool critters that, especially of late, seem to have crashed onto the scene. They make us wonder: Where did they come from? Why have they so captured the imagination of children and adults on a global scale? I have often thought a really informed book about why and how Japanese popular culture has succeeded in becoming (with American pop culture) the leading exporter of fantasy, especially to the young, would go far in explaining both cultural globalization and contemporary children’s commercial culture. In these covers, we have that book.

Of course, much of Japanese fantasy in *anime*, comic books, video games, and toys has been influenced by the West. For the first sixty years of the twentieth century, the Japanese playthings industry was indebted to German and especially American innovation. Linkages between Japanese and American children’s consumption were well established by the 1930s, when Louis Marx, the famous American manufacturer of windup Popeyes and racist “Alabama Coon Jiggers,” outsourced production to Japan. After World War II, Japan became an exporter of robots and space toys made of tin cans to an American market eager for science-fiction and space themes: Japanese spaceships looked like hastily recycled tanks and other war toys, and the toy figures looked alien to Westerners because Japanese toy makers could not afford to license images of movie and TV icons like Flash Gordon and Space Cadet.

By the late 1960s, however, Japan was producing quality Datsuns and other cars for export, and it exploited the development of transistor and digital technology to drive American and European manufacturers of TVs, ra-

dios, and stereos out of business. Still, few in the West seemed to take Japanese popular culture seriously. Until recently, the memory of cheesy Godzilla movies shown for laughs on late-night television seemed to epitomize Japanese popular culture. The revolutionary Walkman was widely embraced, but not Japanese music. Japan got its own Disneyland in 1983, a decade before Europe, but, while it had its own character, Tokyo Disneyland was still derivative. Yet all this began to change noticeably in the 1990s with the coming of *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*, *Sailor Moon*, *tamagotchi*, and *Pokémon*, along with *anime* movies, video games, and much else.

One factor behind this transformation was the fact that the business models of Japanese manufacturers of playthings were consistent with American models of merchandising and manufacturing fantasy; they did not stick with the more parent-friendly approach of European toymakers. As early as the 1920s, toy and children's-book producers had learned the art of sliding characters and stories across "platforms" of fantasy. While British and German doll and toy makers stuck to miniaturizing adult life (e.g., through dolls' houses and vehicles) and usually maintained a didactic tone, Japanese manufacturers were influenced by American innovation in children's fantasy by cross-marketing characters from comic books and illustrated stories in the form of dolls, toys, and games. Tying toys and dolls to children's fantasy narratives was key to Disney's success in the 1930s, when Mickey Mouse became a global "friend" via sand pails, toothbrushes, and comic books as well as through Saturday-morning gatherings of "Mickey Mouse Clubs," which met to watch his cartoons in neighborhood cinemas. The merchandising of *Pokémon* sixty years later followed the same path. The proliferation of Hasbro's GI Joe "dolls" and military gear in the 1960s and the endless action-figure montages of the 1980s—perhaps best seen in the dizzying array of character goods spun off from the three *Star Wars* movies of 1978 to 1983—were adopted by the Japanese. Despite the pressures of education, work, and family, Japanese commercial culture, like the American one, invited children into a fantasy world of playful stories and toys divorced from adults' memories and expectations that children should "train" for adulthood in play. Even the Japanese cultivation of images of the "cute" in Hello Kitty and Pikachu has been influenced by German and American dolls and comic-strip characters from a century ago. Japanese "millennial monsters" are part of a wider and older world of children's fantasy.

But none of this takes away from the striking impact of Japanese imagination on today's children's culture. Nor should it obscure the fact that Japan's millennial monsters represent something new. As Anne Allison

shows us, what is new and important for understanding our own times is the way that Japanese stories are told and how their characters behave and interact. From a superficial perspective, in fact, the Power Rangers are just another group of superhero fighters, appearing at the end of an era of action-figure warriors that began in the late 1970s. But this would miss the point. Japanese children's fantasy is different and seems to be defining children's culture in the twenty-first century just as American dream makers did in the twentieth.

This book tells why and how this happened by relating postwar Japanese society to children's fantasy culture. Even more interesting is Allison's linking of Japanese social experience to the globalization of contemporary consumer culture, of which children's longings are in the vanguard. Japanese dream makers capture the hopes and frustrations of life in the global economy more effectively than America's Disney. This is a big and provocative claim often wrapped in postmodernist packaging, but it is rich, thoughtful, and compelling.

Allison skillfully situates the well-known 1950s images of Godzilla within the despair of recently defeated and oppressed Japan, and relates the technological obsession of Astro Boy to the peculiarly Japanese longing for renewal in a high-tech world. With much sensitivity, *Millennial Monsters* contextualizes the seemingly contradictory world of Japanese fantasy within both the economic boom that began in the 1960s and the subsequent bust of the 1990s. With a deep knowledge of a culture foreign to most Westerners, Allison shows why disciplined and overworked Japanese longed for materialist fantasies. Technologically advanced capitalism produced a loss of place and community, and feelings of alienation from parents and the past. All this created longings for identity via the "friendly" characters of comic books, toys, and cartoons, as well as merchandise emblazoned with images of these characters. Allison shows very concretely how consumption has become a replacement for social contact, and how portable entertainment—in the form of *Pokémon* video games and handheld electronic pets—offers an alternative to place and to older kinds of relationships.

Japanese children's fantasy is riddled with technological imagery, not in a simple celebratory fashion, as with American and European electric trains, construction toys, and science sets of the early twentieth century, but through machines that are infused with techno-animism, or personality and animistic traits. Unlike the fixed world of Western children's fantasy, Japanese stories and character play are about continual transformation, or polymorphous perversity. Japanese cartoons, video games, and action-figure sets are even more foreign to American adults than were the *Star Wars* toys of

the early 1980s (which were at least modeled after older Western traditions of heroism). Japanese stories experiment with more unexpected disruptions of old stereotypes (as in the case of *Sailor Moon*, with its fashionable female fighters and its edgy interpretation of the cute). *Pokémon*, or pocket monsters, are simultaneously pets and fighters, exchanged but also battled with.

Yet this is more than a story of Japanese culture and childhood. The Japanese experience is increasingly a global one, and its success in adapting to the demands of the American market and convincing American children to adapt to its aesthetics is part of the story. Western children may embrace Japanese imagination because it is “foreign” and thus “cool,” but they also do so because it fits the stresses and aspirations of the postmodern age and helps them cope.

Americans, long used to hegemony in popular culture, as well as in the political, economic, and military realms, may find this recentering of global imagination hard to accept. Disney’s nostalgia and cultivation of the cute and of fantasy places may continue to have global appeal, as is evidenced by the ongoing success of Walt Disney World and its spawn in France, Japan, and, soon, Hong Kong. But Japanese have captured the frustrations and longings of a world now beyond nostalgia and dreams of magical places through an ever-changing fantasy of polymorphous perversity and technosocialism: a world of millennial monsters.