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5-13-20
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HIST 301

American-Anime: How Japanese Anime Influenced American Cartoons

Anime is a popular animation style which originated in Japan in the 1960s and is now a part of mainstream pop culture. Most people have for years viewed anime as being culturally and visually distinct from American cartoons. *Spirited Away*, an anime film released in 2001, is the only Japanese film ever to have won an academy award (2003).¹ Although many by now have at least heard the name of *Spirited Away*'s creator, Hayao Miyazaki, few know how Japanese anime has over time influenced American animations. Anime's eventual influence on American cartoons began when the first anime, *Astro Boy*, reached American shores and televisions on September 7, 1963. This paper will begin with a brief background on the history of anime and Japanese animation. The study will focus on Japan's popular animation style and analyze three of its main influential transitions into the U.S. entertainment industry: collaboration in the 1980s, explicit influence on American animators in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and America's full-on adoption of anime in the late 2010s. Anime's influence on American cartoons can be explained by the collaboration of Japanese animation studios with American toy companies in the 1980s, the visual animation techniques and thematic story choices made by American animators in the late 90s - early 2000s (anime-inspired cartoons), and the creation of "American-anime" in the late 2010s.

Michal Daliot-Bul and Nissim Otmazgin's book, *The Anime Boom in the United States: Lessons for Global Creative Industries* (2017), is used extensively throughout this paper to help the reader understand anime's cultural impact on America. This secondary source focuses on what scholars of anime have labeled, "the anime boom," or the years between the late 1990s to 2000s

¹ *Spirited Away*, DVD, directed by Hayao Miyazaki (2001; Tokyo, Japan: Studio Ghibli, Walt Disney Home Entertainment, 2003), DVD.

when anime was imported into the U.S and many anime-inspired cartoons were being created. The phrase “anime-inspired cartoons” is used in this paper to refer to American cartoons created by animators and producers who were influenced by the anime style and sought to emulate some aspects of it or attempt to refer to the aesthetic in their own animations.² Another text informing this research essay is *Anime: From Akira to Howl's Moving Castle: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation* (2005) by Susan Napier. This book provides a study on the history of anime from the 1980s to mid 2000s; this work will be quoted in the short introduction to anime. Another valuable secondary source is *The Astro Boy Essays: Osamu Tezuka, Mighty Atom, Manga/Anime Revolution* (2007) by Frederik L. Schodt. This source is cited to give additional information on the life of Osamu Tezuka and his most iconic work, *Astro Boy*. To begin to understand the history of anime, an analysis of what is largely considered to be the first Japanese animation ever *Namakura Gatana* (1917) is warranted.

Namakura Gatana ("Dull-Edged Sword") is a short Japanese film animated by Jun'ichi Kōuchi and was played in small theaters on June 30, 1917. This short is a 4-minute silent comedy showing a foolish samurai purchasing a dull sword. The samurai tries to fight average people going about their daily lives but ends up losing to everyone. The old animation was discovered in Osaka, Japan in 2008.³ Despite *Imokawa Mukuzō genkan-ban no maki* (“Imokawa Mukuzo, The Janitor”) (1917) being considered by some scholars as the first example of Japanese animation; *Namakura* is the oldest short film found, whereas *Imokawa* is still lost.⁴ This piece of ancient Japanese animation

² Michal Daliot-Bul and Nissim Otmazgin, *The Anime Boom in the United States: Lessons for Global Creative Industries* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2017), 107.

³ Linda Sieg, “Japan finds films by early “anime” pioneers,” *Reuters*, March 26, 2008, [Article \(https://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-anime-pioneers/japan-finds-films-by-early-anime-pioneers-idUST23069120080327\)](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-anime-pioneers/japan-finds-films-by-early-anime-pioneers-idUST23069120080327).

⁴ Daliot-Bul and Otmazgin, *Anime Boom*, 15.

is considered to be the first example of animation created by Japanese animators. The classic animation is best exemplified by this image of the unknown samurai attempting to assassinate a blind man but will soon fail in the next animation sequence (See Figure 1). *Namakura* demonstrates the extensive history of animation in Japan; the short film is an historic example of classic Japanese animation—but is not an example of “anime.” *Anime* is of a different cultural and creative meaning; anime doesn’t signify “any animation from Japan” as Napier states, “to define anime simply as ‘Japanese cartoons’ gives no sense of the depth and variety that make up the medium.”⁵ Although some critics may consider *Namakura* as the first “anime,” other scholars and fans instead see Osamu Tezuka’s *Tetsuwan Atomu* (“*Mighty Atom*”) or as it became known in America, *Astro Boy* (1963) as the origin of anime. *Astro* is seen as the “godfather” of anime because of its style, which includes extreme limited animations for affordable television storytelling.⁶

Osamu Tezuka created the TV animated series *Astro Boy* in 1963 with his studio Mushi Production. It aired on January 1, 1963, on Fuji TV in Japan and later was aired by NBC Enterprise in America on September 7, 1963. Japan at the time was recovering from the Second World War and barely entering its well-known “miracle economic boom.” The story takes place in a futuristic twenty-first century where automation and robots are commonplace. The genius Dr. Tenma, director of the Ministry of Science's Department of Precision Machinery, loses his only child in a tragic car accident. Dr. Tenma reacts to his son's death harshly and becomes deranged. He decides to “resurrect” his son by creating a robot boy in his child's image. The Doctor at first accepts this robot “son” as his own and gives him the name “Astro Boy.” However when he realizes this boy

⁵ Susan Napier, *Anime: From Akira to Howl's Moving Castle: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2005), 6.

⁶ Daliot-Bul and Otmazgin, *Anime Boom*, 1; Frederik Schodt, *The Astro Boy Essays: Osamu Tezuka, Mighty Atom, Manga/Anime Revolution* (Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge Press, 2007), 5; Napier, *From Akira to Howl's*, 6.

will not age or grow up and have a family, he decides to get rid of him. Tenma sells the robot boy to a circus and abandons him. Astro eventually survives the circus where the owner made him fight to the "death" with other robots thanks to being saved by Professor Ochanomizu. This Professor was the new director at the Ministry of Science and he becomes Astro's new dad. Now with his surrogate father, Astro Boy has to balance his life by trying to be a regular human boy going to school and fighting villains on the side. Unlike American superheroes fighting for only justice, Astro Boy also fights for what was postwar Japan's ultimate goal—peace and harmony.⁷

With *Astro Boy*, Tezuka created Japan's first-ever animated TV series. Many anime scholars and fans alike credit *Astro Boy* as the first example of what would become known as "anime."⁸ Tezuka's use of an extreme limited animation technique with a Hollywood film flare, which distinguishes anime from classic Japanese animations, can be seen in this image of Astro Boy flying through the air (See Figure 2).⁹ Americans' witnessed as Schodt puts it, "children characters act like adult counterparts in Russian novels: to be introspective, to agonize, to commit acts of both good and evil, and to even die."¹⁰ This new form of storytelling for animation, which was often classified as "children animation" in the West (American adults in the past often viewed animation as childish or "only for kids") was influential to American animators later on. For example, Astro Boy dealing with "abandonment and identity issues" as seen in some episodes greatly influenced plot developments later American animators would use in their own cartoon shows.¹¹

⁷ Schodt, *Astro Boy Essays*, 4.

⁸ Schodt, ix.

⁹ Schodt, 67.

¹⁰ Schodt, 53-54.

¹¹ Napier, *From Akira to Howl's*, 122.

The term *anime* didn't exist until the 1970s and didn't become used globally until the 1980s according to Daliot-Bul and Otmazgin; animation in Japan before was known as “manga eiga” (manga movies), “dōga” (moving images), or “animēshon” before the 70s.¹² In 1970s United States, anime from Japan was referred to as “Japanimation” or Japanese animation; the 1980s saw the term “anime” finally being used.¹³ Anime’s creator Osamu Tezuka believed humanity desperately needed more ways to communicate with each other, a way to break through cultural walls/barriers; he hoped animation, such as anime, would become a new bridge of communication, an “international language.”¹⁴ The style or medium of anime never focused on “movement and realism,” rather creators/animators would emphasize story, character development, and emotional impact.¹⁵ Anime would lead to what Daliot-Bul & Otmazgin credited as “cultural hybridization” or the mixing of the animation styles of the East and the West.¹⁶ Its popularity and influence had a profound impact on Americans. In time anime would lead to collaborations amongst American toy companies and Japanese animation studios, and a new generation of American animators inspired by the style. One of the most famous examples of collaboration is the creation of *The Transformers* (1984).

The Transformers is an American animated cartoon series created by the U.S. toy company *Hasbro* in collaboration with the Japanese toy company *Takara*. It premiered on September 17, 1984 through first-run syndication. The show was animated by the Japanese anime studio Toei

¹² Daliot-Bul and Otmazgin, *Anime Boom*, 9.

¹³ Daliot-Bul and Otmazgin, 9.

¹⁴ Schodt, *Astro Boy Essays*, 30.

¹⁵ Schodt, 71.

¹⁶ Daliot-Bul and Otmazgin, *Anime Boom*, 5.

Animations for the first 3 seasons. As Daliot-Bul and Otmazgin observed, “The Transformers was written in the United States and animated in Japan by Toei Animation.”¹⁷ The series focuses on robotic creatures known as the Autobots who, under the leadership of Optimus Prime, crashed into the earth while fighting their enemies the Decepticons. The two factions awake after four million years and continue their seemingly never-ending war with each other, but now have to deal with humans who inhabit modern earth. The Autobots try to protect the humans while battling their archenemies. The Decepticons, led by their leader Megatron, want to exploit the planet for its resources to conquer the universe.

The series was created during a time when America’s and Japan’s economies were both booming and competing with each other. Collaborations like this one revealed how America and its producers were beginning to acknowledge anime and its profitability. The U.S. and Japan collaborated on series before *Transformers* such as *The King Kong Show* (1966) as described in *The Anime Boom*.¹⁸ However, *Transformers* was the first widely recognized and popular cartoon series in America to have a Japanese studio, “Toei Doga” title inserted at the end of every episode. The success of *Transformers* would eventually lead to more collaborations and bigwig producers investing in anime-cartoon hybrid shows known as “anime-inspired cartoons.”¹⁹ The anime aesthetic from “Mecha” shows (Japanese piloted-robot anime) can be seen in this image example of the Decepticon Wildrider, lifting his arms in excitement for the coming war with the Autobots (See Figure 3). Ultimately producers would decide to make these kind of hybrid shows, “in-house” or with their own American animators and studios, the first and most famous example being *The Powerpuff Girls* (1998). Before discussing this cartoon series inspired by anime, a few anime

¹⁷ Daliot-Bul and Otmazgin, *Anime Boom*, 41.

¹⁸ Daliot-Bul and Otmazgin, 18.

¹⁹ Daliot-Bul and Otmazgin, 87 and 107.

influencers themselves will be examined. One of the main anime influencers was a man named Hayao Miyazaki; the first film that exemplified his influential style was *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984).

Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind is an anime feature-length film created by Hayao Miyazaki in 1984. It was distributed by Toei Company for Japan and distributed with heavy edits for America in 1985 by Manson International under the altered name of *Warriors of the Wind*. Twenty years later, an uncut/redubbed version was produced by Walt Disney Pictures and released in the United States. Despite being produced before Studio Ghibli was founded by Miyazaki, the film is still largely considered to be a “Ghibli” creation. *Nausicaä* is a story focused on a princess of the same name. However unlike Disney princesses, she does not wait for a male lead to come and save her; she instead is depicted as brilliant and self-sufficient. Nausicaä lives in a post-apocalyptic time. In her world the planet has decided to cleanse itself of an infestation of parasites—humanity. Through the Ohm, which are goliath size insects, and with the aid of the toxic forest creating an atmosphere uninhabitable by humankind; the planet protects itself from further human encroachment. The princess tries to find a way to co-exist peacefully with all the living creatures (human and non) within her home, the Valley of the Wind. Despite this way of life, war and human conflict reach her valley, leading to a stampede of Ohms ready to slaughter what is left of humanity. *Nausicaä* is an influential anime created during the era of Japan’s miracle economy. It has since been largely seen as the starting point of Miyazaki’s famous career. Miyazaki always animated a female protagonist or “shojo” in a distinctive way, his characters are usually seen as assertive and independent.²⁰ Nausicaä’s freedom and independence is represented in many parts of the film such as this image of her freely maneuvering through the air on her glider directing a bug away from her

²⁰ Napier, *From Akira to Howl’s*, 152.

village (See Figure 4).²¹ Another influential aspect of *Nausicaä* and many other Miyazaki movies is how the director depicts nature as its own character with its individual identity and power.²²

Miyazaki also is famously known for humanizing his characters. For example throughout the film *Nausicaä* is seen as peace loving, but in one scene violently kills the men responsible for murdering her father. *Nausicaä*'s remorse and regret afterwards and her intense rage/violence at the moment of the killing mark her as a complex character.²³ Miyazaki's style has gone on to influence the works of not only Japanese animators, but American ones as well. Another famous influential anime is the series *Dragon Ball Z* (1989).

Dragon Ball Z is an anime television series produced by Toei Animation and an adaptation of Akira Toriyama's "manga" (Japanese comic book/graphic novel) of the same name. It began airing in Japan on April 26, 1989. The story focuses on the main character Goku. He and his friends defend the earth from many different villains ranging from aliens, androids, and many other unknown creatures. He is not human and similar to the origins of *Superman*, Goku was an extraterrestrial child born on another planet; before Goku's world was destroyed his parents sent him away.²⁴ Despite being an alien, like Clark Kent, Goku's appearance looks human. When his space pod crashed into the earth, he was able to blend in with human-kind. The series was eventually dubbed into English in 1996 by the American company Funimation Productions and aired on American television in first-run syndication (multiple stations). However in 1998 it was picked up by Cartoon Network and played during the channel's famous afternoon block, *Toonami*, known for showing anime to an American audience.

²¹ Napier, 166.

²² Napier, 153.

²³ Napier, 168.

²⁴ Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, *Action Comics* (New York: National Allied Publications, 1938).

During the 1990s Japan was dealing with a time of economic stagnation which later would become known as the “Lost Decade.” Anime was a way for Japan to make huge profits and revenue abroad despite its internal economic issues. The United States was heavily influenced by animes such as *Dragon Ball Z*. Known also as “*DBZ*” in the west, it was culturally influential to many people and to animators in America. The Americans’ knowledge of Japanese “shonen”(young boy) style anime stems from *DBZ* and their character designs such as this image of Goku in his Super Sayan form standing with his friends (See Figure 5). *Dragon Ball Z* was an influential anime which went on to have an impact on many American animators. Overall *Dragon Ball*’s animation style, character designs, action sequences, and story elements inspired American creators.²⁵ Later in this paper, the episode “Free the Future” from *DBZ* will be used for comparison to present how it was acknowledged and referenced in the American cartoon, *The Powerpuff Girls* (1998).

The Powerpuff Girls is a cartoon show created by Craig McCracken and broadcasted on Cartoon Network in 1998. The series made its debut on November 18, 1998 and became the highest-rated premiere in all of Cartoon Network’s history during the 90s. The show’s story is focused on three Kindergarteners named Blossom, Bubbles, and Buttercup. The three sisters all have superpowers because of their “Father”, a mad scientist named Professor Utonium, creates them in his lab when he accidentally drops a dangerous unknown substance known as Chemical X into a mixture of "sugar, spice, and everything nice." The Professor tries to give life, as seen in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, to “perfect little daughters" but by a miraculous accident creates three superheroes.²⁶ The girls in most episodes are defending their city of Townsville from giant monsters, criminals, or dealing with child issues such as toothaches, bedwetting, and making

²⁵ Daliot-Bul and Otmazgin, *Anime Boom*, 47.

²⁶ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (London, England: Lackington, Hughes, Harding, Mavor, & Jones, 1818).

friends. Sometimes their battles and personal kid-issues are mixed in the same episode. Americans during the time *Powerpuff* was playing on television were going through major cultural changes in the 90s; people in the U.S. were becoming more multicultural and taking in alternative media with the growth of the World Wide Web and cable television. At the same time, the number of anime shows were increasingly being shown on American television such as *Dragon Ball Z* (1989), *Sailor Moon* (1992), *Pokemon* (1997), and anime films like *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995), *Princess Mononoke* (1997), *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), and *Akira* (1988). *Powerpuff Girls* was the first to present the influence anime was having on American cartoons and their animators.²⁷ The “kawaii” (cute) anime aesthetic the girls have is an example of the impact anime had on Craig McCracken, as can be seen in this image of the three sisters grouped up together which was common at the end of most episodes (See Figure 6). The fight scenes in the *PowerPuff Girls* also resemble battle sequences from *DBZ*, especially one specific episode, “Stuck Up, Up, and Away.” American audiences in the 90s and 2000s were being introduced to massive amounts of anime and anime-inspired cartoons. *PowerPuff Girls* exemplifies the beginning of the “anime boom” within the United States and its observable influence on American animators. For a more complete understanding of the impact of *PowerPuff Girls* on American animators, it is important to analyze the two episodes mentioned beforehand.

In the *Dragon Ball Z* episode “Free the Future,” which released in 2000 for American audiences and shown first on July 21, 1993 for Japanese television, the plot focuses on the character Trunks. Trunks is one of Goku’s friends and the son of his main rival Vegeta. He is not from their time, instead he traveled from the future to aid in the destruction of powerful enemies known as the Androids 17 & 18. After defeating Cell, a genetically manufactured monster who was a greater threat than the androids, Trunks returns back to his own timeline far stronger than before. He ends

²⁷ Daliot-Bul and Otmazgin, *Anime Boom*, 113.

up destroying the Androids in his own time and finally bringing peace. During one of the battle sequences, Android 18 throws out a charged energy blast at Trunks and he dodges it by cocking his head to the side (See Figure 7). This exact animation sequence is recreated and mirrored in *The Powerpuff Girls*' episode "Stuck Up, Up, and Away." In the *Powerpuff* episode Blossom, Buttercup, and Bubbles deal with a trouble-making, spoiled brat, rich girl known as Princess Morbucks. The entitled "Princess" is annoyed because she is not one of the Powerpuff girls and decides to use her Dad's money to "make" herself into one. She ends up buying expensive high-tech equipment to give her "powers" close to the girls. Princess fights the Powerpuff girls but ends up losing. In the fight scene where Princess sends out a blast at Blossom, Blossom dodges the energy blast in a mirrored image to the way Trunks dodged the blast of Android 18 (See Figure 7). An interview with Craig McCracken further confirms the prevalence *DBZ* had on influencing the creator of *Powerpuff Girls*.

In 2000 Keith Phipps from *The A.V. Club* did an interview with Craig McCracken, the creator of *The Powerpuff Girls*, in an article of the same name as McCracken's show.²⁸ *The A.V. Club* is an online news magazine and an entertainment website featuring interviews and other articles relating to pop culture media. When the interview was conducted, *The Powerpuff Girls* was popular throughout the United States and was receiving international recognition. In the interview, Phipps asks McCracken about his philosophy on animation. He responds by stating how he feels cartoons or animations could be made for both adults and kids.²⁹ For example he brings up the old 60s' TV series, Adam West's *Batman*, and describes how kids of the time saw the show as "real" and intense with danger around the corner for the cape crusader; at the same time, the show was

²⁸ Craig McCracken, "The Powerpuff Girls," Interview by Keith Phipps, *The A.V. Club*, June 6, 2000, [AV Club \(https://www.avclub.com/the-powerpuff-girls-1798208069\)](https://www.avclub.com/the-powerpuff-girls-1798208069).

²⁹ McCracken, Interview, response #12, 2000.

funny and humorous for their parents who understood the jokes.³⁰ His philosophy about animation was shared amongst new American animators who were influenced by Japanese anime. In the anime style, creators are able to present story situations or plot issues enjoyed by any age group, they have little to no restrictions. Phipps also asks McCracken about how anime appeals to him; he responds with, “the Japanese do the best action films in animation, so when you're studying animation, you look to the best sources you can for whatever you're trying to be inspired by.”³¹ McCracken explained when he wanted to learn how to do action sequences, he would watch anime.³² However while he does acknowledge anime as being an inspiration and influence on the fight scenes in his show *Powerpuff Girls*, he explains the cartoon was not a “definite homage” to anime; because he also had a lot of different influences mixed in *Powerpuff*.³³ This interview is the first of many examples of how American animators were influenced or inspired by anime in the creation of their cartoons.³⁴ Although in the late 90s, and early 2000s, most audiences would admit they still didn’t fully understand anime but watched some as McCracken stated, “I like Japanese stuff. I don't know too much about it, but [Hayao] Miyazaki's films, like *Princess Mononoke*, are incredible.”³⁵ *The Powerpuff Girls* was the first anime-inspired cartoon created in America, but it wasn’t the last. Another famous anime-inspired cartoon which came after *Powerpuff*, was the series *Samurai Jack* (2001).

³⁰ William Dozier, *Batman*, TV, developed by Lorenzo Semple Jr. (1966; Los Angeles, CA: 20th Century Fox Television, ABC, 1966), TV; McCracken, Interview, response #12, 2000.

³¹ McCracken, Interview, response #21, 2000.

³² McCracken, Interview, response #21, 2000.

³³ McCracken, Interview, response #21, 2000.

³⁴ Daliot-Bul and Otmazgin, *Anime Boom*, 21.

³⁵ McCracken, Interview, response #25, 2000.

Samurai Jack is an American cartoon which premiered on cartoon network in 2001. The show was created by Genndy Tartakovsky for Cartoon Network and later finished on Adult Swim's Toonami block in 2017. The series takes place in ancient times when warriors still used swords and shields to battle. A mysterious evil arrives from outer space and begins to wreak havoc on the land, one day transforming itself into a demonic entity known as Aku. A young samurai prince is sent away from his family's land before Aku destroys it. Different leaders escort the prince around the world, helping him receive training from all cultures of the human race. He returns after years of training and is given his father's mystical sword which was endowed with sacred power from the gods. Before this unnamed samurai can finish off Aku, it opens up a portal through space-time sending the samurai into a dystopian future where Aku rules the earth. The samurai is given the name "Jack" by non-human locals of a futuristic city; he now is on the path to find a way back to his own time and save the world from "the evil that is Aku." Tartakovsky's creation is considered to be an anime-inspired cartoon because of his use of adult themes and stories; such as episodes concerning death and loss, which were unheard of or at the least unusual to be seen in an American kid cartoon.³⁶ Interestingly, however, Tartakovsky claims his show was influenced more by old Japanese cinema than by anime in his interview with *Vice* (2017).

Tom Usher from *Vice*, a Canadian print magazine, interviewed Genndy Tartakovsky in 2017. Usher asks Tartakovsky how anime has influenced his T.V. Series, *Samurai Jack*, he replies by saying, "It's funny that a lot of my influences aren't actually manga and anime... For *Jack* there are a lot of 70s films: *The Conversation*, *Apocalypse Now*, Sergio Leone westerns, Sam Peckinpah films, as well as [Akira] Kurosawa, of course."³⁷ According to Tartakovsky, Hollywood films and

³⁶ Daliot-Bul and Otmazgin, *Anime Boom*, 119.

³⁷ Genndy Tartakovsky, "Talking to the Animator Behind Your Favorite Cartoon Network Characters," Interview by Tom Usher, *Vice*, April 6, 2017, [Vice \(https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/z49d9e/you-can-thank-genndy-tartakovsky-for-the-cartoon-network-holy-trinity\)](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/z49d9e/you-can-thank-genndy-tartakovsky-for-the-cartoon-network-holy-trinity).

Japanese cinema classics had a larger influence on his creation in comparison to anime's influence. However, anime-inspired themes or animation techniques can be found in his work. Anyone who has watched a Hayao Miyazaki movie can also clearly see the quiet long shots or atmospheric horizontal camera panning in *Jack*; as can be seen in this image of Samurai Jack walking through a remote snowy forest (See Figure 8). In a later interview Tartakovsky did with *Polygon* (2019), this anime-inspired notion is confirmed.

Tartakovsky was interviewed again in 2019 by Chelsea Stark from *Polygon*, an American video game news website. Stark asks Tartakovsky about his new show *Primal* and how he came up with the final design; he talks about how at first his characters and environments looked too much like Osamu Tezuka's *Astro Boy*.³⁸ His discussion about Tezuka's *Astro Boy* reveals his extensive knowledge of anime, and its seemingly subconscious influence on him. Stark also asks him what he would consider to be his masterpiece or "opus," and he replies by stating, "Like I want to have a career like Miyazaki or whatever...He's got 11 films and they're all incredible in their own unique way."³⁹ Tartakovsky admits Miyazaki is someone he reveres and looks up to. This admiration would explain the "Miyazaki moments," as seen in *Nausicaä* and Miyazaki's other films, found in abundance in Tartakovsky's cartoon *Samurai Jack*. The calming non-vocal scenes, lacking in any voices besides the sounds of nature (the wind, the water, the creatures) and Jack's thematic sentiments about caring for the environment all seem to stem from Tartakovsky's "Miyazaki inspirations." Another anime-inspired cartoon released later on, which instead had a creator who was willing to openly acknowledge his anime influence was *Teen Titans* (2003).

³⁸ Genndy Tartakovsky, "Genndy Tartakovsky: 'I want to be the best'," Interview by Chelsea Stark, *Polygon*, Oct 7, 2019, [Polygon \(https://www.polygon.com/2019/10/7/20902728/genndy-tartakovsky-primal-adult-swim-star-wars-samurai-jack-interview\)](https://www.polygon.com/2019/10/7/20902728/genndy-tartakovsky-primal-adult-swim-star-wars-samurai-jack-interview).

³⁹ Tartakovsky, Interview, response #31, 2019.

Teen Titans is an animated TV series created by Glen Murakami and Sam Register which premiered on Cartoon network in 2003. The show is an adaptation of a superhero comic book of the same name by DC Comics. The story revolves around five teenagers with unique powers and skills who form a crime-fighting team known as the “Teen Titans.” The leader of the team, Robin, tries to keep them together despite facing difficult challenges either against villains or themselves. Most episodes focus on their own internal character issues and bad guys they must face. Typical issues facing teenagers such as pimples, friendships, relationships, and understanding “who they are in the world” are shown through a series of episodes; despite their superpowers or awesome skills (in Robin’s case), they are still all adolescents growing up. *Teen Titans* came about during the middle of the anime boom in the United States. The show has significant influence from anime as seen in the animation technique of making the characters appear detailed in most scenes and switching to a chibi (“cute and little”) or SD (“super deformed”) look for humor; often showing the characters as small with big heads (See Figure 13). Another influence taken from anime known as kaogei (“face performance”), is the exaggeration in characters' expressions to emphasize the internal emotions they are going through at a certain moment (See Figure 14). The series also uses an opening animation sequence reminiscent of anime openings with its visual aesthetics and music performed by a Japanese duo rock group, *Puffy AmiYumi*.⁴⁰ Murakami admits the inspiration he received from anime when creating the show in an interview he did with *ANIMATIONWorld Magazine* (2003).

Martin Goodman in *ANIMATIONWorld Magazine*, a magazine focused on news and articles for animators and fans, interviewed Glen Murakami on August 14, 2003. In the interview Goodman asks Murakami about his show *Teen Titans* and its influences. Murakami confirms anime was a big part in the creation of his show and was a direction he wanted to go in since he and other animators

⁴⁰ *Puffy AmiYumi*, Sony Music Entertainment Japan (Ki/oon Music), 1996-2011, CD.

were big fans of the style.⁴¹ The anime style can be seen in his character designs for Robin, Beast Boy, Cyborg, Raven, and Starfire as seen in this image of them kicking back watching the telly (British word for T.V.) in their home, “Titans’ Tower” (See Figure 9).⁴² He also talks about how it was inevitable for him to want to “mix” the styles, “I had seen a lot of different things being done with anime, and I thought that was a wonderful opportunity to tell stories in a different way... So it just seemed sort of natural that a hybrid would occur.”⁴³ Murakami’s style of animating has been talked about before by scholars and fans as “Murakanime” since he takes animation techniques from anime designs and puts them into his own cartoon projects. One of the *anime* techniques he describes in this interview is the Super Deformed (SD) or “Super D” animation, mentioned in the previous paragraph, which aids in the emoting or expressing of the character's inner feelings by exaggerating their body proportions or facial expressions.⁴⁴ The use of SD can be seen in a large amount of the episodes in *Titans* as well as other limited animation techniques from anime. Murakami also acknowledges how much anime influenced him more than comics, “I think even growing up at that time I was exposed to a lot of variety as far as independent comics. I'm sure that affects the show. *Titans*, though, has been more influenced by anime than anything else.”⁴⁵ The roots of anime’s impact can also be felt in observing Murakami’s character designs for the show. *Teen Titans* was one of the popular examples of an American anime-inspired cartoon which

⁴¹ Glen Murakami, “Talkin’ ‘Teen Titans’: Glen Murakami Raps About His Latest Superhero Series,” Interview by Martin Goodman, *ANIMATIONWorld*, August 14, 2003, [Interview \(https://www.awn.com/animationworld/talkin-teen-titans-glen-murakami-raps-about-his-latest-superhero-series\)](https://www.awn.com/animationworld/talkin-teen-titans-glen-murakami-raps-about-his-latest-superhero-series).

⁴² Daliot-Bul and Otmazgin, *Anime Boom*, 119.

⁴³ Murakami, Interview, response #5, 2003.

⁴⁴ Murakami, Interview, response #7, 2003.

⁴⁵ Murakami, Interview, response #17, 2003.

flourished and was in abundance in the early 2000s. The last and one of the most famous examples of an American anime-inspired cartoon is called *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2005).

Avatar: The Last Airbender is an anime-inspired cartoon created by Bryan Konietzko and Michael Dante DiMartino for Nickelodeon Animation Studio. It aired on Nickelodeon in 2005 and quickly became popular among viewers of the channel. The story centers around the main character Aang, who is the last airbender in existence and is also the “Avatar.” In Aang’s world “benders” are people who can control and manipulate elements to their bidding such as water, air, earth, or fire. The Avatar is the only person who can master all four of the elements. Aang is asleep for one hundred years inside of a gigantic iceball he created when he crashed into the ocean. During Aang’s entrapment the world went to war when the fire nation decided to wage a global war on everyone else to expand their empire. The show focuses on Aang and his newfound friends trying to save the world from the fire nation and bring peace and balance back to the world. Anime influenced character designs and animation sequences in this cartoon series; as can be seen in this image of Aang riding his airball which he creates through his airbending, happily going across the screen (See Figure 10). The show takes many elements from anime like *Titans* did; it uses SD techniques but goes further in its influence by using a linear story which depicts Aang building his power and mastering one element to the next, as would usually be seen in a shonen (young boy’s) anime.⁴⁶ In other American cartoon stories, almost all the time if not always, are not linear and instead take place as entertaining short skits having no connection to the previous episodes; cartoons usually don’t develop the characters, as in showing the viewer their emotional changes through time. Cartoon characters are likelier to be one-dimensional unlike their three-dimensional anime counterparts. In *Avatar*, Aang’s personality goes through a maturity and development which most

⁴⁶ Daliot-Bul and Otmazgin, *Anime Boom*, 119.

likely wouldn't have been seen had the creators not watched an anime or two. Bryan Konietzko and Michael Dante DiMartino discuss anime's influence on them and their show in an interview they did with *IGN* (2007).

Eduardo Vasconcellos from *IGN*, an American entertainment media and video game website, interviewed the creators of *Avatar* on Sep 6, 2007. Vasconcellos asks Konietzko and DiMartino if anime had an influence on them and they respond by saying their love of Japanese anime, Hong Kong action films, and series like the *Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* did have an influence in the making of the show.⁴⁷ They wanted to make an epic or fantasy story such as *LOTR* and *Harry*, but do it in a different way resembling more anime and their own interests. According to DiMartino, “Bryan and I love the films of Hayao Miyazaki. The stories and emotional depth of *Spirited Away*, and *Princess Mononoke* were big inspirations for us when we began creating *Avatar*.”⁴⁸ The Miyazaki storytelling aspects are prevalent in how one of the main “villains,” Zuko, is not easily categorized as “evil” or “good”; rather he is depicted as human and comes to change himself into a hero who aids Aang in the end.

Avatar became so-akin to an anime-like series it had people cosplaying (fans dressing up in costumes of their favorite characters) in masses, as was usually normal for anime shows.⁴⁹ The creators never expected their anime-influenced cartoon to have such an effect on people. However Konietzko admits although people may consider *Avatar* to be an anime, he remains cautious: “I’ll just say that America - us included - has a long way to go to catch up with the animated work being

⁴⁷Bryan Konietzko and Michael D. DiMartino, “Interview: Avatar's Bryan Konietzko and Michael Dante DiMartino,” Interview by Eduardo Vasconcellos, *IGN*, Sep 6, 2007, [Article \(https://www.ign.com/articles/2007/09/06/interview-avatars-bryan-konietzko-and-michael-dante-dimartino\)](https://www.ign.com/articles/2007/09/06/interview-avatars-bryan-konietzko-and-michael-dante-dimartino).

⁴⁸ Konietzko and DiMartino, Interview, response #1, 2007.

⁴⁹ Konietzko and DiMartino, Interview, response #8, 2007.

done in a handful of countries, namely Japan.”⁵⁰ The co-creators acknowledge their own influences and how big an impact anime had on their animations and designs; they also accept the notion that they didn’t create an “anime,” only a “cartoon” with anime elements. *Avatar* is significant in the history of anime-inspired cartoons because it was technically the most recent popular cartoon to be influenced by anime and have American animators admit to such an inspiration in their work. The last episode of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* aired on July 19, 2008. The show seemed to have not only marked the end of the anime boom in the U.S; it also represented one of the last American anime-inspired cartoons to have ever been made. The global financial crisis of 2007 - 2008 may explain why many potential American investors and producers in the animation business chose not to “risk” or gamble their money with “anime-inspired” cartoons. What came in 2017 almost a decade later was of a new creation, a form of animation the world had not yet seen.

Neo Yokio is an animated series created by Ezra Koenig and produced by Production I.G. and Studio Deen. It premiered on September 22, 2017 through Netflix, an online streaming platform available on T.Vs, phones, computers, and tablets for a monthly subscription. The story focuses on the life of a young bachelor named Kaz Kaan who is from a wealthy family of "Magistocrats". Magistocrats were magicians of the old Neo Yokio, a city based on an alternate version of New York and Tokyo mixture; these magicians defeated demons plaguing the city and gained a high class status in the city’s society. Kaz is plagued with melancholy and is disillusioned by his uppity rich lifestyle, trying to figure out what he wants out of life and the city. The show was probably made to be a parody on capitalism, the bourgeoisie, anime in general, and America’s attempts in the past at creating anime-inspired cartoons during the anime boom years (late 1990s-2000s). The show came out at a time when Japan was celebrating what it considered to be “one hundred years” of anime since the first Japanese animation or “anime” *Namakura Gatana* (according to marketers in

⁵⁰ Konietzko and DiMartino, Interview, response #6, 2007.

Japan), was created. *Yokio* was the first example of an American creator approaching an anime studio to create their own anime TV series. The show seems to be a “collaboration,” but since its concept wasn’t fifty/fifty created and formed by the U.S and Japan (as was the case for *Transformers*), it doesn’t appear to be an exact collaboration. The series is also not an “anime-inspired cartoon,” and is not an “anime” in the traditional (only made by Japan) sense either. The classification for *Neo Yokio* falls into an all new category, appropriately labeled as “American-anime.” The “animeness” of the show can be seen in its character designs such as the ones depicted in this image of Kaz and his “mecha” (piloted robot) butler Charles (oddly enough Charles’ character concept seems to also reference the collaborated animated series, *Transformers* 84’) (See Figure 11). Although some critics or fans may see the show as a parody or satire comedy anime, it is nonetheless a good candidate for what may come to be known as “American-anime.” Ezra Koenig was interviewed by *Pitchfork* (2017) about his show, which they referred to as his “anime.”

Ryan Dombal from *Pitchfork*, an online music magazine, interviewed *Neo Yokio*’s creator Ezra Koenig about his anime in an article titled “Ezra Koenig on His New Anime Series and the Next Vampire Weekend Album” in 2017. Dombal asks Koenig why he wanted to present the show as an “anime series” and he responds, “The initial idea of it being called “Neo Yokio” was slightly about seeing New York in an anime style.”⁵¹ Koenig right at the start admits he wanted to create an “anime”. This American magazine also chose to title his show as an “anime” and not a cartoon, which is interesting since the traditional view from some American anime scholars and most U.S. fans was, “only Japan makes anime.” Koenig goes on to discuss how, in his view, anime has always been “international” in conception or pertaining to multiple cultures in its locations/themes despite

⁵¹ Ezra Koenig, “Ezra Koenig on His New Anime Series and the Next Vampire Weekend Album,” Interview by Ryan Dombal, *Pitchfork*, Sep 22, 2017, [Pitchfork \(https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/ezra-koenig-interview-new-anime-series-next-vampire-weekend-album/\)](https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/ezra-koenig-interview-new-anime-series-next-vampire-weekend-album/).

being created in Japan.⁵² Anime's "international sensibilities" do make it easier to be considered a part of global culture and therefore, possible to be created and developed in other countries.

However Koenig states how he wanted to work with anime studios from Japan because he felt they were the only ones who could make anime "properly", "we could only do it if we were working with Japanese partners...I wanted to work with people who made the things that we're referencing and paying tribute to."⁵³

Although Koenig arguably created what may become known as "American-anime," his anime is still widely controversial. Some fans view *Yokio* as a wannabe sham, not "worthy" of the label of *anime* (despite *Neo Yokio* being directed by a famous anime director and animated by two famous anime studios in Japan). Other fans and scholars view the show as a funny anime parody. *Neo Yokio* to this day may be recognized by American magazines and newspapers as an "anime" but, the series is only found on cartoon sites besides its home on Netflix; whereas *Castlevania* (2017) is found on Netflix, anime sites, and cartoon sites and is widely considered to be an *anime*, with little to no debate from fans or critics (who may or may not know its American origins). This show is well deserving of the label of a true "American-anime."

Castlevania is an American-anime developed by Adi Shankar and directed by Sam Deats and Adam Deats. It premiered on July 7, 2017 on Netflix. The show is based on the video game series of the same name created by the Japanese game company, Konami. The story focuses on a dark fantasy version of Eastern Europe in a place called Wallachia, where Dracula resides. In the plot Dracula's human wife is murdered by the church because they assumed she was practicing witchcraft; in actuality she was studying medicine and science to find ways to better serve her community. Dracula becomes outraged and declares war on all of humanity using demons and other

⁵² Koenig, Interview, response #1, 2017.

⁵³ Koenig, Interview, response #2, 2017.

sinister creatures to massacre all humankind. The main protagonist, Trevor Belmont, and his friends must band together to save humanity from its impending doom by defeating Dracula. The show uses many aspects from other anime such as “sakuga” (Japanese term meaning: the moment in the animation when the quality skyrockets and becomes super intense) throughout its episodes and in its character designs and overall aesthetic. The story also dives into adult-oriented themes and explicit bloody death scenes not found in most American animations. The “seinen” (anime for an adult audience) style can be seen in this gritty and bloody scene of Trevor Belmont and his allies, Alucard and Sypha, standing in a room of vampires they slaughtered (See Figure 12). The anime was a first of its kind since it was animated and developed by American producers and animators.

Castlevania’s script and story were also written by a British writer, Warren Ellis. Co-founder Brad Graeber and creative director Sam Deats from the animation studio, Powerhouse Animation, which created the series were interviewed by *Gizmodo* (2017) about their American-anime.

Evan Narcisse from *Gizmodo*, a design, technology, and science-fiction website, interviewed Sam Deats and Brad Graeber on August 2, 2017. When the interviewer asks about the show, Sam Deats doesn’t use the word “cartoon” instead he talks about how he always wanted to create his own action anime someday.⁵⁴ Deats confidently welcomes the idea and notion that animators outside of Japan can create anime as well. When they pitched the storyboard and direction of the show to the producers, Brad Graeber talks about how they presented them with a “kind of kung-fu/Mexican anime thing.”⁵⁵ At first they didn’t understand what the show was, besides knowing its art was leaning towards an anime style. Although, they do discuss how they wanted the art style to

⁵⁴ Sam Deats and Brad Graeber, “The Animation Studio That Made *Castlevania* Explains Why It Was a Dream Project,” Interview by Evan Narcisse, *Gizmodo*, August 2, 2017, [Gizmodo \(https://io9.gizmodo.com/the-animation-studio-that-made-castlevania-explains-why-1797476526\)](https://io9.gizmodo.com/the-animation-studio-that-made-castlevania-explains-why-1797476526).

⁵⁵ Deats and Graeber, Interview, response #6, 2017.

be influenced by and to reference Ayami Kojima's artwork, the original character designer and artist for most installments in the *Castlevania* video games series; they wanted to make it animatable by using anime as the focus.⁵⁶ Kojima's old video game designs are detailed and could be considered "works of art," these kinds of picturesque designs would be far too time consuming and expensive for the producers to have undertaken. The interviewer asks how they managed to work with a style or "idiom" originating from another country; Sam Deats responds by stating, "There's always the debate about whether a studio in the US that's anime-influenced is, in itself, anime...And I'll let other people decide... But the artists and animators here, obviously being heavily influenced by anime, it was easy for us to inject that look and feel into the show."⁵⁷ Deats makes it clear it was possible for him and his animators to get the job done and create an anime show. Graeber responds with, "It's tricky because people classify it by geography or style...That's up to the person...But people need to get used to it."⁵⁸ Graeber points out in his opinion anime is another animation style which can be emulated or redone by anyone; the medium is not exclusive to only one country (Japan); fans and critics fixated on the geography of a creation need to be silent and listen to what the animators creating and working with these styles have to say. This phenomena is not exclusive to anime, in the music industry for example, rock and roll may have been seen at one time to be exclusive and "could only be made" by Americans; nowadays most acknowledge the large number of rock bands from around the world who are not American. Sam Deats ends the interview by stating, "I think any artist that's been doing this for a while will tell you the same thing, that they are the sum of their influences. And if you've grown up being influenced by anime-style work, then

⁵⁶ Deats and Graeber, Interview, response #7, 2017.

⁵⁷ Deats and Graeber, Interview, response #11, 2017.

⁵⁸ Deats and Graeber, Interview, response #11, 2017.

that's going to be the look and feel of the work that you're doing."⁵⁹ *Castlevania* is an iconic series and is extremely popular. The anime is a first because it was created outside of Japan and is in all respects an American-anime.

Over the years anime has exploded in popularity in the United States; fan gatherings such as Anime Expo in Los Angeles have been drawing almost a half a million people in recent times.⁶⁰ During the anime-boom (1998-2000s), the "cross-cultural pollination" of animation occurred between America and Japan because Japanese anime was observed as a global center of animation for most American animators.⁶¹ Anime characters do not appear realistically human or "Japanese," however, they don't appear as "white or caucasian" either; they are only seen as anime characters by viewers and have mukokuseki ("statelessness"). This stateless appearance aided in their exportability to other countries such as the U.S.⁶² These "stateless beings" in the end went on to influence and inspire America to the point where animators in the states began to create their own stateless characters, American-anime. As Napier puts it, "Anime thus both celebrates differences and transcends it, creating a new kind of artistic space that remains informed and enriched by modes of representation that are both culturally traditional and representative of the universal properties of the human imagination."⁶³

⁵⁹ Deats and Graeber, Interview, response #12, 2017.

⁶⁰ Daliot-Bul and Otmazgin, *Anime Boom*, 2.

⁶¹ Daliot-Bul and Otmazgin, 107.

⁶² Daliot-Bul and Otmazgin, 124; Napier, *From Akira to Howl's*, 24.

⁶³ Napier, 34.

Appendix



Figure 1. *Namakura Gatana* (created by Jun'ichi Kōuchi, 1917). © 1917 Kōuchi Jun'ichi.

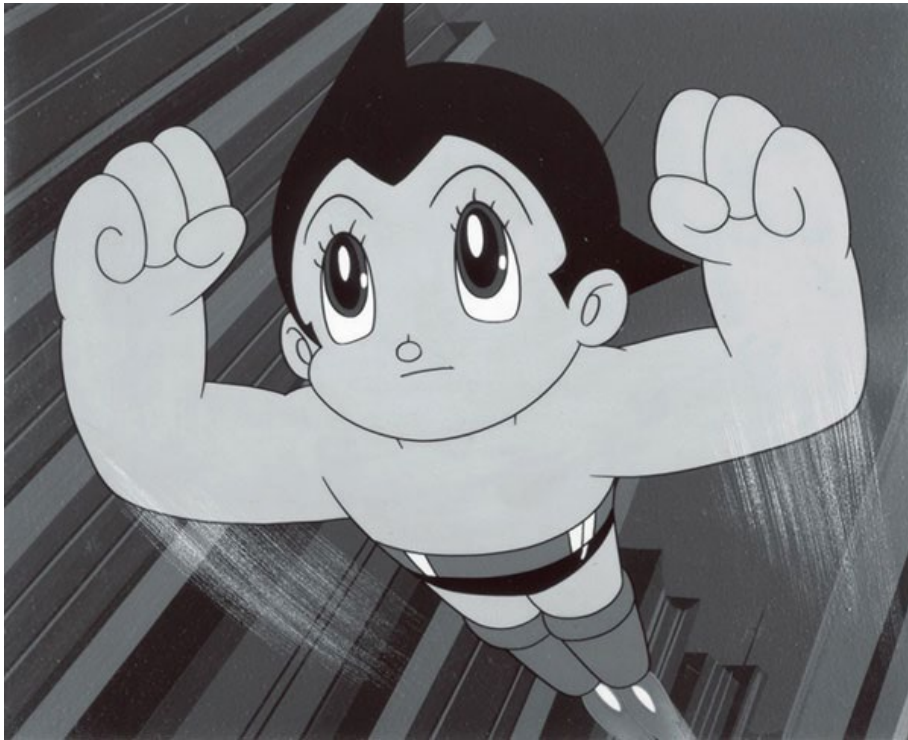


Figure 2. *Astro Boy* (created by Osamu Tezuka, 1963). © 1963 Tezuka Osamu, Mushi Production.

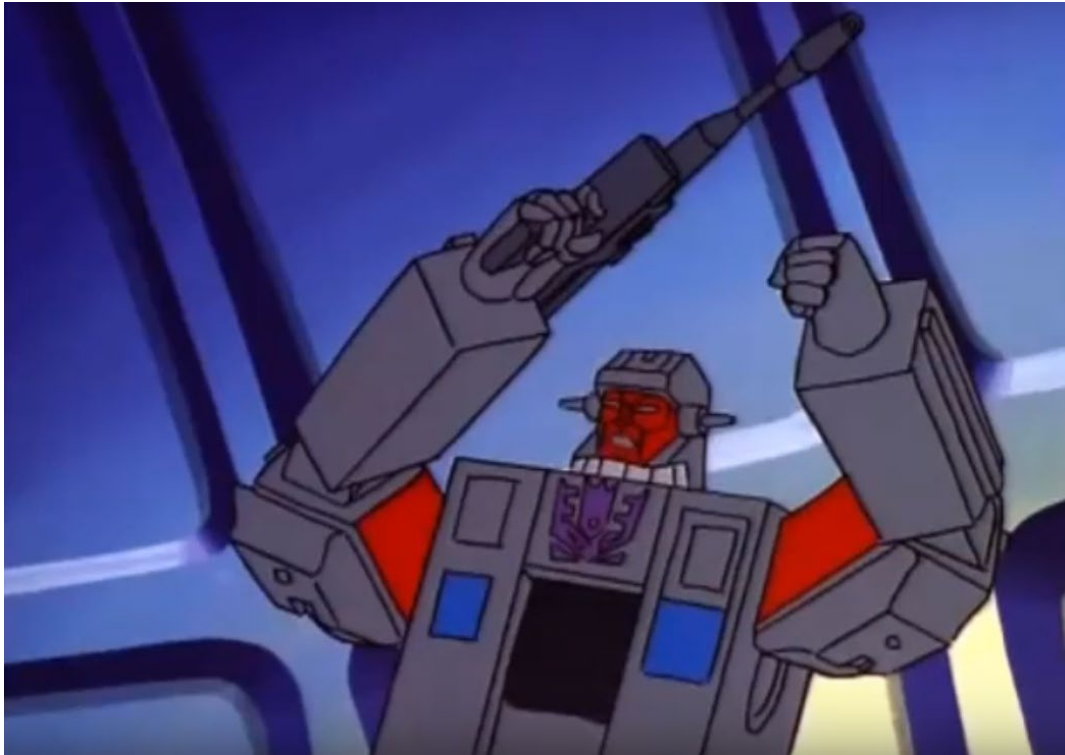


Figure 3. *The Transformers* (created by Hasbro and Takara, 1984).
© 1984 Takara and Hasbro, Toei Animation.

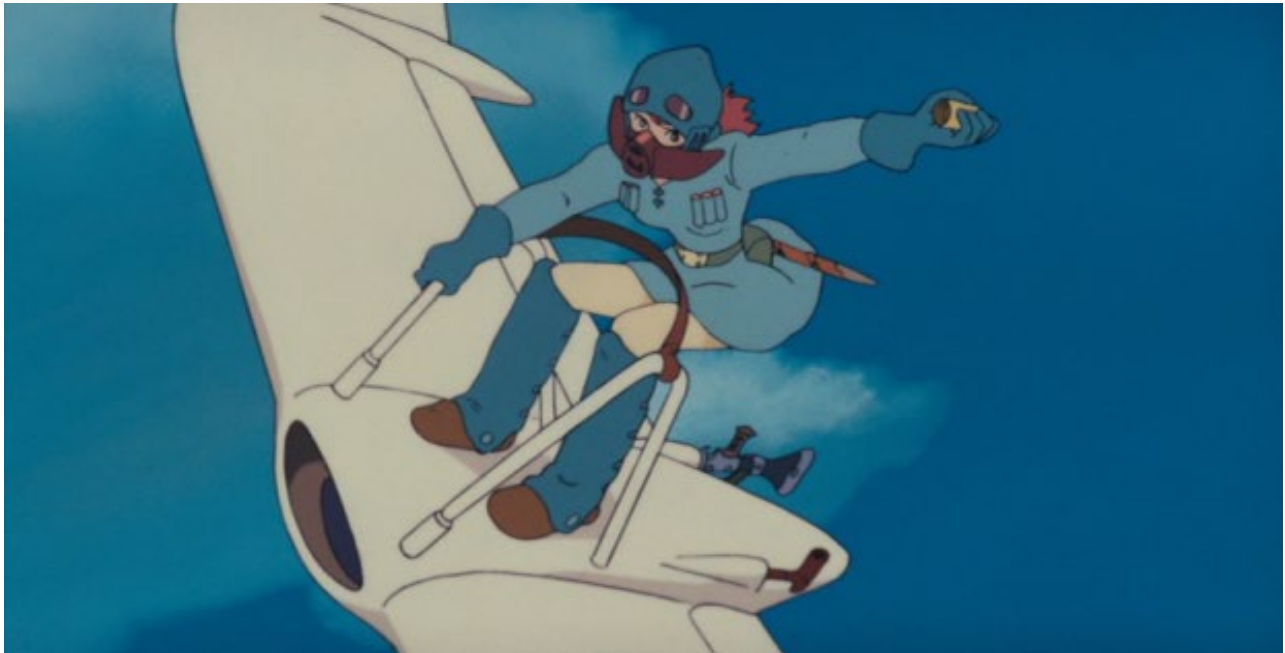


Figure 4. *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (created by Hayao Miyazaki, 1984).
© 1984 Miyazaki Hayao, Topcraft.



Figure 5. *Dragon Ball Z* (story created by Akira Toriyama and directed by Nishio Daisuke, 1989).

© 1989 Daisuke Nishio, Toei Animation.



Figure 6. *The Powerpuff Girls* (created by Craig McCracken, 1998).

© 1998 McCracken Craig, Hanna-Barbera Cartoons.



Figure 7. (Left) *Dragon Ball Z* "Free the Future." Episode #194 (1993). [10:24-10:28] (Right) *The Powerpuff Girls* "Stuck Up, Up, and Away." Episode #14. (1999). [8:55-8:59]



Figure 8. *Samurai Jack* (created by Genndy Tartakovsky, 2001).
© 2001 Tartakovsky Genndy, Cartoon Network.



Figure 9. *Teen Titans* (Developed by Glen Murakami and Sam Register, 2003).
© 2003 Murakami Glen, Cartoon Network.



Figure 10. *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (Created by Bryan Konietzko and Michael Dante DiMartino, 2005). © 2005 Konietzko Bryan and DiMartino Dante Michael, Nickelodeon.

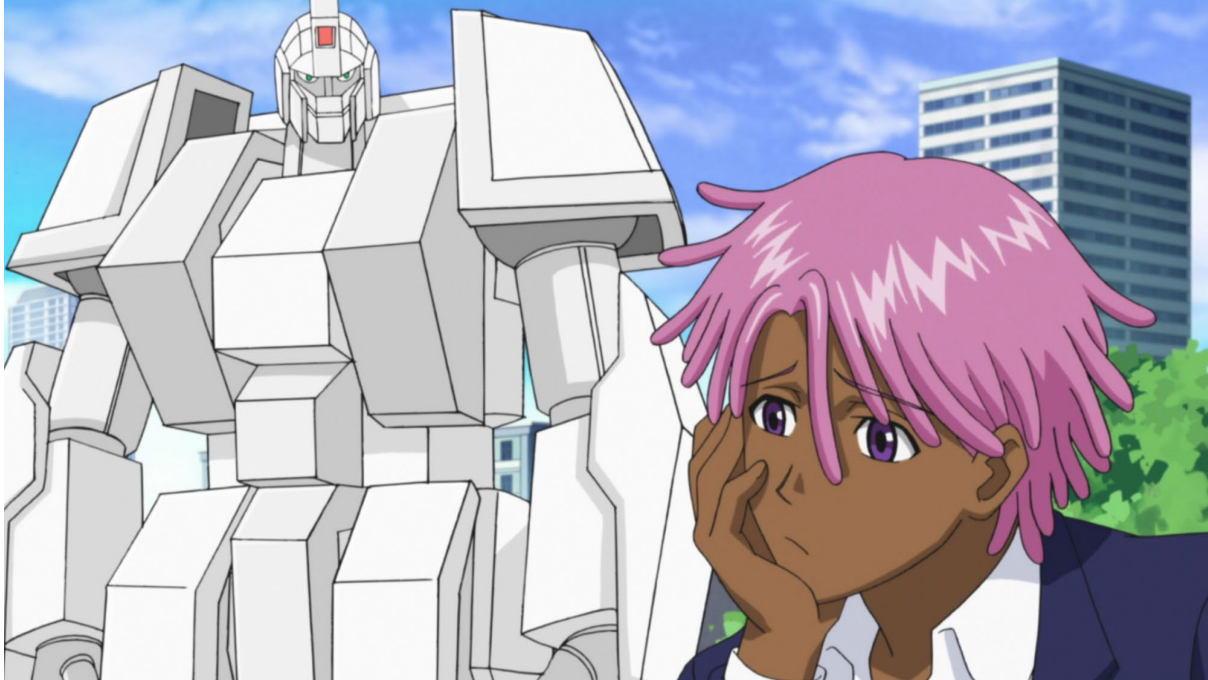


Figure 11. *Neo Yokio* (Created by Ezra Koenig, 2017). © 2017 Koenig Ezra, Netflix.

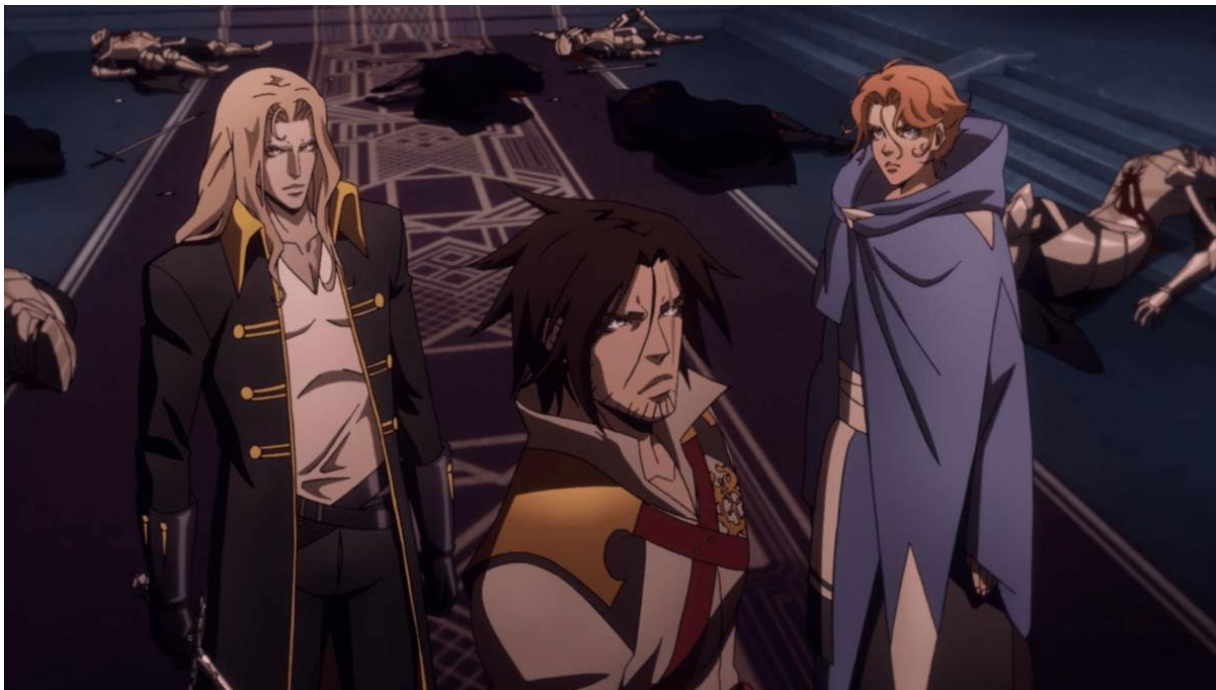


Figure 12. *Castlevania* (Developed by Adi Shankar and Directed by Sam Deats and Adam Deats, 2017). © 2017 Deats Sam and Deats Adam, Netflix.

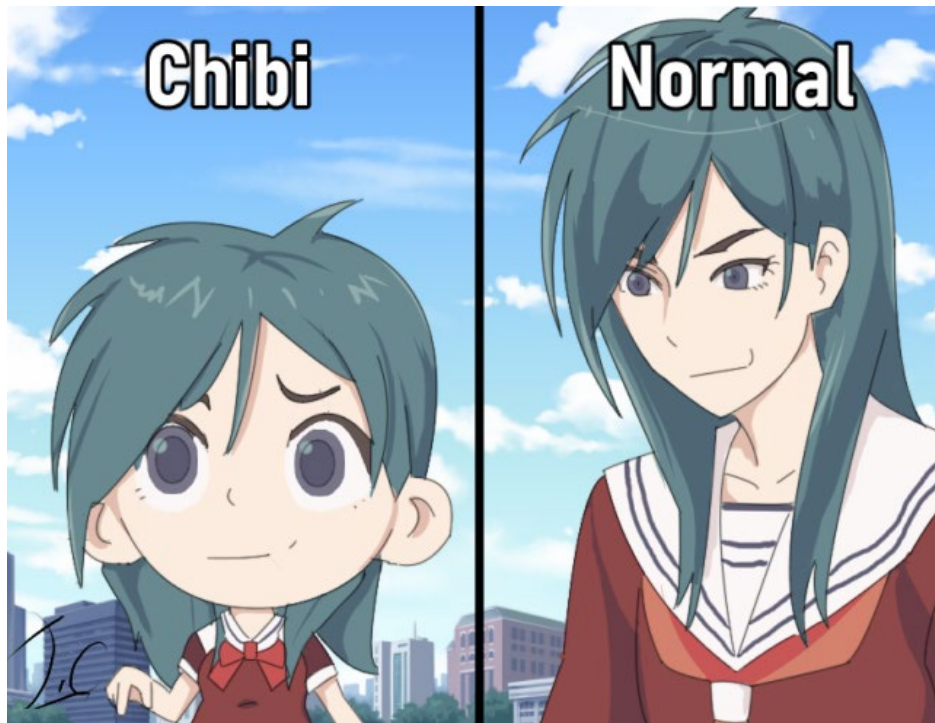


Figure 13. Chibi/Normal Anime Drawing (Created by Skyb0y, 2020). © 2020 Skyb0y.



Figure 14. Kaogei (Created by Skyb0y, 2020). © 2020 Skyb0y.

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