

***Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination.* Anne Allison. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006. 332 pp.¹**

Reviewed by Michael Dylan Foster

In this important and timely work, Anne Allison explores the global impact of made-in-Japan toys at the cusp of the millennium. While introducing a number of toys that have contributed to Japan's growing cultural power in children's entertainment around the world, Allison also examines the processes by which Japanese cultural products are translated and transformed for non-Japanese consumers. Perhaps the word "toy" is somewhat misleading here: indeed, Allison's discussion vividly demonstrates the multiplicity of platforms available for merchandising and commodifying play/entertainment of all sorts, the way in which, for example, narratives made for television morph into action figures, or a handheld electronic game is complemented by trading cards, manga (comics), animated television shows, and feature films.

Allison is an experienced anthropologist of Japan; with this project she has taken on a difficult and postmodern ethnographic challenge. As she states, "the object of study here—toys that travel in a global marketplace and project fantasies of endless morphing and reconstruction—is unwieldy, mobile, and multiedged" (p. 32). Accordingly, she immerses herself in the play culture of different fieldwork sites in both Japan and the U.S., interviewing children (and their parents) as well as toy industry executives, designers, and marketers in both countries. She also draws on a wide range of academic and popular sources in both English and Japanese. To be sure, the resulting work is at times overwhelming, but it is always informative, theoretically complex, and full of critical insights into contemporary childhood, the aesthetics of play, and the logic of global capitalism.

In the first chapter, "Enchanted Commodities," Allison introduces the theoretical frameworks that she will deploy throughout, explaining that her inquiry revolves around three central issues—fantasy, capitalism, and globalization—and will "tack between Japan and the United States and move dialectically between the level of fantasy and play and that of context and the politico-economic marketplace" (p. 7). The second chapter provides a historical overview of the postwar Japanese toy industry. From the very beginning, we see the makings of a transnational circuit of capital and culture: during the American occupation resourceful Japanese toy makers recrafted tin cans, discarded from U.S. military rations, into toy jeeps and dolls. In 1947 these toys became the first Japanese export of the postwar period, many of them finding their way into the hands of American children. This chapter also contains a thoughtful discussion of two other postwar made-in-Japan products that would be reworked for a non-Japanese marketplace: *Gojira* (Godzilla) and *Tetsuwan Atom* (Astro Boy). The third chapter brings the reader up to date with a brief snapshot of the social pressures and problems affecting Japanese youth in the last decade of the twentieth century, the period on which Allison will focus for the rest of the book.

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The author then devotes one chapter each to *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*, *Sailor Moon* and *tamagotchi*, with two chapters dedicated to the *Pokémon* phenomenon. *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* and *Sailor Moon* are both Japanese television series, one live-action and the other anime (animation), that were introduced to the U.S. (and subsequently other markets) with great success during the 1990s. In both cases, Allison details the different processes of transformation and “glocalization” these narratives underwent for the non-Japanese market, as well as the numerous spin-off products that contributed to their ongoing commercial (and cultural) success.

The chapter on the *tamagotchi*, the small electronic virtual pet that “was called ‘the world’s most popular toy’” (p. 163) at the height of its popularity in the late 1990s, is particularly provocative. Not only does Allison describe the socio-economic dynamics of its explosive success in Japan and abroad, but she also explores some of the profound philosophical questions—universal versus particular, nature versus culture—raised by the concept of an electronic object that demands care, “grows up” and eventually “dies.”

Perhaps, however, the real heart of the book is the discussion of the *Pokémon* (lit. “Pocket Monsters”) phenomenon. Allison first details the development of the product in Japan, from its original conception as a handheld electronic game to its proliferation as a television series, a string of feature films, and popular trading cards. She explores the socio-economic ideologies embedded in the playing of the game itself, including the capitalist exhortation to “get” all available pocket monsters through an admixture of exchange and battle (“gotta catch ‘em all” in the American version). Her second chapter on *Pokémon* focuses on the marketing of the product abroad, the “*Pokémonization* of America (and the World)” (p. 234), a process through which Japan’s soft power in the global cultural arena is clearly confirmed and through which the aesthetics of “postmodern play” (p. 235) profoundly challenge traditional conceptions of nation and authenticity.

The book is clearly organized, illustrated throughout, and ultimately provides both a solid (if detailed) introduction to Japanese toy culture for those new to the subject and a thought-provoking study for those already engaged in related research. My only real criticism is that there is a repetitiveness between chapters; some sections might have benefited from more concise editing. Having said this, however, this repetitiveness also allows each chapter to stand on its own: I can easily imagine individual chapters being used in courses on a range of subjects, including classes on Japanese/American popular culture, global capitalism, media studies, and the sociology of collecting. Ultimately, like any innovative and detailed study, Allison’s book raises more questions than it can possibly answer, but these questions, and the book itself, will inform critical inquiry for years to come. For comprehending the complexities of global financial and cultural flows, toys offer serious insight.

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