Why the world is so animated about anime

Japan's cartoons have conquered its screens, and more
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Most athletes raise their fists in triumph after a win. When Noah Lyles, an American sprinter, won gold in the Olympics 100-metre race in August, he held his hands out in front of him, wrists together and fingers extended, as though getting ready to catch a large ball. The gesture may have seemed odd, but fans of Japanese animation knew immediately that Mr Lyles, an avowed fan of the genre, was making a reference to a popular franchise, "Dragon Ball".

Those unfamiliar with the genre often wonder what anime is.
"Animation created in Japan" is the simple definition offered by Rahul Purini, the head of Crunchyroll, an anime-streaming service with around 130m users across 200 countries. But there is also an aesthetic connotation: anime is hand-drawn and usually two-dimensional, unlike the photorealistic 3d animation that has grown more common outside Japan. The characters often resemble hyper-caffeinated Tintins, with unusually large, expressive eyes, small noses, strange hair and easily decipherable emotions.

Anime tends to be set in non-specific places, such as vaguely European-looking cities for some films by Miyazaki Hayao, Japan's most acclaimed creator. The setting makes it easy for non-Japanese audiences to relate; the only barrier is language, and animation is more easily dubbed than live-action films.
Recently anime has raced into people's homes with Lyles-like speed. Anime now makes almost half its profits abroad. Netflix's anime titles had more than 1bn views in over 190 countries last year; the most popular included "Demon Slayer", about an orphaned boy who battles demons to avenge his family, and "My Happy Marriage", about a girl with magic powers who is underestimated by her in-laws.

Two factors help explain anime's surging global popularity. The first is streaming, which made anime easier to find and watch. Fans no longer have to depend on the decisions of network programmers or wait a week for another episode. They can binge, explore and discover on their own. Anime viewership boomed during the pandemic, as the world sat at home in front of screens for months. (The year 2020 was the first time anime made more money outside Japan than within.) Since then viewership numbers have continued rising in Japan and around the world. Increased demand is producing increased supply. In 2023 anime studios licensed 300 works in regions such as North America, South-East Asia and western Europe.

Second, audiences have grown tired and suspicious of Hollywood's neat resolutions. As Susan Napier, a professor at Tufts University and expert on anime, explains, "Technology hasn't brought us the utopia we thought it would, and the post-cold-war world has become more dangerous than we imagined," which makes happily-ever-after endings implausible. Anime is willing to have heroes killed off and characters suffer huge loss. At the same time, the protagonists are often cute and relatable. "It's a dark world out there," Ms Napier says, so audiences "want that fluffy cuteness".

Anime's global growth has been made possible by its own evolution. Japanese comic books and graphic novels, collectively known as "manga", have long provided the source material for anime. Unlike comic books in Britain and America, manga are not primarily or even mostly for children. Thousands of new manga are published every year, on virtually every subject imaginable, from pornography to reflections on war, which gives anime an inexhaustible range of sources.

The painstaking nature of hand-drawn, two-dimensional animation is providing inspiration for creators outside Japan. For all the experimentation, traditional anime shows no signs of flagging. "People are aware of a world that's more amorphous and more dangerous, [and have] less ability to believe in the happily ever after," Ms Napier of Tufts suggests. Bad news for the world, but good for Japanese animators. ■

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