

Cuteness in Anime

Lesson Plan: Cuteness in Anime

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Keywords: Anime, Animation, Cuteness, Kawaii, Art, Characters



Target Audience:

High School students, Undergraduate students

Duration:

2 class sessions, 50-60 minutes long

Potential Courses to Include this Lesson In:

- Japanese Studies courses
- East Asian Studies courses
- Popular Culture courses
- Media Studies courses

Background:

This class will be devoted to working through arguments about the origins of cuteness in American and Japanese prewar, wartime, and postwar animation. We will consider the influence of American animation on Japanese counterparts, focusing on the work of Tezuka Osamu, known for *Astro Boy* (1963–1966; 2003–2004), *Kimba the White Lion* (1965–1966), *The Fantastic Adventure of Unico* (1981), and *Princess Knight* (1967–1968). More advanced students might be guided to the theoretical discussion of neoteny, which offers an alternative to linear, modernist narratives. Important here will be a deeper understanding of cuteness in Tezuka's works, as well as "techno-animism" or "techno-vitalism." Students might also be introduced to the "media mix," or media commodity system, which was supercharged by the synergy between the animated and manga versions of *Astro Boy*, as well as stickers that came with candy and, soon after, toys. Some have argued that the success and spread of this anime media mix has led to Japan being overrun with characters, or rather to it becoming "the Empire of Characters."

Learning Objectives:

1. To acquire knowledge about and develop an interest in different cultures.
2. To develop cross-cultural knowledge and skills to cooperate as a member of the international community.
3. To think comparatively and analytically about culture and the present.
4. To work in groups and conduct discussions that are critical, collaborative, and cross-cultural.

Core Readings:

Gould, Stephen J. "A Biological Homage to Mickey Mouse." In *The Panda's Thumb*, 125–133. New York: W.W. Norton, 1980.

Lamarre, Thomas. "Speciesism, Part III: Neoteny and the Politics of Life."

Mechademia 6 (2011): 110–136.

Assigned Materials:

"Steamboat Willie (1928)." Posted August 27, 2009, by Walt Disney Animation Studios. YouTube, 7 min., 22 sec.,
<https://youtu.be/BBgghnQF6E4?feature=shared>

"Scene from *Momotarō: Umi no Shinpei* (1945)." Posted April 26, 2012, by 99bit. YouTube, 6 min., 39 sec.,
https://youtu.be/aRp_G7ENZo4?feature=shared

Optional Assigned Materials:

Tezuka Osamu Official Website: <https://tezukaosamu.net/en/anime/?c=60>

"*Astro Boy* Episode 01 The Birth of Astro Boy." Posted October 29, 2015, by A Boy From Outer Space. YouTube, 25 min., 12 sec.,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KDES29-OqwU>

Unico, trailers:

<https://tezukaosamu.net/en/anime/14.html>

<https://tezukaosamu.net/en/anime/15.html>

Princess Knight, trailers:

<https://tezukaosamu.net/en/anime/35.html>

<https://tezukaosamu.net/en/anime/100.html>

Friedman, Erica. *By Your Side: The First 100 Years of Yuri Anime and Manga*. Vista, CA: Journey Press, 2022.

Galbraith, Patrick. W., and Megan C. Rose. "Animated Femininities, Queer Discontent: An Interview with Colin Armistead and Phoebe Chan." *Journal of Femininities* (published online ahead of print 2024):

<https://doi.org/10.1163/29501229-bja10001>

Welker, James., ed. *Queer Transfigurations: Boys Love Media in Asia*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2022.

Procedure & Discussion Questions:

Lesson 1:

1. Draw Mickey Mouse. What stands out about this character?
2. Form groups. Watch "Steamboat Willie" (1928). Brainstorm about the character and action in the short film. What stands out to you, and why? Put answers onto sticky notes and add them to clusters of like ideas on the board.
3. Form groups. Watch excerpts (recommended: the animals learn Japanese and the animals mobilize for and engage in warfare) of *Momotarō: Umi no Shinpei* (1945). Brainstorm about the characters and action in this, the first feature-length animated film in Japan. What stands out to you, and why? Put answers onto sticky notes and add them to clusters of like ideas on the board.

Lesson 2:

1. Compare and contrast examples of Japanese characters and Disney characters. What connects and differentiates them? Do we see anything unique about anime today?
2. More recent research by Gary D. Sherman and Jonathan Haidt suggests that cuteness triggers social interaction as opposed to simply care, a fact that they say helps explain "the utilization of cuteness in the areas of toy making, animation, and robotics" (p. 4). Cute others are members of the attributed interiority and are part of the "moral circle." Lars-Martin Sorensen adds that the cognitive gap between cute characters doing serious and adult things makes them appear "supernatural" and "fascinating" (p. 13). What are some other ways that cuteness might work in contemporary anime?

Evaluation:

Students complete a visual analysis of a cute anime character of their choosing. Contemporary examples are encouraged, but this should be informed by the class readings and lessons. The visual analysis will be submitted at the end of class.

Instructor Reference Materials:

Sherman, Gary D., and Jonathan Haidt. "Cuteness and disgust: The humanizing and dehumanizing effects of emotion." *Emotion Review* 3, no. 3 (2011): 245–251. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1754073911402396>

Sorensen, Lars-Martin. "The bestseller recipe: a natural explanation of the global success of anime." *Post Script-Essays in Film and the Humanities* 28, no. 2 (2008): 16–27.

Steinberg, Marc. *Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012.

Teodorescu, Alice. "Cuteness as counterculture in anthropomorphic Japanese animation." *Ekphrasis* 25, no. 5 (2021): <https://www.ekphrasisjournal.ro/docs/R1/25E5.pdf>