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Japan as a brand: anime as a tool for communicating cultural soft power

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*What I want is “something” I cannot see in front of me.
You should enjoy the little detours to the fullest, because that’s
where you’ll find the things more important than what you want.
- Ging Freecs, HunterxHunter*

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Introduction

In the contemporary global media landscape, anime can no longer be considered a mere form of entertainment; rather, they must be recognized as a complex cultural and industrial force operating at the intersection of symbolic production, economic value and transnational distribution. The circulation of Japanese animated content and its ability to reach diverse audiences across platforms and market segments contributes not only to the dissemination of narratives, aesthetics and cultural texts, but also to the negotiated construction of Japan's international image. Anime thus emerge both as cultural artefacts and strategic resources, deeply intertwined with processes of soft power and nation branding. Indeed, Japan's core soft power resource lies in its popular culture, where elements of cultural specificity are not removed but rather selectively reconfigured and translated to enhance accessibility to global audiences.

This thesis therefore aims to analyze the role of anime as diplomatic agents and their contribution to the global circulation of Japanese culture and traditions, while simultaneously operating as the central node of the Japanese media mix, a system of circulation largely driven by market dynamics and based on transmedia platforms and commodification. Rather than assuming a direct cause-and-effect relationship between cultural export and global influence, this study approaches anime as a multifaceted phenomenon continuously shaped not only by centralized corporate power, but also by distributed social and creative energy, its success deriving from the interaction between studios, distributors, fan communities and auxiliary industries. By situating anime within the broader frameworks of cultural globalization, media convergence and soft power, this thesis ultimately aims to provide a deeper understanding of how contemporary media industries participate in shaping national identity, as well as the reputation and influence of a country on a global scale.

To address this objective, the research is guided by three main questions. First, how do selected anime franchises and texts contribute to the global circulation of Japanese culture and imagery? Second, which industrial, transmedia and platform strategies shape the

construction of “Japan” as a global brand through anime? And third, how do processes of global circulation and audience engagement influence the reinterpretation and diffusion of these media products? To answer these questions, the thesis adopts a mixed qualitative methodology combining semiotic analysis of selected anime texts with desk research based on academic literature, industry reports and media sources, thereby allowing for an integrated examination of both cultural and industrial dimensions.

This thesis is structured into five chapters. The first chapter outlines the theoretical framework by introducing key concepts such as soft power, nation branding and cultural globalization, with a specific focus on the Japanese context. The second chapter examines convergence culture, transmedia storytelling and participatory fan practices, establishing the industrial and cultural dynamics through which anime circulate globally. The following three chapters present the empirical corpus and the analysis of three case studies: chapter three focuses on *Pokémon* as a model of long-running transmedia franchise, chapter four analyzes *Demon Slayer* as a platform-driven global success shaped by contemporary distribution strategies, and chapter five explores *Studio Ghibli* as an institutionally recognized cultural brand and a case of nation branding. These cases have been selected for the availability of both industrial and reception data, their diverse modes of transmedia expansion, their variation in genre and target audience and their global impact. Each case study is analyzed through a structured framework articulated across four dimensions: the contextual and industrial dimension examines production contexts, distribution strategies and economic performance; the textual and semiotic dimension focuses on narrative values, aesthetic features and forms of cultural representation; the circulation and reception dimension addresses transmedia expansion and audience at both national and global levels; and finally the soft power and nation branding dimension evaluates how each case contributes to the construction and international diffusion of a carefully curated cultural image of Japan.

Chapter 1 – Soft power and global cultural flows

1.1 Theoretical framework and key concepts

The term “power” is defined as the capacity to carry out actions and control those of others; if in the past the concept was naturally associated with the possession of material goods or with one’s own predominance and authority, today it has also acquired a connotation that extends into the realms of new technologies, economics and education. During the twentieth century, the United States affirmed themselves as the leading country in international dynamics, but with the advent of the 2000s there has been a readjustment of power relations among states, where the greatest threat concerning the American giant did not so much involve the rise of these new powers as the question of how to exert its own (Nye, 1990, pp. 154-155). The true essence of the concept of power thus shifts from a strictly military and political connotation to a branching out into different structures of power, which also encompass the sphere of communication, where materiality is replaced by the speed and spreadability of information typical of an “information-rich” form of power. This new configuration distances itself from the so-called *hard power*, that is, the attempt to control and command others, and takes the name of *soft power*, a persuasive form of power that aims to shape others’ perceptions, eliciting spontaneous agreement and alignment to one’s values and objectives (Nye, 1990, pp. 164-166). It rests primarily on three resources: cultural attractiveness to others, political values and foreign policies seen as legitimate and having moral authority (Nye, 2004, p. 11).

Conventionally associated with intangible resources such as cultural and ideological ones, soft power is embodied in products and objects endowed with broad appeal, which generate a less coercive form of persuasion compared to other expressions of power. While the celebration of one’s own country to others can be traced back to the previous decade, the methods and conditions through which this occurs have undergone significant developments. The technological boom witnessed in recent years has led to an exponential increase in communication channels and in the amount of information accessible to the public, creating

the so-called “paradox of abundance”, according to which the greater the quantity of information, the lower the attention paid to it.

The modes of transmission of soft power include both *projection*, and thus a direct and assertive promotion of values, and *presentation*, an indirect and subtle communication through behavior and culture (Seiichi, 2008, pp. 194-196). They do not concern solely its actual impact on the target audience, but also the understanding of and consequent adaptation to its reception: in order for the message or object to resonate with the intended audience and yield a sufficiently profitable return, it is essential that the senders possess a deep understanding of their target, their interests and motivations (Nye, 2004, pp. 8-12). Soft power’s outcomes are thus unpredictable, as both transmission and reception depend on individual taste and subjective interpretation, impeding forecasting. While globalization can help break down cultural barriers, it might also end up reinforcing the very same stereotypes it attempts to erase, as “all information goes through cultural filters” (Nye, 2004, pp. 41; 111, as cited in Watanabe, 2008, pp. 24-25). A defining feature of soft power is cooperation and dialogue, which creates a win-win converging situation, whereas hard power is defined by hostile interactions aiming for domination that create a zero-sum scenario. Therefore, cultural products evolve through feedback loops and continuous mutual adjustment, rather than a one-way influence (Seiichi, 2008, pp. 197-198).

1.2 Nation branding and the strategic management of cultural identity

Approaches to soft power focused primarily on cultural appeal tend to overlook the strategic and institutional processes through which states manage and promote their international image, where such management shapes not only how a country is perceived abroad but also how it positions itself within a competitive global scenario. These dynamics and limitations are addressed in the literature on *nation branding*, a concept that can be defined as the practice of strategically managing and marketing a country’s image internationally (Aronczyk, 2013, pp. 15-17). Drawing inspiration from corporate branding techniques, such as logo creation, slogan development and reputation management, nation branding has gained prominence since the late twentieth century as globalization intensified and states found themselves competing not only in economic and military terms but also and

symbolically for global attention, foreign investment, tourism and political influence (Aronczyk, 2013, pp. 23-26). Nation branding is more than mere promotion: it constitutes a form of governance where the construction and dissemination of a coherent national image become deliberate policy tools. Governments actively shape narratives about their country to influence global audiences' perceptions, aiming to enhance national reputation and distinctiveness amid a crowded and often saturated marketplace. This strategic image management is critical for attracting tourists, foreign investors, cultural exchanges and political allies, thereby contributing to a country's soft power in a multifaceted way (Aronczyk, 2013, pp. 28; 31-32).

Central to this process is the role of branding professionals, consultants, marketing agencies, communication experts and public relations firms that act as intermediaries between states and global publics, translating complex and heterogeneous national identities into simplified, market-friendly messages and visuals that can resonate across diverse cultural contexts. National identity becomes a marketable narrative that prioritizes coherence, positivity, recognizability and emotional appeal, emphasizing particular values, cultural symbols or economic strengths while downplaying or omitting elements that could disrupt a positive image; this process does not merely represent the nation but it actively reshapes how the nation understands itself, privileging perception over internal debate (Aronczyk, 2013, pp. 53-57). The practice of nation branding, in fact, reflects broader shifts in the nature of global governance. In today's interconnected world, images, perceptions and symbolic power have become as vital as traditional resources like military or economic strength. Nation branding illustrates how culture, identity and communication are deeply intertwined with contemporary forms of power, reshaping the way states exert influence on the global stage and transforming national identity into a communicative and economic resource. This approach highlights the importance of institutional structures, such as government agencies, public-private partnerships and marketing firms that coordinate branding efforts as part of national policy. Through this institutionalization, nation branding moves beyond ad hoc public relations to become an embedded and ongoing element of international diplomacy and domestic governance. Ultimately, it challenges simplistic understandings of soft power by emphasizing the deliberate and institutionalized dimensions of how countries project

themselves globally (Aronczyk, 2013, pp. 30-33). It reveals that cultivating international appeal requires not only exporting cultural products but also managing narratives, perceptions and identities in a way that is adaptable and responsive to global audiences.

The weakening of traditional sources of national legitimacy in an increasingly interconnected world has prompted states to seek new modes of symbolic representation and communicative authority. Nation branding responds to this shift by offering a mechanism through which national identity can be reformulated in ways that remain intelligible and appealing within global circuits of exchange. Functioning as a strategically crafted symbolic device, the brand condenses complex narratives of belonging, values and aspirations into a communicable form aimed at international audiences. This process serves a dual purpose: it affirms a sense of national coherence and territorial identity while simultaneously signaling openness, flexibility and compatibility with transnational economic flows. The strength of nation branding lies in its capacity to hold these competing logics together, enabling states to assert symbolic sovereignty without withdrawing from the demands of global mobility and competition (Aronczyk, 2013, pp. 33-37).

However, although nation branding is often promoted as a strategy for differentiation and uniqueness, it paradoxically tends to produce remarkably similar national images across different countries. This phenomenon arises because branding professionals, who operate within a shared set of industry norms, practices and expectations dictated by the global marketplace, frequently emphasize common themes such as innovation, creativity, openness, sustainability and cultural diversity, which have been standardized as markers of a modern, desirable nation. Nation branding thus becomes a routinized and normalized policy practice, one that relies on transferable knowledge and expertise that can be applied across vastly different national contexts. As a result, this professionalization and institutionalization of branding processes reduce the opportunity for truly distinctive portrayals, as countries often end up presenting homogenized images that conform to global ideals and expectations rather than reflecting the full complexity and uniqueness of their identities. Differences are downplayed in favor of a polished, market-friendly standardization that appeals to international investors, tourists and political allies but risks eroding the rich diversity of national narratives (Aronczyk, 2013, pp. 75; 78-81).

If the focus shifts to how a nation brand is effectively constructed, the process generally unfolds through a series of key stages: evaluation, training, identification, and implementation/communication.

The first stage concerns the assessment and classification of how a given nation is perceived by both domestic and international audiences, particularly in relation to tourism, governance, popular culture, and national traditions. This evaluative phase is typically conducted through interviews, surveys and other opinion-research tools, drawing on methodologies with a long-standing history in the fields of marketing and advertising, where public perception is treated as a measurable and strategically valuable resource (Aronczyk, 2013, pp. 68-69). The training phase involves the selection, implementation and management of the brand vision by a range of public and private stakeholders. During this stage, political institutions, economic actors, and branding professionals are aligned around a shared understanding of the nation's brand and its objectives. This is followed by the identification of the core elements that contribute to the construction of the brand essence: it must be clearly distinguishable while remaining recognizable and functionally standardized, it must generate emotional attachment and resonance among audiences while remaining rationally justifiable and be capable of producing both political and economic capital (Aronczyk, 2013, pp. 72-75). The final stage involves the implementation of a communication strategy that places citizens at the center of the branding process. Members of the nation are called upon to perform or live the nation by adopting behaviors, attitudes and practices consistent with the previously constructed brand identity, effectively becoming brand ambassadors themselves. Far from relying solely on logos, slogans, or promotional campaigns, nation branding becomes truly effective when it fully incorporates its representatives, who internalize the nation's brand essence and reproduce it in everyday life. In this sense, beyond the communicative message itself, citizens constitute a crucial medium of transmission: they embody and enact the nation brand through their daily interactions and self-presentation (Aronczyk, 2013, pp. 75-78). National identity thus shifts from a static representation to something lived, experienced and personally embodied.

1.3 Japan's historical and political foundations of soft power

Against this theoretical background, Japan represents a particularly relevant case through which to observe the historical development of soft power and its gradual institutionalization. Long before the explicit adoption of nation branding strategies, Japan had already invested in forms of cultural diplomacy and international exchange that contributed to shaping its global image. Examining the historical and political foundations of Japanese soft power makes it possible to trace how cultural appeal, international engagement and state-led initiatives predate and later intersect with more formalized branding practices. This perspective allows for an understanding of Japanese soft power not as a sudden policy innovation, but as the outcome of longer-term historical processes that progressively aligned cultural influence with strategic image management.

If in the last century Japan displayed a certain reluctance toward opening itself to foreign cultures and practices, due to the reserved nature of the country's cultural identity, ever since the 1980s its soft power has been exponentially spreading: its products and traditions have been met with great popularity from international audiences, becoming undeniable proof of its breadth and potential (Nye, 1990, p. 169). The centuries of closure and isolationism that characterized Japan's history during the *sakoku* period (1639-1853) were followed by a phase of openness and explicit interest in Western culture and traditions, coupled with a strong desire to, in return, convey what Japan is to the rest of the world (McConnell, 2008, p. 20). This trend anticipates the *Japan Exchange and Teaching Program*, a Japanese cultural exchange and teaching initiative established in 1987 by the Japanese government with the aim of promoting cultural exchange between Japan and other nations, fostering a positive image of the country, and encouraging mutual understanding among states. Managed by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, as well as the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations, the JET Program offers graduates from all over the world the opportunity to attend Japanese language courses and to work in the country, thus enabling participants to deepen their understanding of Japanese culture and traditions also through a first-hand working experience (McConnell, 2008, pp. 18-23). This program stands as a fundamental instrument for the dissemination and exercise of Japanese soft power, as it is

capable of producing positive propaganda for Japan as a nation and, consequently, of increasing the likelihood of achieving the desired outcomes in terms of cultural and public diplomacy (Nye, 2004, as cited in McConnell, 2008, pp. 21-22).

Overall, the JET Program has undoubtedly enhanced Japan's appeal for many participants, giving them direct exposure to the country and a more informed lens to interpret how the country is represented abroad. At the same time, reflections from former JETs show that soft power cannot be reduced to a simple measure of how "liked" a nation is. Their evaluations reveal a complex mix of enthusiasm, ambivalence and critique, where expectations often sit alongside episodes of frustration or disillusionment. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that Japan, like any society, has both admirable qualities and notable challenges, and should thus be approached with nuance rather than through overly romanticized or uncritical media narratives (McConnell, 2008, pp. 24-27).

While many former JET participants continue to engage with Japan through careers, further studies or occasional exchanges with their Japanese acquaintances, the more enduring effects of the program lie in everyday practices that fall well outside formal state influence. For most alumni, their connection to Japan persists through the objects and cultural products integrated into their daily routines: souvenirs displayed at home, regular consumption of Japanese cuisine or ongoing interest in Japanese popular culture and news, these material and sensory engagements sustain an affective link to Japan long after the program ends. Although such influences operate largely in the private sphere and may appear passive, they nonetheless generate a diffuse form of soft power: alumni subtly shape the perceptions of those around them by circulating narratives, objects and symbols of Japan within their immediate social environments (McConnell, 2008, pp. 27-29). The JET Program does not teach people to *like Japan* but rather provides an incomparable insight into how to *communicate with Japanese*, thus contributing to the private and mediatic discourses about Japan (McConnell, 2008, pp. 30-31).

1.4 Popular culture as Japan's core soft power resource

If education can be understood as one of the fundamental pillars in the development of Japan's soft power, strategically employed to weave a stronger social and diplomatic network

with other countries, particularly the United States, the true heart of the nation's soft power resides in its popular culture. Comics (*manga*) that are often adapted into animated stories (*anime*), televised game shows and the youthful "Shibuya-style" fashion trend are only a few of the emblematic and highly influential cultural products that Japan exports across Asia and, increasingly, to the rest of the world (Akiyoshi, 2008, pp. 55-60). These forms of pop culture not only circulate widely, but also help shape Japan's global image, reinforcing its cultural presence and appeal on an international scale.

This phenomenon is not recent; rather, it can be traced back to the postwar period. The media circulation of cinematic products such as *Godzilla*, television series like *Speed Racer* and *Astro Boy*, as well as the technological culture of the 1980s marked by the advent of *Nintendo* and the growing diffusion of manga and anime, contributed to a transformation in the collective imagination of young people, most notably in the case of the American youth (Allison, 2008, pp. 99-100). The products and practices associated with what has come to be known as the "J-trend" were nonetheless adapted for international audiences, often westernized and Americanized to increase their chances of success and resonance among viewers. A paradigmatic example is *Power Rangers*, a show of Japanese origins that was rebranded to suit American tastes to such an extent that it is now regarded as a classic, with many unaware of its Japanese roots. Over time, this process has produced a hybrid cultural sphere in which Japanese entertainment circulates globally, shaped by flows of mediation, adaptation, and reinterpretation. Yet despite such transformations, these cultural forms continue to carry with them a distinctive aesthetic, narrative sensibility and symbolic universe that differentiate them from mainstream Western entertainment. Ultimately, the enduring attractiveness of Japanese culture and media stems precisely from this perception of distance and otherness, from the very fact that these products originate elsewhere, outside the American cultural sphere, and thus offer audiences the allure of the unfamiliar, the exotic, and the non-American (Allison, 2008, pp. 101-102).

In the Asian context, Japanese popular culture did not spread through a deliberate soft-power strategy. Instead, it reached China in particular through the widespread piracy of digital products, which made Japanese series and shows cheap and easily accessible: the

diffusion of Japanese pop culture was therefore driven primarily by Chinese consumers, rather than by Japan itself (Iwabuchi, 2004, as cited in Yoshiko, 2008, p. 112). Although admiration for Japanese cultural products coexists with the persistence of negative views related to past conflicts in the Asian region, this selective cultural consumption has contributed to the creation of a shared regional pop-culture memory among East Asian youth. Viewers unconsciously absorb storytelling styles, forms of humor, gestures and everyday practices, gradually integrating them into their own daily lives. Japanese dramas thus become models of a liberal, idealized lifestyle, where the attraction lies in their approachable modernity rather than in their national identity (Yoshiko, 2008, pp. 112-121).

As domestic animation production increased, China imposed heavy restrictions on foreign television content, reducing imported cartoons to 40% in 2000 and later banning foreign animation during peak viewing hours. Despite these protectionist measures, underground markets continued to supply newly released anime, demonstrating the enduring strength of Chinese consumer demand (Yoshiko, 2008, pp. 121-124). Nevertheless, this cultural affinity is not sufficient to translate into political or diplomatic soft power for Japan. The continued separation between popular culture and unresolved historical tensions means that Japanese cultural influence may soften but does not erase deeply rooted perceptions and narratives about Japan's past. As a result, Japanese pop culture shapes everyday imaginaries and cross-border memories, but it does not automatically lead to a more favorable view of the Japanese state (Yoshiko, 2008, p. 125).

The success of Japanese cultural products does not in fact automatically translate into soft power. Soft power emerges only when cultural consumption is accompanied by a deeper admiration for a country's values, norms, or political orientations: mere popularity is insufficient, what matters is whether cultural appeal generates broader, value-based attraction capable of influencing perceptions and behavior (Nye, 2004, pp. 11-12). In Japan's case, this connection is often weak due to a long-standing strategy of cultural *deodorization*. Since the postwar period, Japanese corporations have in fact been deliberately removing explicit signs of *Japaneseness* from many export-oriented cultural goods, following the principle of *mukokuseki*, literally, "without nationality." This practice, intended to avoid triggering negative memories of wartime Japan and to make products more easily marketable, results

in cultural artefacts that might appear universal, placeless and ethnically neutral (Iwabuchi, 2002, as cited in Allison, 2008, p. 103).

Such deodorization produces a structural paradox. On the one hand, Japanese pop culture circulates globally with extraordinary success: anime, manga, video games, and character goods have become integral components of contemporary youth culture across continents. On the other hand, this very success often fails to cultivate meaningful engagement with Japan as a real nation with its own history, society, and political values. When stripped of local specificity, Japanese cultural products may become disconnected from their cultural origins. Consumers engage with a “virtual Japan”, a stylized, exotic, or aestheticized construct rather than with the complex realities of the country itself. As a result, the global spread of J-pop culture may foster enthusiasm and commercial consumption yet produce only a shallow or decontextualized image of Japan, one that lacks the depth required to generate effective soft power (Iwabuchi, 2002, as cited in Allison, 2008, pp. 104-106).

Nevertheless, this phenomenon reflects a broader shift in how cultural influence operates in the contemporary global context. Unlike traditional models of soft power, which emphasized the export of a coherent national identity and values, the appeal of Japanese pop culture today lies in its ability to create hybrid and fluid imaginary cultural spaces. These spaces combine foreign and familiar elements, allowing audiences worldwide to engage with cultural products that emphasize adaptation, mobility and interconnectedness rather than fixed national identities. This dynamic enables an emotional and cultural resonance that goes beyond the physical boundaries of Japan itself, thus contributing to the creation of a new, decentralized, and multifaceted form of soft power that transcends traditional geographic and cultural limits (Allison, 2008, pp. 106-110).

Although soft power is usually considered to concern exclusively international politics and the network of connections between countries, cultural attractiveness also emerges as a fundamental element for the economic dimension. Companies, in fact, also rely on soft power: aspects such as innovation, design, branding, and creative ingenuity become essential for competitive positioning in the global market, where the symbolic appeal of a

product weighs as much as its material features (Tsutomu, 2008, p. 128). Starting from the 1990s, Japan progressively abandoned the traditional industrial model to shift toward a post-industrial, service-oriented people economy, where value derives more from creative work, communication and knowledge production than from physical manufacturing. In this scenario, employment in creative industries increased by 16% by the end of the twentieth century, with revenues growing from ¥15 trillion to ¥28 trillion, an 86% increase that clearly shows how creative industries outperformed national GDP growth, becoming one of the few sectors capable of expanding even during economic stagnation. Although the domestic market did not witness significant growth in cultural consumption, showing rather a stagnation, Japan's influence abroad is rapidly rising. Culture-related exports have indeed tripled from ¥837 billion in 1996 to ¥2.5 trillion in 2006, confirming that Japan as a global brand and its cultural attractiveness are strengthening (Tsumoto, 2008, pp. 129-141).

Familiarity with Japanese culture increases consumers' willingness to buy, boosts demand for products featuring Japanese aesthetic or narrative elements and also stimulates tourism, creating a virtuous circle between cultural consumption and commercial consumption. Within this framework, Japan's *21st Century Vision* (2005) proposes transforming the country into an open and culturally active nation by 2030, enhancing tradition, creativity and technology to increase Japan's attractiveness and promote the global exchange of people, goods, capital and cultures. Nonetheless, excessive government control or over-promotion of pop culture risks diminishing its appeal: too direct intervention can lead to saturation, backlash reactions, or even phenomena of cultural imperialism backlash. The success of Japanese anime, in fact, is partly due to their spread well beyond institutional regulation, maintaining the authenticity at the core of their popularity (Tsumoto, 2008, pp. 149-150).

Building on Japan's organic cultural influence abroad, the 2000s saw the institutionalization of *Cool Japan*, a strategic government initiative primarily led by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) that aims to leverage the global popularity of Japanese pop culture and creative industries to promote economic growth, tourism and Japan's international image as an innovative and culturally vibrant nation (Intellectual Property Strategy Headquarters, 2019). *Cool Japan* thus represents a deliberate attempt to align cultural production with nation branding and economic diplomacy, marking a shift from

decentralized cultural flows toward a coordinated and multi-sectoral approach to soft power. As it shapes both external perceptions and domestic understandings of national identity, this strategy inevitably intensifies the inherent tensions in institutionalizing cultural appeal: the government's vision of a branded, globally marketable Japan often risks reducing diverse cultural forms into commodified and standardized images, thus undermining the grassroots creativity and cultural authenticity that originally propelled Japan's international appeal (Valaskivi, 2013, pp. 489-499). This paradox reflects broader transformations in how cultural influence operates today: the success of Japanese pop culture lies not in exporting a fixed national identity, but rather in creating hybrid and fluid cultural spaces that blend foreign and familiar elements, allowing global audiences to engage with Japan in varied and often decontextualized ways. In this way, *Cool Japan* illustrates both the possibilities and limits of nation branding as a contemporary soft power strategy, emphasizing that cultural appeal must be carefully managed to avoid commodification while remaining adaptable to the dynamics of global cultural consumption (Valaskivi, 2013, pp. 499-501).

1.5 Cultural globalization and the entertainment economy

While the previous sections have examined Japanese soft power primarily from the perspective of state strategies, cultural diplomacy and nation branding initiatives, such an approach only partially captures how Japanese popular culture circulates and acquires meaning on a global scale. Cultural influence does not move exclusively through institutional channels, nor does it remain fixed to national intentions; instead, it unfolds within transnational media environments shaped by global flows, commercial logics and audience practices. To fully understand the global reach of Japanese entertainment, it is therefore necessary to shift the analytical focus from national image-making to the dynamics of cultural globalization and the entertainment economy, where media texts, images and commodities travel and are re-signified across borders.

Cultural globalization does not operate as a single, unified process but is instead irregular and fragmented, with multiple forces moving at varying speeds and in different directions, generating tensions and disjunctures. Rather than being confined to internal

relations of nation-states, culture circulates through transnational flows, carried across borders by complex systems of media, markets and human mobility, often beyond direct state control or national intent. Appadurai's framework of global cultural flows identifies five interconnected yet disjunctive dimensions: *ethnoscapes* (movements of people such as migrants, tourists and diasporas), *mediascapes* (distribution of images, narratives and media texts), *technoscapes* (global spread of technologies and platforms), *financescapes* (flows of capital and economic interests) and *ideoscapes* (circulation of political ideas and ideologies). These overlapping yet often conflicting flows justify how the same cultural products might be interpreted in radically different ways across contexts, making cultural influence unpredictable and non-linear (Appadurai, 1990, p. 6-11).

Although cultural globalization does not fully correspond to cultural homogenization, it nevertheless involves mechanisms and instruments such as advertising, narrative styles and aesthetic forms that are embodied within political and cultural economies, only to be re-imported as heterogeneous dialogues of national sovereignty, free enterprise and fundamentalism, within which the state continues to play a significant role. At the same time, contemporary global cultural processes counterbalance this apparent standardization by incorporating imagination as a central analytical category, facilitated by mediascapes that enable people not only to consume media content but also to actively reinterpret and remix cultural meanings. Audiences are not passive recipients but rather active agents who re-signify media texts within their own local contexts, producing hybridized and localized versions of global culture; this challenges simplistic models of cultural imperialism by highlighting the negotiated nature of meaning making (Appadurai, 1990, p. 5; 10-11). Consequently, Japanese media products, such as anime and games, circulate globally not as fixed exports of national culture but as dynamic and mobile texts whose meanings are continuously reshaped through processes of translation, adaptation and audience engagement within global entertainment economies.

While Iwabuchi's notion of cultural odor has already been discussed in relation to the limits of Japanese soft power, it becomes even more relevant when examined at the level of media circulation and localization practices. *Cultural odor* refers to the presence of recognizable national, ethnic or cultural markers embedded in media texts and commodities,

which allow consumers to associate a product with a specific place or cultural context (Iwabuchi, 2002, p. 27). From this perspective, *deodorization* is not only a political or symbolic issue, but also a commercial and aesthetic mechanism that facilitates the global mobility of cultural products: *odorlessness* no longer appears as a limitation of Japanese soft power, but rather a key condition enabling the circulation of media commodities across diverse markets. In fact, Japan occupies an ambivalent role within global cultural hierarchies, one that is shaped by the simultaneous internalization of both First World and Third World subjectivities. On the one hand, Japan perceives itself as a fully modern nation due to its economic power and extensive cultural influence; on the other, it continues to experience a sense of subordination derived from persistent Western dominance in the global symbolic order (Iwabuchi, 2002, p. 2). This tension has contributed to a long-standing obsession with uniqueness and distinctiveness, an impulse that has been historically articulated through the strategic mobilization of “traditional” Japanese culture as evidence of an allegedly homogeneous national identity. Such narratives of cultural exceptionalism are deeply rooted in processes of self-orientalization, constructed through the continuous opposition between two imagined cultural entities: “Japan” and “the West.”

This oppositional framework is reinforced by the country’s perceived rupture with the rest of Asia, a separation shaped by its imperialist and wartime history that has been central to the construction of Japanese national identity, allowing Japan to negotiate its place in global modernity while avoiding full identification with either pole. Within this context, the concept of *Japanization* has undergone a significant transformation: while in the prewar period it referred to the assimilation of colonized peoples and the indigenization of Western culture, in the postwar era it has come to signify a process of domestication and selective adaptation of Western influences rather than outright cultural domination (Iwabuchi, 2002, pp. 6-11). As a result, Japan has increasingly been framed as a cultural mediator between East and West, a position that emphasizes negotiation and translation rather than binary opposition. Rather than suppressing or denying cultural differences, Japan has often relied on maintaining a degree of ambiguity and resisting fixed

classifications, thus preserving a sense of cultural singularity while remaining compatible with transnational flows of media and capital (Iwabuchi, 2002, pp. 13-14).

It is precisely within this industrial and commercial logic that deodorization emerges as a strategic practice primarily driven by media industries rather than by state-led nation branding: by minimizing explicit cultural markers, Japanese companies enhance the transnational adaptability of their products, allowing them to circulate more easily. This dynamic becomes particularly visible in the global diffusion of anime, games and character-based franchises, whose apparent cultural neutrality enables wide circulation while leaving space for localized interpretations and audience-driven re-signification. Unlike many American cultural products, whose global success is closely tied to their association with a creative and discursive construction of the *American way of life*, where Americanness itself functions as a central source of symbolic value, most Japanese cultural commodities, especially in the field of animation, do not foreground their national origins: on the contrary, they often appear culturally ambiguous or placeless. This removal of explicit ethnic traits, national settings or specific references, including the frequent design of characters with Caucasian or indeterminate features, is in fact considered to be more commercially viable and globally accessible. While audiences are generally aware of the Japanese origins of these media products, the texts themselves rarely carry unmistakable signifiers of the Japanese cultural odor (Iwabuchi, 2002, pp. 26-30).

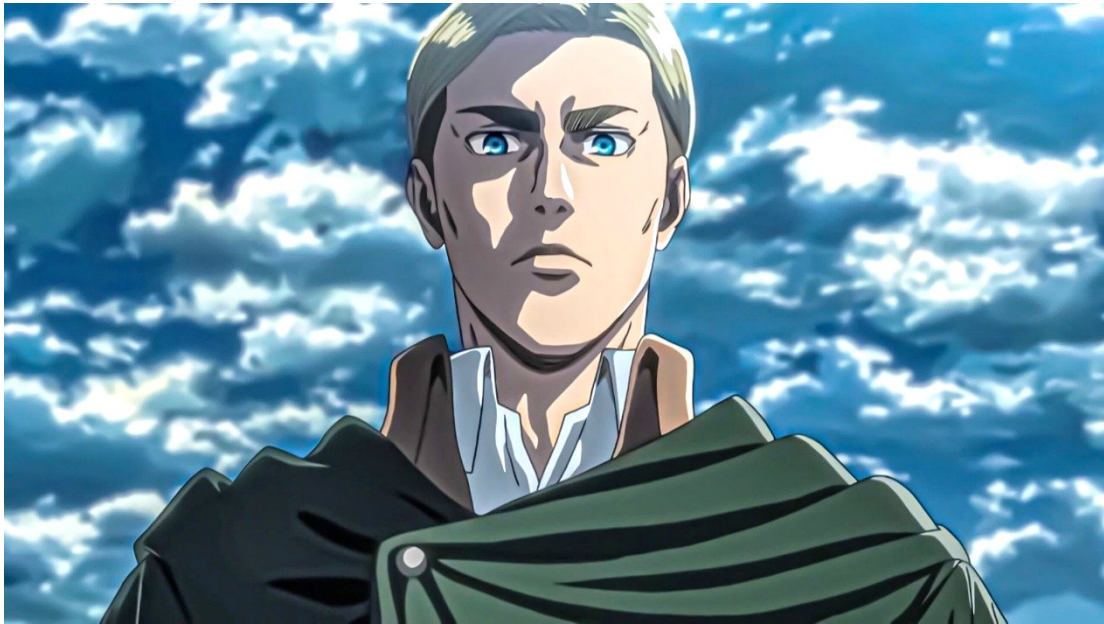


Figure 1. *Erwin Smith* (エルヴィン・スミス) from *Attack on Titan* (進撃の巨人, *Shingeki no Kyojin*). Although produced within the Japanese animation industry, the series is set in a fictional world heavily inspired by 19th Germanic urban and military aesthetics. The character's Europeanized physical traits exemplify the strategy of *mukokuseki*, whereby explicit markers of Japaneseness are minimized to enhance global circulation.

Although *Pokémon* is often described as culturally odorless, many elements of the franchise, such as character and *Pokémon* names, as well as regional settings, are originally Japanese and are frequently modified through localization processes when exported abroad. For instance, the protagonist known internationally as *Ash Ketchum* originates from the Japanese name *Satoshi*, an explicit reference to the series' creator, Tajiri Satoshi, while numerous *Pokémon* names are translated or adapted to enhance memorability and accessibility for foreign audiences. Similarly, several regions within the *Pokémon* world are loosely inspired by real Japanese geographies, even if these references are rarely foregrounded in international versions. Such practices do not contradict the logic of deodorization but rather exemplify it: Japanese cultural specificity is not eliminated, but selectively mediated and made flexible through translation, adaptation and renaming. Deodorization operates not through complete cultural erasure, but through the strategic suppression of explicit national markers that might limit transnational

circulation: the result is a cultural product that retains its industrial and creative origins while presenting itself as universally accessible, allowing global audiences to engage with it without requiring prior cultural knowledge of Japan (Iwabuchi, 2002, pp. 30-32).

Steinberg conceptualizes Japanese animation not simply as a narrative medium, but as the central node of a broader transmedia economic system known as the “media mix”. Within this model, anime functions as one element in a dense network of interconnected platforms that includes manga, video games, toys, collectibles, events and character merchandising: rather than privileging a single “original” text, the media mix operates through the simultaneous circulation of characters, symbols and story fragments across multiple media forms, each reinforcing and expanding the others. Value emerges from repetition, circulation and consumer engagement, as characters can be thought of as modular units that can be endlessly recombined and reproduced across platforms, generating economic value through their presence in everyday life. Anime thus serves as an infrastructural hub that stabilizes characters and worlds, enabling their expansion into games, gadgets and fan practices without requiring narrative coherence or cultural specificity. Such framework shifts attention away from questions of cultural origin or national meaning and toward the industrial conditions of adaptability and platform-friendliness that allow said media products to circulate transnationally (Steinberg, 2012, pp. 135-170). In this sense, Japanese animation’s global reach is less the result of intentional cultural export than of an entertainment economy optimized for circulation, repetition and affective attachment, where influence is generated through commercial infrastructures and media ecologies rather than explicit soft power or national branding strategies.

Allison approaches Japanese popular culture as an affective economy in which media franchises generate value through emotional attachment and everyday consumption rather than narrative depth or national representation. Character-based commodities function in fact as emotional infrastructures, circulating across media platforms and consumer goods to produce familiarity, comfort and resonance through repeated exposure and proximity. For instance, the character in *Hello Kitty* is deliberately designed with minimal narrative, personality or cultural specificity, a strategy that enhances its global adaptability, thus allowing consumers to project their own meanings and emotions with little need for

translation or localization. Its economic success derives not from storytelling or symbolic national value, but from its omnipresence across commodities and everyday practices of fandom and consumption, from stationery and fashion to objects and digital media. Through constant, low-intensity interactions, the character embeds itself into daily life, producing affective bonds that sustain long-term consumption (Allison, 2006, pp. 5-22). Rather than a state-directed communication of Japanese cultural identity, this form of circulation is largely market-driven and prioritizes transmedia repetition and affective commodification.

Chapter 2 – Convergence culture, transmedia storytelling and fandoms

2.1 From cultural export to participatory circulation

The analysis of soft power and global cultural flows highlights how contemporary nations increasingly rely on cultural production to shape international perception, influence and symbolic power. In this context, Japan emerges a paradigmatic case of cultural soft power, where media texts such as anime, manga and videogames function not only as entertainment products but as vehicles of national branding and identity circulation. However, the effectiveness and longevity of this cultural influence cannot be understood solely through top-down strategies of cultural export or state-driven branding policies. Indeed, the global success of Japanese popular culture unfolds within a mediascape characterized by technological convergence, participatory practices and the active involvement of audiences. Cultural flows today are no longer linear processes moving from producers to passive consumers; rather, they are shaped by complex interactions among media industries, digital platforms and fan communities. As a result, soft power increasingly operates through decentralized, networked and participatory dynamics that challenge traditional models of cultural dissemination.

Within this framework, anime functions not only as a cultural product but as a transmedia ecosystem, capable of expanding across multiple platforms and media forms while fostering long-term engagement. Fans play a crucial role in this process, contributing to the circulation, reinterpretation and reinvention of Japanese media texts on a global scale. Practices such as fan translations, online discussions, cosplays, fan art and remix cultures extend the reach of anime beyond its original contexts, transforming it into a shared cultural resource and reinforcing Japan's symbolic presence worldwide. To fully understand how anime contributes to Japan's soft power in the contemporary mediascape, it is therefore necessary to move beyond macro-level analyses of cultural globalization and focus on the mechanisms through which media convergence and participatory culture operate. Through this

perspective, convergence culture emerges as a crucial dimension in explaining how Japanese popular culture circulates, gains meaning and sustains its influence on a global scale.

2.2 Convergence culture and cross-platform narratives

The concept of *convergence culture* describes a profound transformation in the ways media content is produced, circulated and consumed within contemporary societies. Rather than referring to a purely technological shift, convergence culture designates a cultural process in which media content flows across multiple platforms, media industries increasingly cooperate and audiences migrate actively in search of diversified entertainment experiences. In this context, consumption is no longer confined to a single medium, nor are audiences positioned as passive recipients of cultural texts; instead, media consumption has become a collective and socially embedded practice sustained by online discussions, recommendation systems and fan networks that generate visibility and cultural relevance. This collective engagement produces value not only in symbolic terms but also in economic ones, as media industries increasingly depend on audience participation to sustain franchises and extend their cultural lifespan (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 2-4). Convergence culture operates simultaneously on several interconnected levels: economic convergence refers to the capacity of media conglomerates to control and coordinate multiple products and services within a single corporate ecosystem, generating synergies across production, distribution and promotion; organic convergence concerns everyday media practices, as users increasingly engage with multiple media simultaneously, overlapping consumption with other activities and adopting a participatory relationship with content; technological convergence describes the flow of media content across digital platforms, where formerly distinct media forms coexist within unified devices, reshaping users' perception of time, space and access to information; global convergence highlights the circulation of cultural content within a semi-unified global mediascape, enabling broader access and cultural exchange while also requiring negotiation with local values, norms and social practices.

Within this framework, a crucial aspect of convergence culture lies in its participatory dimension. The distinction between producers and consumers becomes increasingly

blurred, as audiences contribute creatively to media ecosystems through practices such as fan fiction, cosplay, fan art and online commentary. These practices do not merely accompany official texts but actively shape their circulation, interpretation and reception. In return, media industries that seek to stimulate participation to enhance visibility, loyalty and commercial success incorporate audience feedback and the cultural buzz produced by discussions and redistribution of content into production strategies, exemplified by phenomena such as the so-called “fanservice”, where narrative or aesthetic choices respond directly to fan expectations (Jenkins, 2006, pp.3-13)

Jenkins further critiques technologically deterministic views of convergence through the notion of the “black box fallacy”, which assumes that all media will eventually merge into a single device. Instead, convergence culture emphasizes continuity and adaptation: while delivery technologies, meaning the tools and devices we use to access contents, may change or become obsolete, media forms persist by adapting their roles and cultural functions within a broader and more dynamic communication ecosystem. Old and new media coexist, reshaping one another and altering the relationships between technologies, industries, genres and audiences (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 14-18). This process is further developed through the concept of “spreadable media”, which highlights a shift from centralized, controlled distribution toward dispersed and open-ended participatory circulation. Unlike traditional bowling media models, which aim to retain audience attention within closed systems, spreadable media build on a pinball model that relies on sharing, grassroots intermediation and peer-to-peer circulation across platforms, reflecting a broader transition from hierarchical communication structures to networked cultural flows. Convergence culture thus emerges as both a top-down corporate strategy and a bottom-up cultural practice, shaped by the tension between industrial control and audience creativity (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 18-20).

While convergence culture expands opportunities for participation, it also presents structural limitations and does not eliminate power asymmetries: copyright regimes, uneven media literacy and unequal access to digital infrastructures contribute to persistent participation gaps, challenging the notion of convergence as a fully democratic process. Moreover, platform-driven environments shape participation through algorithmic selection and economic interests that raise political and ethical concerns related to visibility, data

control and cultural value. Despite these constraints, convergence culture remains a key framework for understanding contemporary media dynamics, particularly in relation to transmedia storytelling and the global circulation of popular culture.

2.3 Transmedia storytelling, franchises and world-building

Within this broader framework of convergence culture, transmedia storytelling emerges as a key narrative strategy through which media content is expanded and experienced across multiple platforms. If convergence culture describes the structural and participatory conditions of contemporary media environments, transmedia storytelling illustrates how these conditions are translated into specific narrative forms.

The term *transmedia storytelling* refers to a communication and narrative strategy through which a specific product or content is extended and made accessible across multiple media platforms, with each medium contributing a distinct, autonomous and meaningful element to the overall interpretation of the narrative. Rather than merely replicating the same story across different channels, transmedia storytelling relies on the dispersion of fictional elements across diverse media forms, where each platform offers a unique point of entry into the narrative universe. Each new text makes a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole, encouraging audiences to actively piece together dispersed information in order to construct a coherent and enriched story world experience. Narrative expansion is not controlled exclusively by the original producers: while media industries play a central role in designing and coordinating the story world, audiences and consumers increasingly participate in its development through participatory practices that contribute to the creation of a unified experience, in which the overall narrative acquires greater value than the mere sum of its individual components. Meaning is thus produced collectively through the interaction between official texts and user-generated content, reinforcing the sense of immersion and emotional investment that characterizes successful transmedia franchises (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 95-97).

From an industrial perspective, transmedia storytelling reflects a shift toward a horizontal, rather than vertical, integration of the entertainment industry. Instead of operating as a rigid hierarchical system with clearly defined power relations and linear

production chains, the transmedia logic promotes the distribution of a single property across multiple media sectors, platforms and markets. This form of crossover marketing strategically fragments the narrative universe into differentiated elements that are tailored to the specific affordances and expectations of each medium's audiences. It allows media industries to address heterogeneous consumers, including niche audiences with specific tastes and interests, while simultaneously maximizing engagement and economic profitability (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 103-106).

However, one must not conflate transmedia storytelling with the related but distinct narrative practices such as *adaptation*, *remakes* or *reboots*. In the case of adaptation, a pre-existing story is transferred from one medium to another through a process of selection, reinterpretation and restructuring, often resulting in a retelling of the same narrative within a different formal and technological framework. Remakes and reboots similarly involve the repetition or reconfiguration of an established text, either by updating its aesthetics or by restarting a franchise from its premises. While these practices may contribute to the circulation and revitalization of media content, they remain fundamentally centered on the replication or revision of a core narrative. By contrast, transmedia storytelling operates through a narrative expansion rather than repetition: content does not simply migrate from one medium to another but outgrows the source, developing autonomously across platforms. Each medium introduces new characters, events or perspectives that expand the story world without creating redundancy. No single text can be considered the definitive or complete version of the story; instead, meaning emerges through the cumulative exploration of multiple narrative fragments. This logic of expansion reinforces and encourages audience agency, as users actively navigate across media environments in search of narrative coherence, thus establishing a hypertextual relationship to media content that allows them to access cultural texts and recombine them to create signification (Jenkins, 2006, p. 129).

Anime franchises offer a particularly effective illustration of transmedia storytelling as a narrative logic grounded in convergence culture, especially through the centrality of world-building. Many anime series are in fact conceived as expansive narrative universes capable of generating multiple entry points across media platforms such as manga, light novels, videogames, films, merchandise and spin-off series, as this emphasis on world-building

allows them to sustain long-term engagement and narrative flexibility (Jenkins, 2006, p. 110). Transmedia storytelling deepens the complexity of the fictional universe by distributing narrative functions across different media forms: manga establish the core narrative arc, anime adaptations enhance emotional engagement through audiovisual storytelling, videogames offer interactive exploration of the story world and other texts such as novels or mobile games may focus on secondary characters or untold events. Each medium thus contributes to the construction of a shared narrative ecosystem, in which understanding the world becomes an active process of exploration rather than passive reception.

Prominent franchises such as *Pokémon*, *Gundam*, *Naruto* or *Neon Genesis Evangelion* exemplify this model by constructing worlds that are narratively dense yet open-ended and capable of continuous reconfiguration through new media products. This openness enables franchises to accommodate remakes, reboots and alternative timelines without undermining the integrity of the core story, as these variations are absorbed into a broader multiform narrative structure rather than replacing the original texts. For instance, since its inception with *Mobile Suit Gundam* (1979), the *Gundam* series has evolved into a vast narrative universe that extends across television series, theatrical films, manga adaptations, light novels, videogames, model kits (*gunpla*) and spin-off productions. Each element of this complex story world adds multiple timelines and alternative continuities, such as the *Universal Century*, *Cosmic Era* and *Anno Domini*, thus allowing the franchise to expand while keeping intact the core centered on war, technology and human conflict (Bandai Namco Filmworks, 2025).



Figure 2. Transmedia expansion within *Mobile Suit Gundam* (機動戦士ガンダム, *Kidō Senshi Gandamu*): an animated mecha from the television series (left) and its corresponding *Gunpla* (ガンプラ) model kit (right). The circulation of the same character design across audiovisual narrative and material commodity exemplifies the media mix strategy, in which story elements extend beyond a single text into a coordinated system of world-building and consumption.

Each medium performs distinct narrative functions: anime series and films typically establish the major historical events and ideological conflicts of each timeline, while manga and novels enrich the narrative by exploring secondary characters or untold conflicts; videogames reenact battles or allow fans to experience alternative outcomes, reinforcing personal immersion. The franchise's emphasis on world-building also facilitates the integration of reboots and remakes without destabilizing the overall coherence, usually reinterpreting motifs and character archetypes in different historical or political settings. Transmedia world-building thus prioritizes the continuity of a fictional universe over individual storylines and narrative closure.

Moreover, *Gundam*'s transmedia structure is deeply intertwined with participatory fan cultures and practices such as the customization of *gunpla*, fan art and online encyclopedias that actively contribute to the circulation of narrative knowledge through additive comprehension (Jenkins, 2006, p. 123), as well as generating new meanings and affective investment. Fans thus engage with classification and expansion of the logic of the story world itself, positioning themselves as cultural agents that contribute to a shared cultural labor that

is distributed across official producers and fan communities, blurring the boundaries between production and consumption.

2.4 Fandoms: appropriation and cultural production

Fandoms are defined as a set of socially situated practices through which engagement with media and cultural products acquires an added value that is embodied and contributes to the very production of the universe of meanings and functions surrounding the content itself. Rather than constituting clearly bounded communities with defined identities, fandoms operate as continuously evolving processes enacted through creative labor, affective investment and interpretive practices that take place within physical and embodied spaces and not exclusively in digital environments or textual reinterpretations (Zubernis & Larsen, 2018, pp. 145-147).

Conventions, fan gatherings, cosplays and fan tourism function as liminal spaces in which everyday hierarchies and social norms are reconfigured and fandom becomes performative: identity and belonging are enacted through apparel, behavior and material objects. These practices and rituals transform fictional places, characters and narratives into emotionally lived spaces, allowing media narratives to be inhabited rather than merely and passively consumed. Such forms of expression operate as mediating structures that enable fandoms to gain visibility and legitimacy, while embodiment allows fans to experience media texts as affective and social realities. Fan practices also bleed into everyday life through fashion and design, enabling socially adaptable expressions of fandom that operate along a spectrum ranging from overt cosplay to subtle stylistic references. This adaptability allows fans to negotiate their affiliation with media texts across different social contexts. Fashion thus functions as a semiotic system through which fandom is communicated and negotiated, as media narratives are translated into wearable forms that express identification and, in some cases, political positions. This everyday dimension of fandom highlights its integration into ordinary routines and social interactions, reinforcing the idea that fandom should not be confined to exceptional moments or specialized spaces (Zubernis & Larsen, 2018, pp. 147-154; Lamerichs, 2018, pp. 175-178).

As far as authorship and legitimacy are concerned, fan practices often operate in transformative ways, intervening in mainstream representational and expressive structures. Through appropriation, remix practices and performative acts, fans have the potential to reconfigure normative representations by foregrounding marginalized identities, alternative interests and counter-hegemonic narratives. The reworking of objects belonging to popular media culture becomes a strategy of visibility and critique aimed at non-mainstream discourses, where meaning does not reside solely in what the text explicitly states, but in what fans are able to extract and reconstruct from it, as exemplified by queer reinterpretations. The negotiation of cultural meaning and the intertwining of creativity and critique thus reveal the potential of fandoms as forms of participatory cultural resistance (Coppa, 2018, pp. 199-203).

Audiovisual remix practices exemplify fandom's interpretive dimension: through the recombination of pre-existing footage, audio and narrative structures, fans produce alternative readings of mainstream storylines that align more closely with their personal expectations and desires. The reworking of original narratives and the highlighting of elements or subplots that are marginalized within canonical storytelling emphasize subtext and emotional coherence from a subjective perspective, aiming to reorganize meaning through personal attachment and relevance. These practices prompt a reflection on the nature of participatory culture and fandom, in which authorship is redefined as interpretive agency. Within these spaces, acts of (re)storytelling become collaborative and iterative, linking traditional analog fan practices to contemporary digital cultures and media technologies (Freund, 2018, pp. 207-213; 221).

Affective mechanisms, particularly nostalgia, play a central role within fan practices, especially when connected to texts, toys and franchises that can be associated with early media experiences. Far from remaining confined to a passive sense of longing, nostalgia is articulated as an active process of remediation, through which media objects from the past are reworked via contemporary technologies and new cultural contexts. Through nostalgic engagement, fans negotiate temporal continuity by integrating childhood emotional attachments with present identities and creative practices. Rather than constituting a form of escapism, fandom thus emerges as a space in which memory, emotion and cultural value are

continuously renegotiated, reinforcing its transgenerational relevance (Geraghty, 2018, pp. 161-165; 171-172).

This understanding of fandom as practice and negotiation echoes earlier foundational work in fan studies. Today's media audiences, whose visibility has now increased thanks to social media, find it easier to identify others with shared interests and coordinate their activities in pursuit of common cause; nonetheless, they are also more fragmented, and media audiences are therefore more networked while also being more dispersed. Different consumers relate to mass media messages by reading them within the terms of dominant ideology, resisting or rejecting them outright, or negotiating, taking them apart and taking part in them in equal measures as they align with their own personal experiences and beliefs. Media audiences exercise forms of agency in their engagement with cultural texts, yet this agency operates within broader structural constraints. Interpretative and creative practices are socially embedded and the meanings constructed by audiences remain shaped by institutional, economic and ideological forces. Fandom thus emerges as a dynamic process of negotiation situated along a spectrum of engagement with cultural objects, an attachment that is sustained precisely because they generate both affective investment and critical tension: this interplay between fascination and frustration, affirmation and transformation, motivates transformative practices through which fans actively interpret and reshape these objects. Fandoms also have the capacity to influence the cultural agenda and determine what elements actively engage and are engaged by the public, often reframing and critiquing more mainstream representations of said cultural items (Jenkins, 2018, pp. 13-16).

Even before digital tools and spaces came around, fandoms were interpretative communities that had developed distinctive patterns of interpretation, modes of social interaction and forms of cultural production. They have historically operated as self-aware communities organized around shared interpretative, affective and collective practices: fandoms function simultaneously as subcultural groups and as publics, determined by a consciousness of their own sociability and shared identity (Jenkins, 2018, pp. 16-17). Jenkins identifies five dimensions of fandom: a mode of reception that builds on the emotional investment and attachment a fan might form with an object; a set of critical and

interpretative practices and discourses; a site for consumer activism, in which fans can intervene in production processes, negotiating demands and relationships with media industries; a space that supports these particular forms of cultural production and prevents them from being discarded in mainstream platforms and places; an alternative social community, which distinguishes the embodiment of an identity from the mere liking. Media fandoms are a branch of participatory culture communities that have flourished within a networked culture, where being a fan means interacting with a cultural object on multiple platforms, engaging with it in a more interactive way that allows for personal creativity and producing content starting from it. Fan culture takes place in highly fluid social contexts that allows objects to easily migrate beyond the community where they were produced into new platforms. While fandoms involve personal creativity and novelty, they respond to products that are mass produced and distributed for commercial profit: with their practices, they generate forms of culture that address their interests and fantasies, while also challenging the commercial logics behind them (Jenkins, 2018, pp. 18-23).

Online fan communities have also developed forms of cultural preservation that exceed participatory production: fans function as unofficial archivists who construct infrastructures for storing, organizing and spreading fan works outside institutional systems of cultural memory. Through practices such as maintaining fanfiction repositories, moderating wikis and preserving digital artifacts, they end up sustaining archival labor that both legitimizes their cultural objects and resists their marginalization, thus demonstrating that fandoms do not merely reinterpret media texts, but also actively safeguards and historizes their own cultural production within networked environments (De Kosnik, 2016, pp. 187-191). In addition to archival practices, fan labor manifests through a wide range of productive and circulatory activities that take place in contemporary media ecosystems, such as the creation and dissemination of memes, GIFs, fan edits, subtitled clips, translations and commentary threads. Such practices contribute to the ongoing visibility and reinterpretation of media texts across platforms, generate affective value and increased engagement and extend the lifespan of commercial products beyond their initial release. Although often unpaid and framed as leisure, these activities constitute forms of immaterial labor that blur the boundaries between consumption and production. Fandom thus operates not only as a space of interpretation and

resistance, but also as a site where cultural value is continuously produced, circulated and, at times, appropriated by platform and media industries. Taken together, these practices demonstrate that fandoms cannot be reduced to enthusiastic communities or passive interpreters of cultural objects: they must be understood as dynamic social formations composed of embodied performers, interpretive negotiators and active cultural producers.

Williams complicates the idea that fandom is anchored to a single national context by emphasizing the mobility of media texts and the transnational communities that build around them. As cultural objects migrate globally, fans do not merely import their meanings, but actively reinterpret, localize and rearticulate them within new cultural frameworks and borders. Audiences abroad translate, memeify, cosplay and remix media texts, creating forms of engagement where the culture of origin is partially reimagined through fan mediation: cultural identity associated with a media text is neither stable nor national, but rather dynamically negotiated through global circulation (Chin & Morimoto, 2013, pp. 92-105). In some cases, industrial revivals and reboots show how transnational fandoms operate across temporal borders, as well as spatial ones: legacy texts are reactivated through contemporary distribution systems, thus allowing affective attachments formed in earlier moments to persist and circulate across generations and territories. The media mix thrives on temporal layering and long-term affective engagement, which helps explain the sustained global presence of certain franchises (Williams, 2015, pp.1-16).

Transnational fandoms thus exceed the role of foreign audiences merely consuming imported media: they are geographically dispersed yet networked communities that generate hybrid interpretative identities and practices, adapting attachments to external media texts and industries to local cultural sensibilities and traditions. These communities function as sites of cultural translation and negotiation, where national identity is commodified and re-signified through everyday practices and acts of consumption and interpretation. Cultural influence thus emerges through mediated and affective investment rather than direct state intervention, positioning transnational fandoms as key agents in the circulation and negotiation of cultural soft power (Chin & Morimoto, 2013, pp. 1-14).

2.5 The Japanese media mix: industrial and participatory convergence

The Japanese media mix model demonstrates that the processes of convergence, cross-media circulation, narrative expansion and consumer participation were embedded in industrial practices before they were even conceptualized in Western theory or intensified by digital platforms. Rather than emerging as a by-product of platformization, transmedia storytelling in Japan developed as a deliberate economic and narrative strategy, anticipating the industrialization of convergence culture instead of exemplifying it. Examining Japan's model allows us to understand anime as part of an integrated transmedia economy in which storytelling, merchandising and affective attachment are structurally intertwined.

The eleventh episode of *Tetsuwan Atomu* (鉄腕アトム, *Astro Boy*) by Osamu Tezuka, "The Time Machine", aired in 1963, showcases a specific gag in which the characters, traveling back in time in search of the protagonist's father, end up in the Ice Age and as they disembark the slot on the side of the time machine, a box of *Meiji Seika Marble Chocolates* comes out instead of one of the character; this moment is followed by a "Cut!", after which the screen goes black and a retake of the scene shows the character coming out instead. This gag, where the chocolate company is humorously introduced as the television anime's first and sole sponsor, raised questions on the regulation of media connectivity, transmedia consumption and the relationship between anime and sponsored products. One of the reasons the anime studio producing *Tetsuwan Atomu* relied on other transmedial means and commodity forms was to compensate for the production costs, with Tezuka hoping to recover his losses also through the royalties coming from licensing the characters and exporting his series to other markets. This commerce strategy base was deeply inspired by Walt Disney, whose presence in Japan since the 1950s allowed for the regularization of character-based merchandising practices: Tezuka was the first Japanese producer to center his business model on the sale of licenses and royalties, with his character being marked with the copyright sign. Tezuka's success immediately influenced other producers and established such practices as a fundamental part of anime as a media mix system, making Japan nowadays known as the "Empire of Characters" (Steinberg, 2012, pp. 38-41).

While character merchandising can be defined as the licensing, production, marketing and consumption practices based around the image of a character and regulated through a

copyright law, it also involves the ubiquity and spreadability across media forms and goods: the desire for the character and its exploitation supersede the sponsoring company's monopoly and allow for a much wider economic success, as well as creating a prolific character-based media system of commodities that exists to this day. In this case, the character functions both as a magnetic force that attracts media representations and objects to align with it, as well as an agent that tends to expand its original boundaries, bleeding into other media forms and representations (Steinberg, 2012, pp. 41-44). This double logic incentivizes the distribution of the character's both physical and immaterial forms, its image and the consumer's desire and attraction to it: the magnetic pull of the character makes media act to resemble its image and spread it, which in turn furthers its attraction and creates a universe of association between media commodities and the anime's world. Therefore, character merchandising does not merely rely on the intellectual property distribution laws and royalties' recollection, but also on the building of an infrastructure of desire based on attraction and diffusion (Steinberg, 2012, pp. 44-45; 58).

Character-based systems function through the principle of recognition, as they are only effective so long as they can be recognized by the publics: unlike real-life stars, which have embedded within themselves both the character and the actor playing the role, there is no doubled body and only a one-to-one correspondence between the narrative and the character, meaning that they are specific to the series they star in. However, a first double structure can be found when thinking about voice actors, around which the anime industry has built a secondary star system: the voice of the actors playing animated characters gives back to the "real-life" corporality which would otherwise be absent. Moreover, the character body can be recognized by the unique touch of its animators, whose drawing styles allow fans to identify changes in directions and design across panels, as well as proliferate across platforms and media types more easily than nonphotographic media; most importantly, character bodies maintain a certain level of likeness across time, their corporality as immortal as their popularity (Steinberg, 2012, pp. 68-69). For those who weren't readers of the manga before the anime was broadcasted, the series introduced the comic to a wider audience, expanding the market and making it an object of consumption on its own: this phenomenon of *synergy* occurs when the persuasive power of the whole

is more than the mere sum of the individual parts and the popularity of a media text or object in one medium increases its consumption in other platforms and spaces too, favored by the visual consistency across converging media forms. In the material dispersion of the character image, which is one of the main reasons for the present state of character merchandising in Japan, stickers played a key role: their small size and inclusion with already branded products (es. *Meiji* chocolate bar) made them mobile, their adhesiveness allowed them to be placed on any surface and, finally, their ability to be seen anytime enabled a pleasure that came from consuming the character and its narrative world in temporally and spatially diffused practices. This form of material abstraction shifted the character from its original settings to the consumer's personal environments and goods, transforming a lifeless commodity into a familiar companion and passive spectators into active curators of the character's presence (Steinberg, 2012, pp. 69-81). In this sense, character merchandising generates a desire for a ubiquitous character and its narrative universe through the consumption and participation in its world, consequently offering the means to satisfy it through the various images and forms of the character image. Characters thus become a mobile node within a networked media environment, generating economic value through their capacity to circulate, be recognized and further affective engagement across different contexts (Steinberg, 2012, pp. 82-83).

Anime represents a form of cultural globalization driven not solely by centralized corporate power but by distributed social and creative energy, with its success deriving from a complex interplay of small studios, freelance animators, distributors, fans and auxiliary industries operating within a fragmented and yet cooperative environment. The production cycle requires highly coordinated labor, involving repetitive, detail-oriented practices in which animators are asked to reproduce character designs and stylistic conventions established by others. This form of collaborative creativity generates not only visual consistency, but also industrial scalability, where the economic constraints imposed by market conditions reflect the tensions of contemporary media industries shaped by neoliberal labor dynamics (Condry, 2013, pp. 2-4).

Despite anime's global visibility, much of its production remains grounded in relatively small studios scattered across Tokyo, which often heavily rely on freelance animators and subcontracted domestic and overseas partners: projects are rarely produced by a single

company, but are rather coordinated between studios, television broadcasters, publishers, toy manufacturers, advertising agencies and music labels, a system commonly referred to as the “production committee model” (*seisaku iinkai*). Such a structure creates a built-in transmedia expansion, as narrative worlds are designed to circulate across manga, television series, theatrical films, music releases, videogames and licensed commodities: the industrial infrastructures anticipate cross-platform development as a core economic objective, coordinating anime production through transnational distribution pipelines. Moreover, overseas licensing agreements, streaming platforms and global fan communities extend these networks beyond Japan, transforming local works into globally circulating media franchises. In this perspective, anime’s resonance across media, markets and communities is not accidental but rather structurally enabled, making transmedia expansion culturally and economically sustainable over time (Condry, 2013, pp. 7; 35-52). In the contemporary platform era, this infrastructure has intensified through simultaneous global releases, algorithm-driven recommendation systems and co-production agreements with platforms such as *Netflix* and *Crunchyroll*, which further integrate anime into transnational distribution ecosystems and consolidate convergence as both industrial and affective logic.

This structural convergence also reshapes modes of consumption, as fans engage with affective fragments such as visual traits, personality archetypes and relational dynamics that can be recombined and enjoyed independently across media platforms. Their engagement shifts from linear narrative immersion to database consumption, reinforcing the centrality of the characters over plot coherence. Within the Japanese media mix, franchises such as *Pokémon* are generationally renewable and structurally expandable precisely because their worlds are organized around combinable character units, where convergence operates not only at the level of distribution, but also within narrative architecture (Azuma, 2009, pp. 25-36).

Moreover, media franchises cultivate emotional attachment through characters that function as intimate companions embedded in everyday life, encouraging long-term engagement that extends beyond single narrative texts. The commodification of childhood culture and “portable monsters” transforms affection into an economic driver, securing

consumer loyalty across platforms and also life stages. A paradigmatic example is the *Tamagotchi*, a handheld digital device released by *Bandai* in 1996 that simulates the care of a virtual pet requiring constant feeding, cleaning and emotional attention. Its design demands continuous interaction, transforming companionship into a daily routine and embedding affective labor within a consumer object (Allison, 2006, pp. 163-167; 172-176). In this sense, the Japanese media mix industrializes emotional attachment within a system of continuous and renewable consumption.

Taken together, the Japanese media mix thus emerges as a system in which industrial coordination, modular narrative design and affective investment converge, creating franchises capable of expansion and longevity.

Chapter 3 – Anime as transmedia storytelling:

Pokémon as a case study

3.1 Industrial context and evolution of the *Pokémon* franchise

Pokémon, originally conceived as an abbreviation of *Pocket Monsters* (ポケットモンスター, *Poketto Monsutā*) and later adopted by American audiences as the official name of the franchise, was first created as a software game for the *Game Boy*, the handheld console developed by *Nintendo* in 1989 and designed by *Game Freak*'s game designer Satoshi Tajiri. In the early 1980s, Tajiri befriended illustrator Ken Sugimori and together they created a *fanzine* dedicated to video games titled *Game Freak*. The magazine aimed to help players by providing strategies for winning and lists of *easter eggs* present in games, meaning hidden messages or features embedded within them. Initially self-funded, the publication was later distributed through *Mandarake*, a retail chain specializing in second-hand manga and related media goods. Tajiri later discovered *Family BASIC*, a programming package designed for creating video games; in 1989, he and Sugimori transformed the magazine into a video game development company and shortly after pitched their first game, *Quinty*, to the video game publisher *Namco*, which agreed to release it (Allison, 2006, pp. 197-199; Uslenghi, 2022).

The success of this first title encouraged Tajiri to conceive a new project, this time centered on the capture, collection and exchange of creatures. *Pokémon* was in fact deeply rooted in Tajiri's childhood memories and in the imaginary worlds to which he retreated during a time when industrial development had not yet fully overtaken nature. Like Osamu Tezuka, creator of *Tetsuwan Atomu* (鉄腕アトム), and Hayao Miyazaki, co-founder of *Studio Ghibli* (スタジオジブリ, *Sutajio Jiburi*), Tajiri shared a fascination with biodiversity and collecting insects, further intensified by his Asperger syndrome, which contributed to the remarkable intensity with which he focused on this particular interest. He envisioned an aesthetic display of creatures that could be traded from one console to another and evolve into new and more powerful forms, their characteristics recorded and catalogued within an in-game database.

After years of intense work and financial difficulties that nearly drove *Game Freak* into bankruptcy, *Pokémon Red* (ポケットモンスター 赤, *Poketto Monsutā Aka*) and *Green* (ポケットモンスター 緑, *Poketto Monsutā Midori*) were finally released in February 1996 under the *Nintendo* label, achieving a level of success that far exceeded initial expectations. The initial versions of the game were characterized by numerous programming errors and sales were initially modest: in response, developer Shigeki Morimoto secretly inserted *Mew* (ミュウ, *Myū*), a Pokémon that could not normally be obtained in the game except through specific glitches, whose existence was later revealed in a gaming magazine. A contest was subsequently organized that offered twenty players the opportunity to obtain the legendary Pokémon, exponentially increasing both participation and game sales. By 1997, *Pokémon* had already emerged as one of *Nintendo*'s leading franchises. The games were subsequently introduced to American audiences as *Pokémon Red* and *Blue*, and in 1998 *The Pokémon Company* was established as the organization responsible for the brand's production, marketing and licensing activities (Uslenghi, 2022).

Pokémon's outcome was largely due to the convenience of being able to play it anywhere, as well as to its accessibility, since it did not require prior gaming knowledge or advanced skills. Alongside the game itself, its marketers quickly envisioned an expansion of the product's reach into manga series, trading cards, an animated television series, toy merchandise, the first feature film of the saga, as well as a wide range of stationery products, food industry tie-ins and highly visible advertising campaigns. Notable examples include *Pokémon*-painted aircraft operated by *Nippon Airways* and themed trains run by *Japan Railways*, as well as through physical fan-oriented experiences including *Pokémon Centers*, themed cafés and international competitive events such as the *Pokémon World Championships*, which further extend the media mix into retail spaces and participatory fan environments (Steinberg, 2012). Within a year of its release, *Pokémon* had also reached Asian, European and American audiences, becoming not only a commercial success but also a new form of play and a social phenomenon (Yamato, 1998, as cited in Allison, 2006, pp. 197-199).

Unlike many games available on the market at the time, which demanded considerable cognitive effort and immersion in complex fictional worlds, *Pokémon* presented itself as software accessible to younger players while simultaneously encouraging exchange and interaction. It promoted a form of play centered on sociality, complementing its competitive core of battles, primarily oriented toward a target audience constructed as male. Through the insertion of a link cable, in fact, the console enabled players to compete against one another and trade their Pokémon, embedding interpersonal interaction into the mechanics of the game itself. Moreover, the form of communication envisioned by Tajiri did not concern only the interaction with other players, but also communication with the self. Children were drawn to Pokémon not merely for their physical attributes, but also for the relationships they developed with these creatures and with the imaginary world in which they were embedded, dynamics that resemble those associated with the *kawaii* aesthetic trend, which emerged in Japan in the mid-1970s and experienced a resurgence toward the end of the century. Such emotional attachments became, on the one hand, an extension of the self, and on the other, a means of engaging in creative and simulated interaction with the external world (Allison, 2006, pp. 203-206). *Pokémon* thus emerged as a game that was easy to play yet sufficiently challenging to stimulate children's imagination, while also offering a temporary escape from the social pressures associated with growing up in a post-industrial society. In a context where academic success and performance increasingly shaped childhood experience, often at the expense of interpersonal relationships, *Pokémon* provided a counterbalance to tendencies toward isolation by fostering intimacy and companionship within virtual, yet natural worlds enabled by new technologies (Allison, 2006, pp. 199-201). From its origins, the game was thus characterized by an implicit tension between a childlike attraction to nature and the desire to contain, classify and control it. It is noteworthy that the Pokémon Professors featured in the anime all bear names associated with elements of the natural world, such as *Professor Oak*, *Ivy*, *Elm* and so on, further reinforcing the franchise's symbolic connection to nature and taxonomy (Bainbridge, 2014, pp. 399-414).

3.2 The *Pokémon* anime and the construction of a narrative world

The *Pokémon* animated television series first aired in Japan on *Terebi Tokyo* in April 1997 and has since then become one of the most widely distributed Japanese anime productions worldwide, broadcasted in more than seventy countries. The series is produced by the animation studio *OLM, Inc. (Oriental Light and Magic)* and constitutes one of the central pillars of the broader *Pokémon* multimedia franchise (Allison, 2006, p. 199). In Japan, the anime is generally divided into eight major narrative series corresponding to different stages of the story and generations of *Pokémon*, while international distribution organizes the episodes into twenty-eight seasons (Tajiri, 1997-present).

The anime follows the adventures of *Ash Ketchum* (サトシ, *Satoshi*), a young boy from *Pallet Town* whose dream is to become a *Pokémon* Master; the English surname “Ketchum” derives from the franchise’s famous slogan “Gotta catch ’em all!”, which encapsulates the central mechanic of collecting *Pokémon*. At the beginning of the story, *Ash* receives his first *Pokémon*, *Pikachu* (ピカチュウ, *Pikachū*), from *Professor Oak* (オーキド・ユキナリ博士, *Ōkido Yukinari-hakase*), a renowned researcher. With *Pikachu* at his side, *Ash* sets out on a journey across the *Kanto* region with the goal of challenging the region’s Gym Leaders in order to obtain the eight Gym Badges required to enter the prestigious *Pokémon* League competition. During his travels, *Ash* is joined by several companions who accompany him on his adventures: among the first and most recognizable are *Misty* (カスミ, *Kasumi*), an aspiring Water-type *Pokémon* trainer who dreams of becoming the strongest specialist of that type, and *Brock* (タケシ, *Takeshi*), a knowledgeable trainer whose ambition is to become a *Pokémon* breeder. *Ash*’s journey is also shaped by his rivalry with *Gary* (オーキド・シゲル, *Shigeru Okido*), the ambitious grandson of *Professor Oak*, who constantly competes with him in order to prove his superiority as a trainer. Throughout the series, *Ash* and his friends repeatedly encounter the members of the criminal organization *Team Rocket*, whose goal is to steal rare and powerful *Pokémon*. The group is primarily represented by the trio composed of *Jessie* (ムサシ, *Musashi*), *James* (コジロウ, *Kojirō*) and the talking *Pokémon* *Meowth* (ニャース, *Nyāsu*), whose comedic schemes and repeated failures became one of the most iconic

recurring elements of the series. Over the course of the anime, Ash travels through numerous regions of the Pokémon world, including *Kanto*, *Johto*, *Hoenn*, *Sinnoh*, *Unova*, *Kalos*, *Alola* and *Galar*, meeting new companions, rivals and antagonists in each storyline, where each major narrative arc is broadly based on a corresponding generation of the *Pokémon* video games, allowing the anime to introduce new species, characters and locations in parallel with the release of new installments of the game series (Tajiri, 1997-2023).

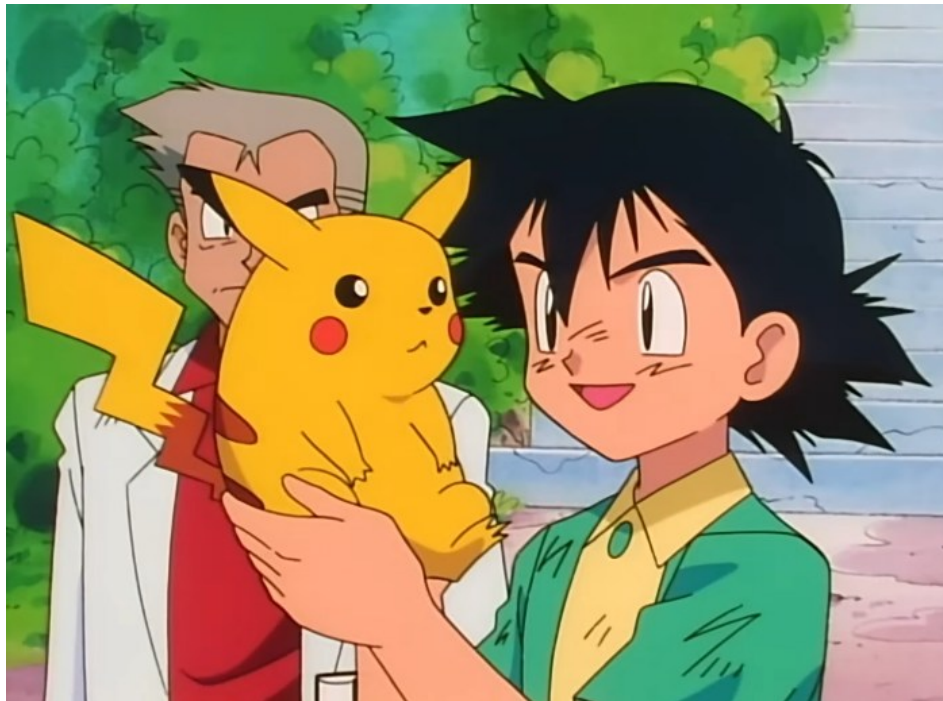


Figure 3. *Ash Ketchum* holding his first Pokémon, *Pikachu*, while *Professor Oak* observes. This scene from the very first episode of the *Pokémon* anime illustrates the initial interaction and budding partnership between *Ash* and *Pikachu* shortly after *Pikachu* is given to him in *Pallet Town*.

After more than two decades of adventures, *Ash* eventually achieves one of his greatest milestones in the *Alola* region when he wins the regional Pokémon League. The episode depicting his victory first aired in Japan in September 2019 (Fujisaku & Asada, 2019), marking the first time the protagonist succeeded in winning a major league tournament. *Ash* later becomes World Champion during the Masters Eight Tournament in 2022 (Yonemura & Asada, 2022), bringing his long narrative journey to its climax. The conclusion of his story

emphasizes that becoming a Pokémon Master does not simply mean being the strongest trainer but rather building meaningful relationships with Pokémon and continuing to explore the world alongside them.

Following the conclusion of *Ash* and *Pikachu*'s storyline after more than twenty-five years, the anime introduced a new generation of protagonists in the series *Pokémon Horizons*. The new central characters are *Liko* (リコ), a girl originally from the *Paldea* region, and *Roy* (ロイ), a boy from *Kanto*. The two join the group of adventurers known as the *Rising Volt Tacklers*, who travel across the Pokémon world aboard an airship. During their journey, *Liko* and *Roy* discover that the mysterious objects they possess, an enigmatic pendant and an ancient *Poké Ball*, are connected to the legendary explorer *Lucius* (ルシウス, *Rushiasu*) and his six Pokémon companions, known as the “Six Heroes”. Their quest revolves around uncovering the secrets of this legend and locating the mythical paradise known as *Laqua*, while confronting the antagonistic organization called the *Explorers* (Tajiri, 2023-present).

The early narrative direction of the anime was strongly influenced by the work of the head writer Takeshi Shudo, who contributed to shaping the personalities of many of the central characters and the thematic tone of the first seasons; the long-time director Kunihiko Yuyama supervised the visual and narrative development of the series for more than two decades and the musical score of the Japanese version was composed by Shinji Miyazaki. The international success of the *Pokémon* anime required extensive localization for audiences outside Japan: the English-language adaptation was initially produced by *4Kids Entertainment*, which licensed the series for North American distribution in the late 1990s. This process involved rewriting dialogue scripts, replacing the original Japanese voice acting with an English cast, modifying cultural references and substituting much of the original musical score with newly composed tracks, where such practices were commonly used in the localization of Japanese animation for Western television (Katsuno & Maret, 2004, pp. 80-107). Since 2006, international distribution and localization have been overseen directly by *The Pokémon Company International*, which manages the franchise's global expansion and media coordination outside Japan.

One notable event in the early history of the anime occurred in December 1997 with the broadcast of the episode “Electric Soldier Porygon” (でんのうせんしポリゴン, *Dennō Senshi Porygon*). During the episode, rapidly flashing red and blue visual effects triggered photosensitive seizures in several hundred viewers in Japan. The incident led to the temporary suspension of the series and prompted the introduction of stricter broadcasting guidelines regulating flashing imagery (Plunkett, 2015). Despite the controversy, the anime resumed shortly afterward and continued to expand both domestically and internationally, eventually becoming one of the most successful and recognizable anime franchises worldwide.

Within the broader *Pokémon* media ecosystem, the animated television series occupies a distinctive narrative position: while the video games represent the original platform through which players can interact with the *Pokémon* world, the anime functions as one of the main frameworks through which that world is narratively structured and emotionally experienced by a global audience. Rather than functioning as a simple adaptation of the games, the anime should be understood as part of the franchise’s broader transmedia storytelling strategy: the games primarily offer an interactive experience centered on player agency, while the anime provides a shared narrative framework centered on serialized storytelling, recurring characters and long-term development, thus enriching the *Pokémon* universe with distinct elements and helping audiences around the world engage with it. In fact, one of the most important functions of the anime lies in its world-building: regions, cities, ecosystems and cultural practices surrounding Pokémon training are progressively explored through *Ash*’s travels, allowing the series to expand the fictional geography and social structure of its universe. Through repeated encounters with Gym Leaders, rivals, researchers and other trainers, the anime functions as a narrative map: it shows how Pokémon coexist with humans in everyday life, transforming what in the games is often a mechanical gameplay environment into a more detailed and social world.

Moreover, the anime strongly emphasizes character-driven storytelling: while the playable protagonists in the video games typically serve as relatively silent avatars through which players experience the world, the anime develops a cast of recurring personalities with clearly defined motivations, relationships and emotional trajectories. *Ash*’s long-running journey to

become a Pokémon Master provides the central narrative thread of the series, but the story is equally shaped by the companions both humans and Pokémon that accompany him throughout different stages of the narrative, who introduce individual aspirations and personal challenges that unfold across multiple episodes and seasons. Through these character arcs, the anime foregrounds themes of friendship, perseverance and personal growth, transforming the act of Pokémon training into a narrative about relationships and self-development.

Another distinctive feature of the anime is in fact its strong emphasis on the emotional bonds between humans and Pokémon, which differentiates it from the more mechanical representations typically found in the video games. While battles in the games are governed by a rigid system of statistics, type advantages and strategic calculations, the anime frequently presents battles not only as tactical confrontations but also as moments that highlight the trust and emotional connection between trainers and their Pokémon. In many cases, victory is achieved not strictly through adherence to the established mechanics of type effectiveness, but through determination and the strength of the relationship between the trainer and their partner. For instance, the anime occasionally depicts situations in which a Pokémon successfully damages an opponent despite using a move that would normally be ineffective according to the logic of the game system. Similarly, *Ash* often participates in high-level competitions, such as the Pokémon League tournaments, with Pokémon that have not reached their final evolutionary stage, which, from the perspective of the games' strategic logic, might appear irrational, since evolution typically results in stronger battle capabilities. However, within the narrative framework of the anime, these choices emphasize the importance of personal bonds and individual growth rather than pure competitive efficiency.

Episodes frequently explore themes such as loyalty, sacrifice, empathy and perseverance, portraying Pokémon not merely as collectible creatures but as companions with distinct personalities and emotional depth. Through these narrative choices, the anime reinforces the idea that the relationship between trainers and Pokémon is based on mutual care and cooperation rather than simple ownership or utility, with the relationship between *Ash* and *Pikachu* representing the most emblematic example (Laato & Rauti,

2021, pp. 2815-2817). Throughout the entire series, *Pikachu* remains *Ash*'s closest partner and constant companion, accompanying him across every region he explores. Significantly, *Ash* never forces *Pikachu* to evolve into its next evolutionary stage, which would require the use of a special item called *Thunder Stone*, despite being aware that such an evolution could potentially increase its battle strength. This decision, repeatedly reaffirmed throughout the series, symbolizes the central message of the anime: success as a trainer is not determined solely by power or competitive advantage, but by the strength of the bond between a trainer and their Pokémon. As a result, the partnership between *Ash* and *Pikachu* has become one of the most recognizable symbols of the franchise and a narrative representation of its broader themes of friendship, trust and shared growth.

The structure of the anime further reinforces these themes through its serial narrative format, as the series unfolds across hundreds of episodes, allowing for long-term character development and narrative continuity. Unlike the relatively self-contained progression of the games, the anime storylines often extend across multiple episodes or entire seasons, thus providing a sense of ongoing progression. This serialized structure enables viewers to follow *Ash*'s journey over extended periods of time, creating a sense of familiarity and attachment to both the characters and the fictional world they inhabit, while also introducing new Pokémon, locations and narrative conflicts on a regular basis, ensuring that the expanding franchise remains accessible to both new and long-time audiences. Because of these narrative features, the anime crucially shapes the global perception of the franchise, as it offers a shared narrative experience that is broadcasted to a global audience; in this sense, it functions as a central storytelling medium that organizes the franchise's expanding universe into a continuous and emotionally engaging narrative.

In addition to the main television series, the animated universe also includes several spin-off productions and numerous theatrical films that expand the narrative world. Unlike the episodic structure of the television series, the films generally present self-contained stories with higher narrative stakes and a more cinematic approach to storytelling. These productions often focus on legendary or mythical Pokémon and explore broader themes such as identity, coexistence between humans and Pokémon and the ethical implications of scientific intervention. Through their larger scale and more dramatic tone, the films expand both the

narrative and emotional scope of the animated universe while remaining connected to its established characters and world.

For instance, the first film, *Pokémon: The First Movie*, revolves around the artificially created Pokémon *Mewtwo* (ミュウツー, *Myūtsū*), a powerful being produced through genetic experimentation using the DNA of the mythical Pokémon *Mew*. Confronted with questions about his origin and purpose, *Mewtwo* challenges the authority of the humans who created him and ultimately grapples with the ethical consequences of manipulating life. The film's narrative culminates in a dramatic confrontation between original Pokémon and their cloned counterparts, symbolizing a deeper conflict between nature and technological control. Through this storyline, the film raises philosophical questions about individuality, free will and the moral responsibilities associated with creation, topics that the television series rarely addresses with such intensity. At the same time, the film reinforces a core value of the *Pokémon* franchise: the importance of empathy and coexistence between different forms of life. The emotional climax of the story, in which *Ash* intervenes in the conflict between Pokémon despite his own vulnerability, demonstrates that understanding and compassion ultimately triumph over domination and violence. In doing so, the film portrays the Pokémon world as a space in which relationships between humans and Pokémon are shaped by cooperation, trust and mutual respect (Yuyama, 1998).

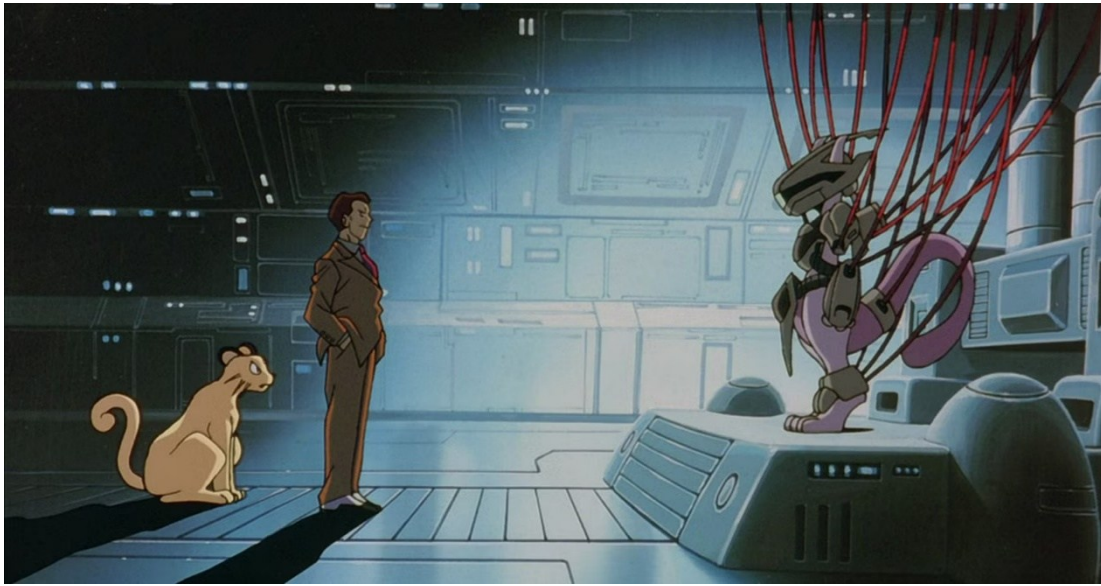


Figure 3.2. *Mewtwo* upon completion in the laboratory, restrained and under the control of *Giovanni* (サカキ, *Sakaki*), leader of *Team Rocket*. The very process of creating this Pokémon, coupled with the ambition to generate life through cloning, prompts critical reflection on the dynamics of power and the ethical and philosophical limits of scientific practice.

3.3 Semiotic structure of the *Pokémon* universe

The *Pokémon* universe does not function solely as a narrative system, but also as an extensive network of meanings, symbols and classificatory mechanisms that structure the characters and environments inhabiting it. From a semiotic perspective, Pokémon can be understood as semiotic units, whose visual design is intentionally simplified and highly iconic in order to ensure immediate recognizability. Their appearance typically relies on strong silhouettes, bright colors and clearly defined shapes, elements that allow them to be quickly identified even in small-scale representations or fast-paced visual contexts. In many cases, color coding also corresponds to Pokémon's elemental type, reinforcing the communicative clarity of their design. Their visual construction frequently draws from a wide range of referents from the real and imaginary worlds: their designs may be inspired by real-world animals, plants, objects, mythological creatures or figures drawn from both Japanese folklore and global cultural traditions; in addition, Pokémon names often reflect aspects of their design, behavior or conceptual origin. In the original Japanese version, many Pokémon vocalize their own

name, thus making the connection between sound and recognition even clearer. This combination of visual readability and symbolic coding allows Pokémon to function as clear and memorable visual signs, facilitating both immediate recognition and long-term retention among audiences (Allison, 2006, pp. 225-228).

Within the anime, these principles of visual recognizability are often reinforced through playful segments that invite viewers to identify a Pokémon based solely on its silhouette before its name is revealed. These short interludes resemble common guessing games frequently played by children, where participants are required to associate a black silhouette with the correct creature. By prompting the audience to actively recognize the figure through its outline alone, the anime encourages a small cognitive effort that strengthens the viewer's familiarity with Pokémon's design and enhances memorability, where the effectiveness of such interludes highlights the importance of distinctive shapes and simplified visual structures within the franchise's overall design strategy. As a result of these mechanisms, combined with the popularity of the video games and the widespread diffusion of the animated series, some Pokémon have become globally recognizable cultural icons, even among audiences who have never directly engaged with the franchise itself. The most emblematic examples include *Pikachu*, whose simple design and expressive features have made it the primary mascot of the franchise, and *Charizard* (リザードン, *Lizardon*), whose dragon-like appearance and powerful presence have contributed to its enduring popularity among fans.

Another important dimension of *Pokémon's* visual and symbolic structure is the influence of the *kawaii* aesthetic, a cultural concept deeply embedded in contemporary Japanese visual culture. The term *kawaii*, often translated as “cute”, refers not only to physical appearance but also to a broader aesthetic sensibility characterized by softness, roundness, innocence and emotional expressiveness. Many Pokémon designs incorporate these features through rounded shapes, large eyes, simplified facial expressions and compact body proportions, elements that contribute to their perceived friendliness and approachability, thus fostering affective attachment between audiences and Pokémon, that are not presented as collectible entities or battle units, but also as companions capable of forming emotional bonds with their trainers (Allison, 2006, pp. 204-206). The *kawaii*

aesthetic was further reinforced with the introduction of the *Fairy* type in *Pokémon X* and *Pokémon Y*: this new elemental category, often associated with pastel colors, magical motifs and delicate visual traits, further foregrounds themes of charm and enchantment. Its importance is also reinforced through the circulation of the characters in material culture: plush toys, figurines, clothing and a wide range of other merchandise reproducing Pokémon designs allows them to circulate beyond the narrative context of the games and animated series, as well as transforming them into affective commodities and tangible cultural symbols that can be encountered in everyday life (Allison, 2006, pp. 215-219).

Beyond their visual design, Pokémon are also organized according to a precise taxonomic logic, which is represented by the *Pokédex*, an in-game digital archive that records detailed information about each encountered species and provides data such as height, weight, descriptive characteristics and typical habitats, documenting the player's progress in discovering and cataloguing the creatures inhabiting the Pokémon world. This system reflects a broader database-oriented logic, in which the accumulation and classification of information become a central component of the experience (Azuma, 2009, pp. 25-36). Pokémon are primarily categorized according to elemental types, each associated with specific strengths and weaknesses that structure battle mechanics. Types such as *Fire*, *Water*, *Electric*, *Grass* and many others interact through a system of effectiveness relationships, including super-effective, not very effective, neutral or ineffective interactions. This system creates a strategic layer that links visual design, narrative identity and gameplay mechanics. The color schemes, visual motifs and thematic characteristics of each Pokémon often correspond to its elemental type, reinforcing the semiotic coherence of the classification system.

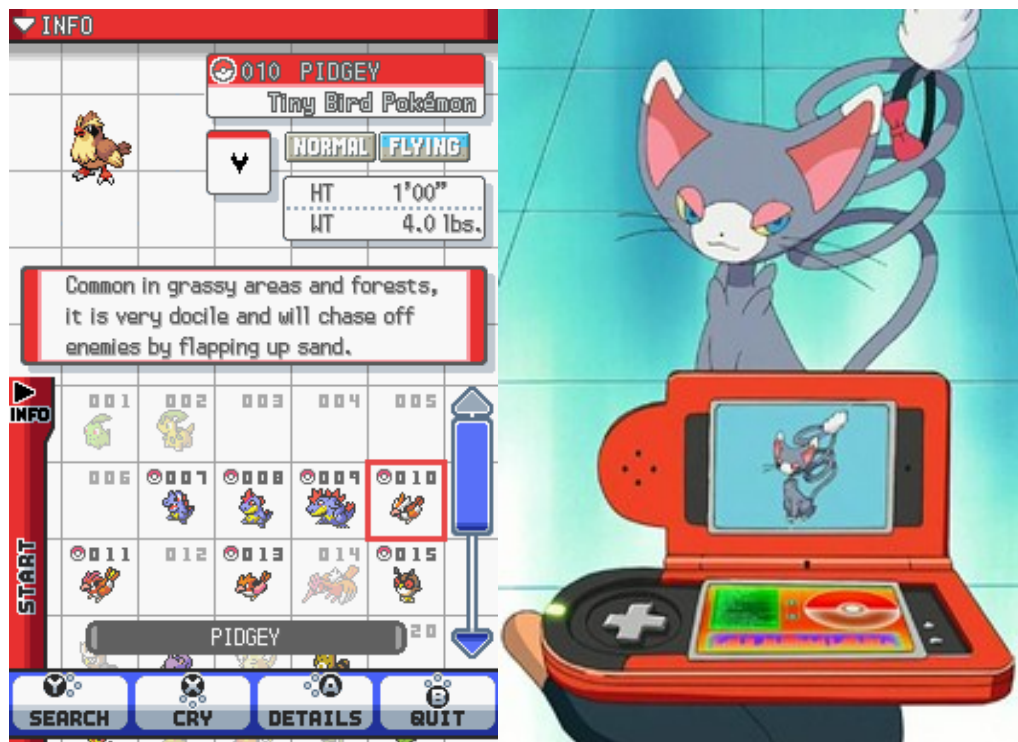


Figure 3.3. Examples of *Pokédex* entries and interfaces in the video games (*Pokémon HeartGold & SoulSilver*) and in the anime, illustrating its role as a classificatory and informational system within the *Pokémon* universe.

Another fundamental classificatory mechanism is the concept of evolutionary chains, through which many Pokémon transform into more powerful forms over time. Evolution may occur through a variety of mechanisms, including reaching a certain level, the use of special evolutionary stones, trading with other players, the development of friendship or affection with the trainer, environmental conditions such as time of day or weather or the knowledge of specific moves. In some cases, the conditions required for evolution are deliberately unconventional, as in the case of *Inkay* (マーイーカ, *Maaiika*) which evolves into *Malamar* (カラマネロ, *Calamanero*) only when the game console is physically held upside down at the moment it reaches level 30. In addition to standard evolution, Pokémon may also display a remarkable variety of alternative forms: for instance, in later installments of the franchise, certain species can undergo *Mega Evolution*, a temporary transformation triggered through the use of a specific *Mega Stone*, which enhances their

combat abilities during battle. Other mechanics introduce additional transformations, such as the ancient power known as *Primal Reversion*, or the *Gigantamax* phenomenon, which temporarily alters both the appearance and abilities of certain Pokémon during battles. Furthermore, the introduction of regional forms allows some species to appear differently depending on the geographic region in which they are encountered, often featuring altered designs, types, and ecological adaptations; other Pokémon might change form depending on the items they hold or the types they combine with, further expanding the variability of the system.

In addition to evolutions and regional variants, some Pokémon also display further forms of visual differentiation, such as sexual dimorphism, where male and female individuals of the same species present slight variations in appearance, coloration, body shape or specific design details. Another form of variation is represented by “shiny” Pokémon, rare color variants of existing species; although shiny forms do not alter their fundamental characteristics, their rarity and distinctive appearance make them particularly desirable within the logic of collection that underlies the franchise.

Beyond the Pokémon themselves, the semiotic structure of their universe also extends to the human characters who interact with them: there is a wide variety of trainer categories, each associated with specific roles, visual identities and battle strategies. Some specialize in particular types, which is typical of Gym Leaders, who are characterized by their exclusive use of a single type of Pokémon, as exemplified by characters such as *Brock*, who specializes in Rock-type Pokémon. Other trainer archetypes include Pokémon Professors, who conduct scientific research on Pokémon species, Rangers, who protect natural environments and assist Pokémon in the wild, Pokémon Breeders, who focus on the care and development of creatures, and many more. Through these diverse roles, the franchise constructs a structured social ecosystem in which different forms of knowledge, specialization and interaction with Pokémon are represented.

Another key dimension of the *Pokémon* universe, in fact, concerns the relationship between humans and nature, which is expressed through the practices of capturing, training and battling Pokémon. At the center of this system lies the concept of evolution, which, beyond its gameplay function, can be interpreted as reflecting a parallel with Japan’s own

development as a modern nation, where technological innovation and the production of cultural goods for children became significant elements of the country's global identity (Allison, 2006, pp. 206-208). At the beginning of most entries in the video game series, players are introduced to the Pokémon world by a regional Professor, who explains the basic principles governing the relationship between humans and Pokémon and then invites players to venture into the world and uncover its mysteries, one of the most fundamental ones concerning the very nature of Pokémon themselves. Although they resemble other living creatures in many respects, they cannot be easily classified with conventional systems of knowledge, where such ambiguity contributes to their fascination (Allison, 2006, pp. 208-211). Therefore, a central dynamic within the franchise is the desire to discover, catalog and understand Pokémon, which ends up staging a continuous tension between two impulses: the desire to control and categorize nature and the fascination with its diversity, unpredictability and mystery. Within the narrative framework of the franchise, however, this is often reframed as a relationship based on cooperation and mutual trust rather than simple control: the stories presented in the games and especially in the anime emphasize that successful training depends on respect and care, where battles are portrayed as collaborative efforts in which trainer and Pokémon work together to overcome challenges and grow stronger. This representation can also be interpreted as reflecting the desires of a highly industrialized society that, having progressively distanced itself from direct contact with nature, expresses a nostalgic longing for a more harmonious relationship with the natural world. In this sense, the *Pokémon* universe offers a fantasy in which the impulse to dominate and classify nature is transformed into a relationship of mutual understanding (Allison, 2006, pp. 212-215).

Beyond human and non-human coexistence, other recurring cultural values in the franchise include themes such as perseverance and personal growth: in fact, the journey undertaken by trainers typically involves overcoming obstacles, forming bonds with Pokémon and learning through experience rather than achieving immediate success, thus framing Pokémon training not simply as a competitive activity but as a process of self-development and ethical learning.

With regard to the narrative spaces in which the storylines of the franchise unfold, the main regions of the *Pokémon* world are often closely inspired, both geographically and culturally, by real-world locations, including France (*Kalos*), the Hawaii archipelago (*Alola*), United Kingdom (*Galar*), the Iberian Peninsula (*Paldea*), the metropolitan area of New York City (*Unova*) and several regions of Japan (*Kanto*, *Johto*, *Hoenn*, *Sinnoh*).



Figure 3.4. Comparison between the *Pokémon* regions of *Kanto* (on the left) and *Unova* (on the right) and the real-world inspirations, the Kantō region in Japan and the metropolitan area of New York City. The figure illustrates how the geography of the *Pokémon* world draws from existing cultural landscapes while creatively reimagining them within a fictional framework.

Although these regions correspond to recognizable real-world inspirations, the design of their landscapes is characterized by considerable creative freedom, where urban environments and architectural landmarks are frequently reimagined through elements drawn from international literary and cinematic traditions. In some cases, references to real locations are also incorporated directly into the descriptive entries of the *Pokédex*, which occasionally allude to myths, historical sites or cultural traditions associated with particular Pokémon

species. The spaces of the *Pokémon* world also serve an important semiotic and narrative function, as they guide the players or viewers through a progressive exploration: cities typically function as social hubs where trainers can rest, interact with other characters or obtain new items, while the routes connecting them are spaces of transition meant for encounters with wild Pokémon and other trainers. This rhythm of movement and discovery is punctuated by training and competition in the Pokémon Gyms, each one usually associated with a specific elemental type and characterized by a distinctive design or puzzle-like challenge that reflects the personality of its leader, who needs to be defeated in order to obtain badges required to participate in regional tournaments. The *Pokémon* world also features numerous iconic landmarks, such as forests, caves, mountains, research laboratories and historical ruins, which often host rare Pokémon species or key narrative events and thus function not merely as backdrops for the story but as meaningful environments that guide the progression of both gameplay and storytelling.

Moreover, the franchise occasionally incorporates playful references to real people and cultural figures through hidden characters and easter eggs scattered throughout the games. Some non-player characters are modeled after developers involved in the creation of the games and may even be challenged in battle by players, one notable example being *Bug Catcher Tajiri*, a clear reference to the creator of the franchise and his childhood fascination with insects; other references draw inspiration from historical figures or popular culture, such as Santa Claus or Noah, mentioned in the anime. These easter eggs can be interpreted as meta-cultural elements that reflect on the production context of the *Pokémon* universe, embedding traces of its creators, as well as cultural and historical inspirations, within the fictional world.

Taken together, these elements reveal how *Pokémon* operates as a complex semiotic system in which visual design, classificatory structures, narrative roles and spatial organization work together to create meaning. Pokémon themselves function simultaneously as recognizable visual signs, collectible entries and affective companions, while the systems that organize them, including types, evolutions and regional variations, create a structured framework that encourages interaction, exploration and discovery. At the same time, the emphasis on cooperation, combined with the construction of landscapes

inspired by real-world referents, situates the franchise within a broader cultural imagination that reflects contemporary concerns about nature, technology and sociality. In doing so, it constructs a world that is narratively engaging as well as culturally meaningful, where gameplay mechanics, visual aesthetics and symbolic values converge to produce a coherent and long-standing transmedia universe.

3.4 Transmedia expansion of the franchise and mobile experiences

Following the success of the early video games and anime, the *Pokémon* universe continued to expand its reach through the development of additional media products and experiences. Among the most significant developments was the introduction of the *Pokémon Trading Card Game* (PTCG), alongside manga adaptations and, in more recent years, mobile-based experiences such as *Pokémon GO*. These extensions contributed to transforming *Pokémon* from a successful video game series into a broader transmedia ecosystem spanning games, printed media and everyday consumer culture.

The *Pokémon Trading Card Game* is a collectible tabletop strategy game developed by *Creatures Inc.* and first released in Japan in October 1996, its distribution in America initially handled by *Wizards of the Coast* before later being transferred to *The Pokémon Company*. In a typical match, two players take on the role of *Pokémon Trainers* and compete against one another using decks composed of sixty cards, which include *Pokémon cards*, *Energy cards* and *Trainer cards*. During the match, players place Pokémon into play from a bench area and use them to launch attacks against the opponent, with the goal of reducing their Pokémon's *Health Points* to zero. Attacks require the attachment of the appropriate number and type of *Energy cards*, but the game also incorporates elements of chance, such as coin flips or dice rolls, which can influence the outcome of certain moves or card effects. Damage counters and status markers are used throughout the match to keep track of damage and conditions affecting Pokémon in play. Victory is most commonly achieved by collecting six *Prize Cards*, which are awarded when a player knocks out an opponent's Pokémon; however, matches can also end through alternative conditions, such as eliminating all of the opponent's Pokémon from the field or winning by "deck-out" when the opposing player is unable to draw a card

at the beginning of their turn because there are no cards left in deck to draw into (Creatures Inc., 1996-present).

Over time, the card game has developed into competitive events ranging from local leagues to large international tournaments that are regularly hosted in game stores, shopping centers and convention venues. Participants are divided according to age and compete in a series of preliminary rounds where match results are recorded to determine overall rankings; the highest-ranking players advance to elimination stages until a final winner is determined. Through participation in official tournaments, players can earn Championship Points that contribute to qualification for the annual World Championships. The *Pokémon Trading Card Game* has thus been officially classified as a sport and was also adapted into a video game version first released for the *Game Boy Color*, translating the mechanics of the tabletop game into a portable digital experience. More recently, online versions of the game have been developed for *Android*, *iOS* and *Microsoft Windows*, allowing players to participate in matches remotely while maintaining the core mechanics of the physical card game (Creatures Inc., 1996-present).

Beyond its gameplay system, however, one of the most influential aspects of the PTCG lies in its culture of collecting and exchange: the rarity of specific cards, their fluctuating market value and the desire to complete particular sets have turned the cards into collectible objects; for many enthusiasts, the aesthetic attributes of the cards, including their illustration styles, holographic effects and design variations, can be as important as their competitive utility. Cards are distributed through multiple retail formats, including booster packs, boxed sets and special promotional collections, and they are sold by official retailers as well as secondary online markets. Within the collecting community, an important practice is the professional grading of cards by specialized authentication companies such as *Professional Sports Authenticator*, *Certified Guaranty Company* and *Beckett Grading Services*: compared to their ungraded counterparts, cards that receive particularly high grades from these organizations can increase dramatically in value and sometimes reach extraordinary prices in the market (Creatures Inc., 1996-present).



Figure 3.5. “Pikachu Illustrator” (on the left) and “20th Anniversary 24-karat real-gold Pikachu” (on the right), two of the rarest and most expensive *Pokémon* cards. “Pikachu Illustrator” was bought by celebrity Logan Paul for \$5,275,000 in July 2021 and later sold in February 2026 for \$16,5 million to AJ Scaramucci. “20th Anniversary 24-karat real-gold Pikachu” was sold via a lottery system for approximately \$2,081 (Sharman, 2026).

In recent years, the act of opening *Pokémon* card packs has itself become a form of digital entertainment, particularly on platforms such as *YouTube* and *TikTok*, where content creators frequently broadcast “pack opening” videos to large audiences, transforming the discovery of rare cards into a shared spectacle and further reinforcing its cultural visibility.

With regard to the manga adaptation of the *Pokémon* franchise, one of the most notable examples is *Pokémon Adventures* (ポケットモンスターSPECIAL, *Poketto Monsutā Supesharu*), written by Hidenori Kusaka and originally illustrated by the mangaka Mato, later replaced by Satoshi Yamamoto. The series was first published in March 1997 by the Japanese publishing company *Shogakukan* and quickly attracted both critical acclaim and a large audience of readers. Over the years it has become one of the most successful manga adaptations associated with the franchise, with global sales reaching hundreds of millions of

copies. The *Pokémon* manga is generally classified as *shōnen* manga (少年漫画), a category referring to comics primarily targeted at adolescent boys and characterized by themes such as adventure, friendship, competition and personal growth (Unser-Schutz, 2015, pp. 133-134). The narrative is structured through a series of story arcs that correspond broadly to the different generations of the *Pokémon* video game series, each introducing new characters, regions and narrative conflicts; more than sixty volumes have been published, alongside several special and mini volumes that further expand the storyline (*Pokémon Adventures*, 1997-). According to Kusaka himself, the writing process for the manga aimed to reproduce the sense of discovery and surprise typical of the video game experience, allowing readers to feel as if they were actively participating in the journey; particular attention was also devoted to the visual representation of *Pokémon*, whose designs were often rendered in ways intended to enhance their expressive appeal. The creator of *Pokémon*, Satoshi Tajiri, has reportedly stated that the manga's interpretation is the one that most closely resembles the world he originally imagined for the franchise (G., 2016).

The early narrative arc follows the adventures of *Red* (レッド, *Reddo*), a young Trainer from the *Kanto* region who receives a *Pokédex* from *Professor Oak* and sets out on his journey. During his travels he encounters his rival *Blue* (グリーン, *Gurīn*, known as *Green* in the original Japanese version), whose counterpart in the animated series is *Gary*, as well as *Green* (ブルー, *Burū*, *Blue* in Japanese), a mischievous and resourceful girl who in the manga is portrayed as a crafty pickpocket who once stole a *Pokémon* from *Oak*'s laboratory and sells counterfeit *Pokémon* merchandise. Throughout their journey, the three protagonists confront the notorious criminal organization *Team Rocket*, which in the manga is depicted as having connections with several *Gym Leaders*, and eventually challenge the *Pokémon League*. After his victory, however, *Red* mysteriously disappears and his *Pikachu* returns alone to the lab, subsequently entrusted to *Yellow* (イエロー, *Ierō*), a young girl who disguises herself as a boy on the advice of *Green* and embarks on a journey across the region in search of the *Red*. In this narrative arc the main antagonists become the *Elite Four*, who pursue a radical vision of a utopian world inhabited

exclusively by Pokémon. Subsequent story arcs introduce new protagonists and settings corresponding to the later generations of the video game series, thereby expanding the narrative universe while maintaining connections with earlier characters and events. In this way, the manga mirrors the evolving structure of the franchise itself, continuously renewing its cast and locations while preserving a coherent fictional world (Kusaka et al., 1997-present).



Figure 3.6. Cover artwork (on the left) and panel sequence (on the right) from the manga *Pokémon Adventures*, illustrating how the battle dynamics and character interactions are translated into the visual storytelling conventions of manga through sequential panels, expressive character design and action lines to convey movement and tension.

One of the most distinctive aspects of the manga adaptation lies in its narrative tone. While the animated series and the video games are generally designed for a younger audience and tend to adopt a lighter, more educational and adventurous approach, the manga often explores darker and more complex themes. Pokémon may be seriously injured in battles, manipulated by humans or even die, and antagonistic groups such as *Team Rocket* are portrayed not as purely comic villains but as ruthless criminal organizations driven by ambitious and sometimes disturbing goals. Despite this darker tone, for many fans of the games the manga

represents a valuable parallel experience that deepens and enriches the understanding of the *Pokémon* universe without contradicting its internal logic (Mosca, 2025).

Another major milestone in the expansion of the *Pokémon* universe emerged with the release of *Pokémon GO*. Launched in June 2016 by the company *Niantic*, *Pokémon GO* is a free-to-play mobile game built on location-based and augmented reality technologies. The application uses the *Global Positioning System* (GPS) of players' mobile devices to map the game environment onto the player's physical surroundings, allowing Pokémon to appear as digital overlays within real-world spaces (Mäyrä, 2016, pp. 47-50), thus integrating computer-generated elements with the player's immediate environment and creating an immersive experience in which the boundaries between the physical and the virtual world become partially blurred. This combination of real and digital environments generates a form of *telepresence* in which players simultaneously inhabit both spaces, ultimately producing a heightened sense of engagement and satisfaction (Tang, 2017, p. 727). Moreover, this type of hybrid experience generates an embodied space that brings together physical environments and *mediaspaces* and can be seen as emblematic of a form of *postdigital storytelling*, in which the separation between the digital and the non-digital is no longer clearly defined. Instead, these dimensions increasingly converge, shaping the ways in which individuals experience the world, perform sociality and engage with practices of production and consumption (Jordan, 2019).

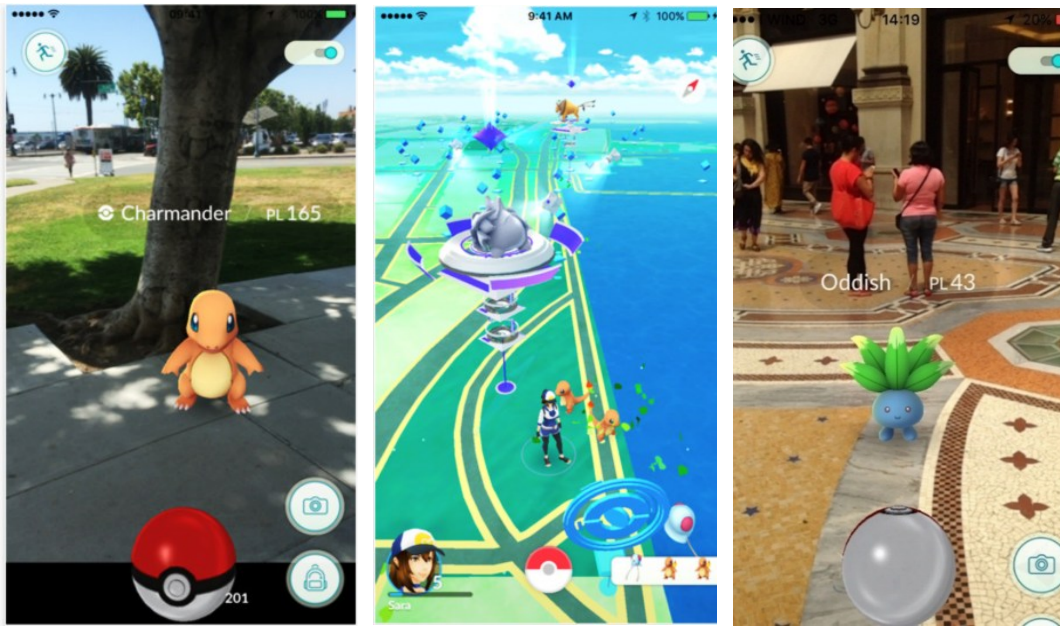


Figure 3.7. Examples of in-game interfaces and scenarios from *Pokémon GO*, showcasing the digital rendering of real-world spaces and the location-based mechanics that structure and regulate the gameplay experience.

Another factor that contributed significantly to the widespread diffusion of the game was its accessibility: as a free-to-play application available on smartphones, the game presented a very low barrier to entry and thus allowed a large number of users to easily access the technology, learn how to use it and engage with it in a relatively casual and non-demanding way. In doing so, the game was able to reach audiences beyond traditional video game players and include those who might not normally participate in gaming culture.

In terms of gameplay, the experience revolves around collecting items from *PokéStops*, which correspond to geotagged virtual landmarks superimposed onto real-world geography, capturing Pokémon and engaging in battles with other players. As a result, the exploration of urban environments becomes a central gameplay mechanic: players are encouraged to move through physical spaces, walk outdoors and interact with their surrounding environment, transforming everyday locations such as parks, monuments or public squares into sites of play and discovery. The game therefore promotes forms of physical activity and outdoor engagement that contrast with the sedentary and often solitary habits associated with traditional digital gaming. Moreover, the design of the game fosters increased social

interaction among players, where the presence of shared locations brings players together in the same physical spaces, creating opportunities for encounters and collective activities, in some cases overlapping online and offline communities. A notable example of this dynamic is represented by so-called “lure parties”, during which players activate lures at one or multiple *PokéStops*. These items attract a higher number of Pokémon to a specific location and, at the same time, draw other players who can detect the increased activity in that area and gather there as well, resulting in spontaneous gatherings centered around gameplay (Paavilainen et al., 2017, p. 2495). Augmented reality games such as *Pokémon GO* can thus generate social affordances, strengthening both interpersonal relationships and a sense of belonging to a community as well as to a particular place (Vella et al., 2017, pp. 583-603).

The rapid diffusion of *Pokémon GO* quickly developed into a widespread social phenomenon that extended across both online and offline media environments: content related to the game circulated widely through social networks, influencers and news media, amplifying its visibility and encouraging mass participation, where such extensive exposure contributed to the game attaining a form of cult status in a relatively short period of time.

Another key factor behind the success of *Pokémon GO* lies in its ability to tap into the childhood memories of a large number of young adults who were already familiar with the *Pokémon* franchise. By reintroducing iconic characters and gameplay mechanics in a new technological format, the game evoked a strong sense of nostalgia among players who had previously encountered *Pokémon* through the anime, video games or other media products. Nostalgia, closely linked to personal memories and emotional attachment, thus functions as a shared cultural code among players, fostering interaction and engagement. At the same time, individuals who had not previously been exposed to the franchise could still be drawn into the experience through the influence of existing fans and the visibility of the game in public spaces, further expanding the player base (Tang, 2017, pp. 725-728). Thereby, the success of *Pokémon GO* demonstrates how the franchise continues to expand across multiple media platforms decades after its first release, extending it beyond traditional screens and integrating it into players’ everyday practices. *Pokémon GO* can

thus be understood as a transmedia extension that temporarily overlaps elements of the fictional universe with the physical environment, as well as allowing the *Pokémon* brand to circulate across different media forms, consumer products and spaces.

3.5 Brand extension, licensing and experiential spaces

The expansion of the franchise has not been limited to storytelling platforms alone. Over the years, *Pokémon* has increasingly moved beyond traditional media and into physical consumer environments, where the fictional world is translated into collaborative products, themed retail spaces and cafés. Through these experiential formats, fans are able to interact with Pokémon not only as characters within stories but also as tangible elements of everyday life, further strengthening the presence of the franchise within contemporary consumer culture. In fact, the franchise has simultaneously extended its intellectual property beyond narrative media through licensing strategies and branded environments, where the possession of *Pokémon*-branded objects functions not only as a marker of belonging to a specific fan community, but also as a means of social positioning, reinforcing participation in shared cultural practices and signaling affiliation. In this sense, the capitalist expansion of the brand, primarily targeting a child audience, can be interpreted as a mechanism through which individuals are gradually introduced to their role as consumers, where happiness, social recognition and a sense of identity become closely tied to the ownership and display of branded goods (West, 2008, pp. 62-66). More broadly, consumerist logic permeates children's interests and everyday activities, with the *Pokémon* franchise materializing across a wide range of heterogeneous and differentiated objects that reflect the multiple ways in which the brand is encountered, played with and acquired. These material forms are intimately co-implicated in the routines and spaces of everyday life, often functioning as extensions of consumers' identities and imaginaries, where even mundane practices and situations may be temporarily transformed and animated through the presence of popular cultural materialities (Horton, 2012, pp. 4-13).

Beyond individual objects, *Pokémon*'s licensing strategies and cross-brand collaborations have been pivotal in consolidating the franchise's presence in everyday life while reinforcing its social and cultural significance as a phenomenon. Through partnerships with both global

corporations and local brands, *Pokémon* has extended into fashion, food, home goods, stationery and lifestyle commodities, where licensing acts as a key mechanism of transmedia expansion. Notable collaborations include footwear collections with *Converse*, *Crocs*, apparel lines with *Uniqlo*, *Adidas*, *Levi's*, *PUMA*, promotional campaigns with fast-food chains such as *McDonald's* distributing themed meals and collectible items, and limited-edition food and beverage products available through Japanese convenience stores. The brand has also moved into design-oriented collaborations, partnering with *LEGO* through construction-based play experiences and with luxury brands such as *Longchamp*, which released high-end bags featuring *Pokémon* characters, thus demonstrating the franchise's capacity to extend beyond children's markets into adult and luxury consumption. Additional partnerships span cosmetics and personal care products, such as *ColourPop* and *Anessa*, transportation companies and global entertainment platforms, all of which reinforce the franchise's visibility and cultural relevance (DeStefano, 2021; Paul, 2023). In doing so, the franchise's licensing and collaborative practices do not simply commercialize the brand but actively foster participation in shared consumer experiences, strengthening both social bonds within fan communities and the circulation of *Pokémon* across diverse contexts and everyday spaces.

Beyond merchandise, both official and developed through collaborations with external brands, the *Pokémon* franchise has also extended into physical spaces, leading to the creation of experiential environments in which the boundaries between the fictional world and everyday life become increasingly blurred. Physical fan environments include *Pokémon Cafés*, a chain of themed restaurants operated by *The Pokémon Company*, where visitors can consume food and beverages presented in highly decorative and *kawaii*-inspired forms based on characters from the franchise. These spaces are carefully designed to evoke the aesthetic identity of the brand and to immerse customers in the *Pokémon* world; they typically include retail sections offering exclusive merchandise available only on-site, thus reinforcing the connection between consumption and spatial experience. The experience is further enhanced through occasional live performances and character appearances, such as a chef version of *Pikachu* interacting with guests, which transform dining into a performative and participatory event. These cafés are often located in

proximity to *Pokémon Centers*: while functioning as the official retail stores, they are designed as immersive environments that feature large-scale character statues, themed decorations, interactive installations and, in some cases, arcade-style game machines, like the stores in Tokyo and Osaka. Shopping thus becomes an experiential activity in which visitors are encouraged not only to purchase products but also to engage with the franchise on an affective and sensory level. In recent years, the expansion of an official online store has further extended this retail market into digital space, thus facilitating global expansion while maintaining the logic of exclusivity through limited-edition releases and region-specific products (The Pokémon Company, 1998-present).



Figure 3.8. *Pokémon Center Yokohama*, opened on March 5, 2005. Given the importance of the location as one of the most famous port cities in Japan, the store often has a nautical installations and interiors, in this case featuring the Legendary Pokémon *Kyogre* (カイオーガ, *Kaiōga*), hanging from the ceiling.

Beyond cafés and retail environments, *Pokémon* has also expanded into more specialized and educational formats: a notable example is the *Pokémon Fossil Museum*, a traveling paleontology exhibition developed in collaboration with scientific institutions in Japan that juxtaposes artwork and sculptures of Pokémon fossils with real-world specimens. By blending science with the *Pokémon* lore, the exhibition becomes a hybrid space where entertainment and education intersect, reinforcing the franchise's cultural legitimacy while offering an interactive learning experience for visitors (National Museum of Nature and Science, n.d.).



Figure 3.9. *Pokémon Fossil Museum*, featuring the life-sized conceptual skeleton model of *Tyrantrum* (ガチゴラス, *Gachigoras*) and its real-life counterpart, a *Tyrannosaurus rex*.

More recently, the spatial expansion of the franchise has reached new levels with the development of large-scale themed environments and attractions. Among the most notable is the opening of *PokéPark Kanto*, the first permanent outdoor attraction within *Yomiuriland Amusement Park* in Tokyo that aims to recreate the *Pokémon* world natural environments and allow visitors to explore spaces populated by life-sized *Pokémon* installations. The park is divided into three main areas, the *Pokémon Forest*, *Sedge Town* and the *Entrance Plaza*, which feature a variety of attractions, including *Pokémon Centers*, *Poké Marts*, rides, carousels, *Gyms*, live parades and much more; some of these experiences require advance reservations or additional tickets. This type of environment represents a further evolution of the franchise's spatial logic, shifting from enclosed commercial spaces to open, exploratory settings that emphasize movement and environmental interaction, thus mirroring the dynamics of the video games. In addition to permanent installations such as the newest *PokéPark Kanto*, *Pokémon* has also been featured in temporary events, pop-up exhibitions and collaborations with larger

entertainment venues, such as theme parks and urban installations (Barbera, 2025); these limited-time experiences encourage attendance and social interaction, as well as contributing to the continuous reactivation of the brand within physical spaces.

Taken together, these diverse extensions illustrate how the *Pokémon* franchise operates according to the logic of the Japanese media mix: rather than relying on a single dominant medium, *Pokémon* circulates its characters and narrative elements across a wide range of interconnected platforms that range between video games, anime, films, collectible cards and manga, as well as consumer practices and experiential spaces that include merchandising and themed environments. The very modular design of Pokémon characters facilitates this process of expansion: each creature can function simultaneously as a narrative figure, a collectible commodity and a visual symbol that can easily be reproduced across media formats and consumer products. It is precisely through this strategy that the franchise is able to continuously renew itself across generations of audiences while maintaining a recognizable and coherent fiction universe and experience.

3.6 *Pokémon*'s global reception and cultural soft power

The global reception of *Pokémon* represents one of the most striking examples of the transnational circulation of Japanese popular culture. Since the late 1990s, the video games and especially the *Pokémon* anime have achieved an extraordinary worldwide popularity, being broadcast in over seventy countries and becoming a formative media experience for multiple generations of viewers. Its narrative simplicity, episodic structure and emphasis on values such as friendship, perseverance and adventure have allowed it to resonate across diverse cultural contexts and markets, facilitating identification and long-term engagement. The figure of *Ash Ketchum*, accompanied by *Pikachu*, has thus become globally recognizable, contributing to the creation of a shared media memory.

However, this global success has not occurred through the direct export of an unaltered Japanese cultural product; on the contrary, it has been deeply shaped by processes of localization, translation and adaptation. Character names, dialogues and cultural references had to be systematically modified to ensure accessibility and familiarity for foreign audiences: the Japanese protagonist *Satoshi* becomes *Ash*, food items are often replaced or

generalized and culturally specific elements are either neutralized or recontextualized. In some cases, censorship has also been implemented by foreign markets, where certain episodes were edited or removed due to concerns related to violence, sexuality or in general cultural sensitivity (Sandoval Lahut, 2025). Rather than eliminating *Japaneseness* entirely, *Pokémon* selectively mediates it through the logic of *deodorization*, producing a hybrid text that appears globally accessible while maintaining traces of its origin (Iwabuchi, 2002, as cited in Allison, 2008, p. 103). At the same time, *Pokémon* has generated vast networks of fans who engage with the franchise through gaming, collecting, online discussions, fan art, cosplay and competitive events, thus actively participating in the circulation and reinterpretation of *Pokémon*, contributing to its longevity and cultural relevance, as well as building shared identities that transcend national boundaries. *Pokémon* must then be understood as a participatory cultural ecosystem rather than a mere exported product, whose global success is the result of continuous interaction between media producers and audiences.

Despite its widespread cultural fascination, *Pokémon* does not necessarily translate into political soft power for Japan: cultural popularity alone is insufficient to generate soft power unless it fosters a deeper attraction to a country's values, institutions or political agenda (Nye, 2004). While audiences may become attached to the franchise and incorporate it into their everyday lives, this does not automatically lead to a greater interest in Japan as a nation, nor to a more favorable evaluation of its policies or global role, but rather remains in an affective and entertainment-oriented realm. Moreover, despite being incorporated into broader institutional strategies such as *Cool Japan* as a flagship example of Japan's creative industries, contributing to narratives centered on innovation, creativity and cultural vibrancy (Intellectual Property Strategy Headquarters, 2019), this institutionalization reveals a tension: *Pokémon*'s global success, driven by fans and market forces, does not fully align with attempts to use it as a soft power strategy, precisely because its appeal depends on its flexibility and its loose attachment to a clearly defined national identity.

That being said, the global diffusion of *Pokémon* does contribute to the circulation of specific cultural values and sensibilities often associated with Japanese popular culture:

among these, the aesthetic of *kawaii* shapes character design and modes of emotional attachment, while the franchise also promotes forms of playful behavior, companionship, collection, classification and social interaction through trading, battling or other collaborative activities. While not explicitly political, these values play a key role in shaping everyday cultural practices and imaginaries on a global scale. The impact of *Pokémon* also extends beyond media consumption into material and spatial dimensions, particularly in relation to tourism: *Pokémon GO*'s location-based gameplay encourages players to move around and explore real-world locations, transforming urban spaces into interactive environments as well as indirectly supporting tourism and local economies.

In this context, *Pokémon* can be understood as an “informal cultural ambassador” of Japan: by spreading images, aesthetics and practices that are associated with Japanese culture, *Pokémon* fosters fascination and curiosity among global audiences through affect and consumption rather than explicit ideological representation. However, as its impact remains largely confined to the cultural and affective sphere, *Pokémon*'s global reception highlights the limits of equating cultural influence with political soft power, as well as exemplifying a form of influence that is not a direct instrument of national power, but rather participatory and decentered, shaped by producers as much as audiences.

And yet, perhaps the most revealing aspect of *Pokémon*'s global success lies in its role in defining the childhood experiences of entire generations. Beyond its industrial and strategic dimensions, the franchise has become a shared cultural memory, embedded in everyday practices, relationships and imagination that continue to resonate over time. In this sense, what began as Satoshi Tajiri's childhood fascination with collecting insects did not remain a personal memory but rather evolved into a shared experience lived by millions of children worldwide, becoming, in many ways, a shared dream that indelibly shaped our own childhoods.

Chapter 4 – Anime as platform convergence:

Demon Slayer as a case study

4.1 *Demon Slayer*'s industrial context and production ecosystem

Recent developments in the anime industry suggest a partial shift from the logic of media mix exemplified by *Pokémon* toward a model strongly shaped by platform convergence, where streaming services, global distribution networks and event-based releases play a central role in structuring both production and reception. In this context, *Demon Slayer* offers a particularly emblematic example, as its success is not only tied to its animation mastery and narrative qualities but also to its ability to circulate across diverse platforms and experiential spaces, thus exemplifying how contemporary anime operates within a convergent media environment.

Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba (鬼滅の刃) is a Japanese manga series written and illustrated by Koyoharu Gotōge, originally serialized in the *shōnen* magazine *Weekly Shōnen Jump* beginning in February 2016. The series was later compiled into 23 volumes and has been translated and distributed internationally, including simultaneous publications on digital platforms. Its origins can be traced back to an earlier and significantly darker prototype titled *Ka Gari Gari*, later developed into a one-shot story known as *Kisatsu no Nagare*. This initial version, characterized by a somber tone, minimal comic relief and a narrative centered on themes of violence and revenge, was ultimately deemed unsuitable for serialization and the project was then reworked with the support of editor Tatsuhiko Katayama, who encouraged Gotōge to reshape the story by introducing a more empathetic protagonist and a narrative structure that would be more accessible to the public. An intermediate draft of the series was produced under the title *Kisatsu no Yaiba* (鬼殺の刃); however, the use of the character 殺 (*satsu*, “to kill”) was considered excessively explicit and as a result the title was revised to *Kimetsu no Yaiba* (鬼滅の刃), where the character 滅 (*kimetsu*, “to perish”) conveys a less overt idea of “eradication” or “destruction”. Although not commonly used in everyday

language or standard dictionaries, the term is still easily understandable for a Japanese audience; the character 刃 (*yaiba*, “blade”), on the other hand, indicates a particular Japanese sword, further reinforcing the emphasis on swordsmanship as well as traditions (Katayama, n.d.).



Figure 4. Cover artwork for the first volume of the *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba* manga and panel from Chapter 1, showcasing the protagonists *Tanjiro* and his sister *Nezuko*.

Following its publication, the manga quickly achieved significant commercial and critical success, becoming one of the most widely read and acclaimed series in contemporary Japanese popular culture. In addition to the main storyline, the franchise has expanded through a variety of print media, including spin-off manga focusing on secondary characters and side narratives, light novels that explore events preceding the main timeline, as well as *fanbooks* and art books that further enrich the narrative universe and its visual identity.

Demon Slayer is centered on the activities of the *Demon Slayer Corps* (鬼き殺さつ隊 たい, *Kisatsutai*), a secret organization that has long been engaged in a relentless war

against demons, former humans endowed with supernatural abilities such as enhanced physical strength, rapid regeneration and unique powers that can only be defeated under specific conditions, including exposure to sunlight, decapitation with *nichirin* blades, or the use of poisons derived from wisteria flowers. The demonic hierarchy is strictly organized, with the *Twelve Moons* (十二鬼月, *Jūnikizuki*) representing the most powerful subordinates of *Muzan Kibutsuji* (鬼舞辻 無惨), the progenitor of all demons; in parallel, the *Demon Slayer Corps* is structured according to a hierarchy, at the apex of which stand the elite warriors known as *Hashira* (柱, *Pillars*). Members of the *Corps* employ specialized *Breathing* techniques that enhance combat capabilities and allow human fighters to stand their ground with demonic opponents.

The story revolves around *Tanjiro Kamado* (竈門 炭治郎), a compassionate and resilient boy who, following his father's death, sells charcoal in nearby villages to provide for his family. One day, he returns home to find his family slaughtered by a demon, with his younger sister *Nezuko* (禰豆子) transformed into a demon herself; however, she is still capable of exhibiting some human consciousness and emotion. The brothers are discovered by *Water Hashira Giyū Tomioka* (富岡 義勇), who decides to spare *Nezuko* after seeing her suppress her demonic urges, and sends *Tanjiro* to train under his own former mentor *Urokoaki* (鱗滝). Driven by the goal of avenging his family by bringing *Muzan* to justice, as well as restoring *Nezuko*'s humanity, *Tanjiro* enters the *Demon Slayer Corps*, where he masters the *Water Breathing* technique and successfully completes the final selection. Over time, he is joined by fellow demon slayers *Zenitsu* (善逸, *Zen'itsu*) and *Inosuke* (伊之助), quickly drawing the attention of the *Hashira* and their leader *Ubuyashiki* (産屋敷), who believes they will be the key to defeating *Muzan*.

Later in the story, *Nezuko* develops an immunity to sunlight, making her a unique anomaly within the demonic order and the key to *Muzan*'s goal of overcoming his own fatal weakness, while *Tanjiro* awakens a powerful technique known as *Hinokami Kagura* and learns that it is derived from the original *Sun Breathing* style created by legendary swordsman *Yoriichi* (縁 壹). The story culminates in a large-scale confrontation when *Muzan* attacks the *Ubuyashiki*

estate, triggering an explosion that draws the *Hashira* toward him and trapping them within the *Infinity Castle*, a twisted dimension under his control. There, the *Demon Slayer Corps* engages in a devastating conflict against him and the *Upper Moons*, resulting in significant losses among the *Hashira*. *Muzan* is eventually defeated but in a final act transforms *Tanjiro* into a demon to ensure his own legacy, a transformation that is later reversed thanks to *Nezuko*, who has fully regained her humanity. Following *Muzan*'s death, all demons cease to exist, the *Demon Slayer Corps* is disbanded and *Tanjiro* and *Nezuko* return to their mountain home; the story ends with a modern-day epilogue depicting the descendants and reincarnations of the main characters, who live happily in a world free from demons (Gotōge, 2016-2020).

Following the success of the manga, *Demon Slayer* was adapted into an anime produced by *Ufotable* and first broadcast in 2019. The adaptation quickly distinguished itself within the contemporary anime landscape for its high visual quality and its sophisticated use of digital animation techniques, exemplifying a hybrid production model that seamlessly combines traditional 2D character animation with digital compositing and CGI integration. In contrast to industry practices in which studios often manage large-scale productions simultaneously, frequently relying on outsourcing, as is the case with studios such as *MAPPA* (*Jujutsu Kaisen*, *Chainsaw Man*), *Ufotable* dedicates substantial time and resources to a limited number of projects. Moreover, the studio is renowned for maintaining an in-house workflow, encompassing storyboarding, direction, key animation and the integration of 2D and 3D elements, including lighting, visual effects and atmosphere design, in order to achieve a film-like stylistic consistency and to reduce the risk of fragmentation that is frequent in outsourced pipelines (Brandefy Team, 2025).

Rather than replacing hand-drawn animation, *Ufotable* uses CGI to augment visual depth and dynamism, taking compositing, which is the process through which multiple visual layers, including characters, backgrounds, effects, lighting and virtual camera movements are integrated into a final image, to another level. Techniques such as controlled camera focus, dynamic framing and the addition of atmospheric layers, lighting and visual effects contribute to a degree of immersion and cinematic visual quality that intensify emotional engagement, especially in action sequences (Brandefy Team, 2025).

When synchronized with character animation, this approach creates a fluid and cohesive visual style characterized by strong contrasts, detailed textures and a heightened sense of motion, thus allowing *Demon Slayer* to simulate 3D spatiality while maintaining a 2D aesthetic identity. This configuration, combined with complex action choreography and cinematic mode of presentation, contributes to the immersive quality and visual appeal that have become a defining feature of the anime.

The high quality of the animation can already be seen in the early seasons and, most notably, in the first film of the saga, *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba – The Movie: Mugen Train* (2020), which positioned the series as a precursor to more recent trends in digitally mediated animation practices, where aesthetic innovation is closely intertwined with technological convergence and the demands of cross-platform circulation. Directed by Haruo Sotozaki, the film represents a pivotal moment in the evolution of the series, functioning not as a standalone product but rather as a direct continuation of the first season of the anime. In fact, in contrast to the traditional model of anime films as non-canonical spin-offs, *Mugen Train* is fully integrated within the main storyline, extending serialized storytelling into the cinematic space and reconfiguring theatrical distribution as part of the narrative progression itself. At the same time, the film exemplifies the logic of “event cinema”, as its release generated an unprecedented level of anticipation and engagement on a global scale, its record-breaking box office performance demonstrating how contemporary anime have the power to mobilize mass audiences beyond television and streaming platforms. From an aesthetic and technical perspective, *Mugen Train* further consolidates the hybrid production model that characterizes the series, combining hand-drawn animation with digital compositing, especially in combat sequences, thus contributing to the construction of a cinematic visual space that enhances both spatial perception and emotional intensity (Animation World Network, 2021).

In this context, *Mugen Train* can be understood as a site of technical experimentation where aesthetic innovation becomes increasingly intertwined with technological convergence and transplatform distribution logics, which, at least for the time being, reached its apex with *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba – Infinity Castle*. Released in theaters in the summer of 2025, the film represents the culmination of an extended production cycle of

approximately three and a half years, where such prolonged development is reflected in the exceptional level of visual refinement, which has contributed to its recognition within the global film industry and a nomination for *Best Animated Feature* at the *Academy Awards*. The film intensifies the stylistic and technical strategies already established in the series: the constantly shifting architecture of the *Infinity Castle*, the accelerated pacing of combat sequences and the visualization of *Breathing* techniques are not merely aesthetic embellishments, but the result of months of iterative work in which individual sequences are first constructed and later refined through multiple layers of digital compositing until they achieve a satisfying sense of fluidity and coherence. In sequences where the camera navigates labyrinthine corridors or follows characters through collapsing spatial configurations, animation operates as a form of “engineered motion”, in which spatial continuity, visual rhythm and physical impact are meticulously calibrated (Gonzalez, 2025).

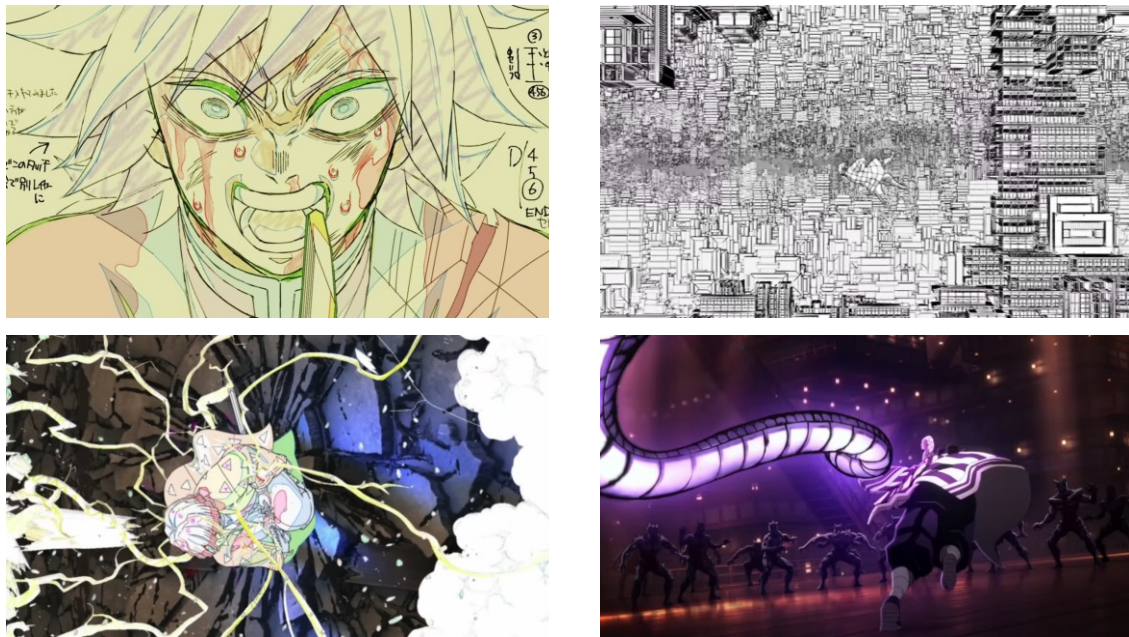


Figure 4.2. Shots taken from a production interview by *Ufotable* on *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba – Infinity Castle*, illustrating key animation drawings for expressive 2D character acting that are later integrated into a digitally composited scene. “By the 3D artwork is the work’s structure supported, and within the 2D artwork lies its soul” (Oscars, 2026).

4.2 Platform convergence and distribution strategies

Building on its industrial configuration and hybridization of hand-drawn animation with 3D CGI, *Demon Slayer* exemplifies a broader transformation in the contemporary anime industry, in which media products are no longer confined to a single platform but instead circulate seamlessly across an integrated network of distribution channels. In this context, the anime can be understood as a paradigmatic case of platform convergence, a process through which distinct media infrastructures, such as television broadcasting, streaming services and theatrical exhibition, become increasingly interconnected, operating not as separate domains but rather as complementary domains within a unified narrative ecosystem. Platform convergence, in this sense, does not simply refer to the coexistence of multiple distribution channels, but to a structural reconfiguration of how content is produced, circulated and consumed (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 2-4). For anime such as *Demon Slayer*, this implies that narrative development and audience engagement are no longer organized around a single medium but are instead distributed across platforms that collectively sustain its very lifecycle: as a result, the anime is designed to function within a multi-platform environment, where each medium contributes to both the prosecution and the reinforcement of its overall narrative universe.

A key feature of this model is the adoption of staggered and multi-platform distribution strategies: following its initial broadcast in Japan, the anime has been made available internationally through streaming platforms such as *Crunchyroll*, *Netflix* and *Amazon Prime Video*, each of which plays a distinct role in the global dissemination of the series. Streaming platforms have, in fact, radically transformed the way more generalized content and anime are conceived and distributed, effectively reshaping the balance of power between digital services and traditional television broadcasting. While the latter requires audiences to conform to fixed schedules, often resulting in international releases that occur months after the original Japanese broadcast, platforms such as *Crunchyroll* provide simulcast distribution, thus allowing episodes to be viewed within minutes of them airing in Japan. This near-simultaneous availability significantly reduces waiting times and minimizes the risk of spoilers, as well as fostering a more synchronized global audience and experience. In the specific case of *Demon Slayer*, distribution is further characterized by a non-exclusive

fragmentation of licensing rights: *Crunchyroll* typically holds primary simulcast rights, functioning as the main platform for first-release international viewing, while *Netflix* and *Amazon Prime Video* acquire the series with a temporal delay, operating as a catalog-based platforms that facilitate catch-up viewing and long-term accessibility. This layered distribution strategy not only maximizes the reach of the anime across different audience segments but also extends its lifecycle beyond the initial broadcast window.

Moreover, traditional broadcasting is often subject to constraints such as advertising interruptions and content censorship, particularly in relation to time-slot regulations, whereas streaming platforms generally offer the complete, uncut version of episodes in high definition, alongside multiple language options including subtitles and dubbed audio. These features enhance both the accessibility and the qualitative experience of viewing, contributing to a more immersive and flexible mode of consumption. Additionally, streaming services enable practices such as binge-watching, allowing audiences to consume entire narrative arcs consecutively without requiring attentiveness, an experience that is structurally incompatible with the weekly scheduling model of linear television (Jenei et al., 2025, pp. 2547-2559). Finally, the global reach afforded by streaming distribution plays a crucial role in expanding the franchise's fanbase, which in turn supports the commercial success of its cinematic releases. By cultivating a large and internationally synchronized audience, platforms contribute to transforming films such as *Mugen Train* and *Infinity Castle* into major box office events, a result that traditional broadcasting alone has historically struggled to achieve in the context of animated cinema.

However, rather than replacing traditional broadcasting, these streaming platforms function as complementary infrastructures that extend both the temporal and geographical reach of the anime, enabling asynchronous consumption and facilitating access for transnational audiences. While this multiplicity of platforms may appear to generate a fragmentation of audiences, as viewers engage with the series through different services, release schedules and modes of access, such dispersion constitutes an integral component of the convergence logic. Through the narrative continuity of the anime and the coordinated circulation of content across media formats, these dispersed audiences are progressively recomposed into a cohesive viewership. Audience engagement is structured

through multiple and interconnected entry points: casual viewers may encounter episodes through television broadcasts and subsequently develop an interest in the series and more established fans may engage in binge-watching practices on streaming platforms, consuming entire narrative arcs in a continuous and immersive manner; meanwhile, cinema audiences who are drawn to theatrical releases may later return to the series through digital platforms in order to reconstruct the broader narrative context. These differentiated modes of access do not remain isolated but instead converge toward a shared narrative experience, reinforcing the coherence of the anime across media environments. Platform convergence, therefore, does not eliminate dispersion but reorganizes it into a structured system in which multiple points of access ultimately lead to the same narrative universe, thus transforming fragmentation into a productive mechanism for audience expansion and engagement.

Within this framework, *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba – The Movie: Mugen Train* (2020) represents a crucial turning point, as it extends the logic of convergence into the cinematic domain. While anime films have long been distributed in theaters, including the works of studios such as *Studio Ghibli*, these have typically taken the form of self-contained narratives rather than integral components of serialized storytelling. In contrast, *Mugen Train* is fully integrated within the main storyline, functioning as a direct continuation of the anime and positioning theatrical exhibition as an essential component of serial narration, thus becoming a particularly influential and globally visible example of a model that redefines the relationship between cinema and serialized animation. The film's events were later incorporated into the second season of the anime, re-edited and expanded with additional scenes before transitioning into the *Entertainment District Arc*. This integration in the main series not only ensures narrative continuity across platforms but also allows the same content to be recontextualized for different modes of consumption, bridging theatrical and streaming experiences. From a distributional perspective, this model also reconfigures audience behavior: by presenting the film as a canonical installment released in advance of its streaming adaptation, the franchise incentivizes theatrical attendance and encourages audiences to engage with the narrative in cinemas rather than waiting for its later availability on digital platforms. This dynamic becomes particularly significant in the context of declining cinema attendance, as it demonstrates how anime franchises can actively contribute

to the revitalization of theatrical exhibition by transforming films into must-see narrative events. At the same time, *Mugen Train* exemplifies the increasing importance of event-based releases within convergent media systems: its international release generated a shared viewing experience that temporarily recentralized viewership, counterbalancing the dispersive tendencies associated with streaming consumption and bringing together audiences through a large-scale cultural event that ends up reinforcing both the exposure and cultural impact of the anime.

In this sense, *Demon Slayer*'s distribution model highlights how contemporary anime franchises strategically orchestrate the circulation of content across platforms in order to maximize both visibility and engagement: television broadcasting establishes initial exposure within domestic markets, while streaming platforms sustain long-term and global accessibility and theatrical releases function as high-impact nodes that intensify audience participation and generate collective forms of engagement. This integrated system not only enhances the commercial performance of the series but also contributes to the construction of a cohesive transmedia experience that intertwines narrative progression with technological infrastructures and audience practices. *Demon Slayer* thus exemplifies a shift toward a platform-oriented logic in anime production and distribution, where the success of a franchise is increasingly dependent on its ability to operate across multiple media environments and audiences. Therefore, platform convergence emerges not only as a distribution strategy but also as a fundamental organizing principle that shapes the very structure of contemporary anime as a global cultural product.

This platform-based logic is not limited to past releases but continues to shape the future development of the franchise, as highlighted by the decision to conclude the narrative of *Demon Slayer* through the *Infinity Castle* trilogy, planned for theatrical release before its subsequent circulation on streaming platforms. By structuring the final phase of the story as a sequence of high-profile film events, the series establishes cinema as the primary site of narrative resolution, as well as intensifying audience participation and encouraging viewers to move across platforms in order to access the complete narrative experience. More broadly, this approach reflects an emerging trend within the anime industry, in which rather than maintaining a strict separation between episodic storytelling

and filmic releases, contemporary franchises frequently alternate between the two, or in some cases replace entire narrative arcs with theatrical adaptations. Notable examples include the adaptation of the volleyball match between the main team *Karasuno* and *Nekoma* in *Haikyuu!!* as a feature film, as well as the cinematic treatment of the *Reze Arc* in *Chainsaw Man*. In these cases, cinema does not function as a merely supplementary medium but as an integral component of serialized storytelling, further reinforcing the logic of platform convergence.

Demon Slayer can thus be seen as both a catalyst and a particularly successful embodiment of this model within the landscape of animation. The transition from television to cinema and back to streaming platforms is no longer perceived as a disruption of narrative continuity but rather as a normalized mode of consumption that structures audience expectations. As a result, convergence operates not only at the level of distribution infrastructures but also at the level of narrative design, where stories are increasingly conceived to unfold across multiple media environments in a strategically coordinated manner.

4.3 Hybrid aesthetics, *yōkai* folklore and narrative values

Demon Slayer is set during the Taishō era (1912-1926), a period of significant transformation marked by the continued spread of Western technologies and cultural influences that had begun during the Meiji period (1868-1912), and as these new ideas and innovations gradually extended from urban centers into rural areas, they were often met with resistance and suspicion, as they were perceived to challenge or deviate from established Japanese cultural and religious traditions. The series places considerable emphasis, both narratively and visually, on the social and cultural conditions of this transitional period, where its environment can be read as a stylized yet recognizable portrayal of Japanese society at the time, one that is reworked through creative and aesthetic choices while grounded in historical reality. The ability to “read” landscapes and environments thus becomes crucial, as they provide insight into how communities live, adapt and shape the world around them. A notable example can be seen in the telegraph poles and wires visible when *Tanjiro* travels through snow-covered villages to sell charcoal, where these modern elements, standing alongside

traditional wooden houses and shops, subtly signal the gradual introduction of new communication technologies into everyday life (Green & Bergeron, 2021, pp. 48-49).

Even more striking are the scenes set at night in the streets of early modern Tokyo, particularly in Asakusa, where *Tanjiro* and *Nezuko* walk along Nakamise-dōri, the shopping street leading to the Sensō-ji temple. Although the area was heavily damaged during the Second World War, it has since been reconstructed based on historical records and photographs, allowing the series to evoke a historically grounded yet visually immersive setting. A contrasting case is represented by the pleasure district of Yoshiwara in the *Entertainment District Arc*. Known in Japanese as *yūkaku* (遊廓), or licensed red-light district, Yoshiwara historically resisted the rapid modernization that characterized the rest of Japan during the Meiji era, striving instead to preserve a more traditional atmosphere. In *Demon Slayer*, however, the district is depicted at a moment of transition, where elements of modernization, such as electricity and new forms of luxury, coexist with traditional structures and social practices. The area is animated by processions in which the high-ranking courtesans known as *oiran* (花魁) are displayed, embodying both spectacle and cultural continuity: within the narrative, the central antagonist of the arc is a demon known as *Daki*, who operates as an *oiran* under the name *Warabihime* (蕨姫) (Ventura, 2022).



Figure 4.3. Sequences taken from *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba – Entertainment District Arc*: on the top, an *oiran*'s procession within the walled Yoshiwara pleasure district; on the bottom, a digital reconstruction of Taisho-era Asakusa.

This tension between tradition and modernity is not only reflected in spatial settings but also extends to other aesthetic dimensions of the series, particularly costume design, which contributes to articulating the coexistence of historical continuity and cultural transformation within the series.

In fact, clothing in *Demon Slayer* plays a significant role in articulating the interplay between tradition and individuality, as well as functioning as a narrative device that reinforces character identity through visual symbolism. Most characters wear the *haori* (羽織), a traditional jacket layered over the *kimono*, whose patterns are often inspired by historical Japanese motifs or designed to reflect the wearer's personality, abilities or

affiliations. *Tanjiro's haori*, for instance, is characterized by a distinctive black-and-green checkered pattern known as *ichimatsu* (市松), which is traditionally associated with continuity and prosperity and is worn by all members of his family; the repetitive geometric design conveys the idea of ongoing growth and enduring connections, thus visually reinforcing *Tanjiro's* attachment to his familial roots. Similarly, after her transformation into a demon, *Nezuko* wears a pink *kimono* adorned with an *asanoha* (麻の葉) pattern, a stylized hemp-leaf motif associated in Japanese tradition with protection and the warding off of evil spirits, as well as strength and rapid growth. The choice of this motif for *Nezuko* is particularly significant as it visually encodes her resistance to her demonic nature and her continued moral alignment with humanity. Other characters' garments likewise incorporate symbolic patterns: for example, *Rengoku* (煉獄)'s flame-like *haori* reflects both his role as *Flame Hashira* and his fiery personality, while *Shinobu* (胡蝶)'s design evokes butterfly wings, alluding to her insect-based techniques and her association with poison (Tokyo Otaku Mode, n.d.)

A particularly meaningful case is that of *Giyū*, whose *haori* stands out for its asymmetrical design: one half is a solid dark red, while the other features a geometric *bishamon kikkō* (毘沙門亀甲) pattern composed of hexagonal shapes. This visual asymmetry is not merely stylistic, but deeply symbolic, as the garment is constructed from two different pieces of clothing belonging to individuals who played a crucial role in his life: the dark red half derives from his sister's kimono, who sacrificed herself to save him from a demon the day before her wedding, while the patterned half recalls the clothing of *Sabito* (錆兎), his close friend and fellow trainee, who died in order to protect him and other aspiring demon slayers during the *Final Selection*. As such, *Giyū's haori* functions as a material embodiment of memory, grief and love, reflecting not only his survivor's guilt, but also his enduring bonds and his commitment to carry their legacy forward (Tokyo Otaku Mode, n.d.).

Moreover, the *Demon Slayer Corps'* uniform is visually reminiscent of the *gakuran* (学ラン), a style influenced by Western military dress, and contrasts with the more traditional elements of the *haori* and *kimono*, thereby reflecting the historical tensions of

the Taishō period and the coexistence of imported modern forms with established Japanese aesthetics.



Figure 4.4. Examples of symbolic costume design in *Demon Slayer*: Tanjiro and Nezuko in their *ichimatsu haori* and *asanoha kimono* (top left); Shinobu's butterfly-inspired *haori* (bottom left) and Giyū's tribute *haori* (on the right).

Other garments that play a subtle yet significant role in the narrative are masks, which function as ritual objects evoking traditional Japanese religious and performative practices and are thus not merely decorative, but serve to embody spiritual entities and mark transitions between different states of being. One of the most examples is provided by the swordsmiths, who wear *hyottoko* (火男) masks. Typically characterized by exaggerated, asymmetrical facial expressions and a puckered mouth, they are traditionally associated with fire-making and craftsmanship; while often used in comedic or performative contexts, their symbolic connection to fire acquires relevance within the series, where the act of forging swords is essential to the demon slayers' endless conflict against the demons (Chester-Londt, 2022).

Another example is the *tengu* mask worn by *Urokodaki*: inspired by the homonymous *yōkai*, *tengu* are red-faced, long-nosed supernatural beings traditionally associated with mountains, ascetic practices and martial prowess that are often depicted as both guardians and tricksters and are believed to inhabit liminal spaces between the human and spiritual worlds. *Urokodaki*'s mask aligns him with these attributes, reinforcing his role as a reclusive mentor and a figure of spiritual authority operating at the boundary between nature and society; moreover, *tengu* are also associated with control over natural elements such as wind and weather, a symbolic connection that is reflected in the former *Water Hashira*'s robes. *Urokodaki*'s students are identifiable by their *kitsune* masks, each hand-carved and imbued with a protection spell. Within Japanese folklore, the *kitsune* functions as a liminal figure and a messenger of the deity *Inari* (稲荷), often acting as an intermediary between the human and divine realms and is associated with prosperity and protection. The parallel with *Tanjiro*'s own journey is particularly evocative when considering the narrative dynamic with *Nezuko*: much like the mythical association between *Inari* and the fox, she often travels on *Tanjiro*'s back and ultimately becomes central to the restoration of humanity and the ending of all bloodshed (Chester-Londt, 2022).

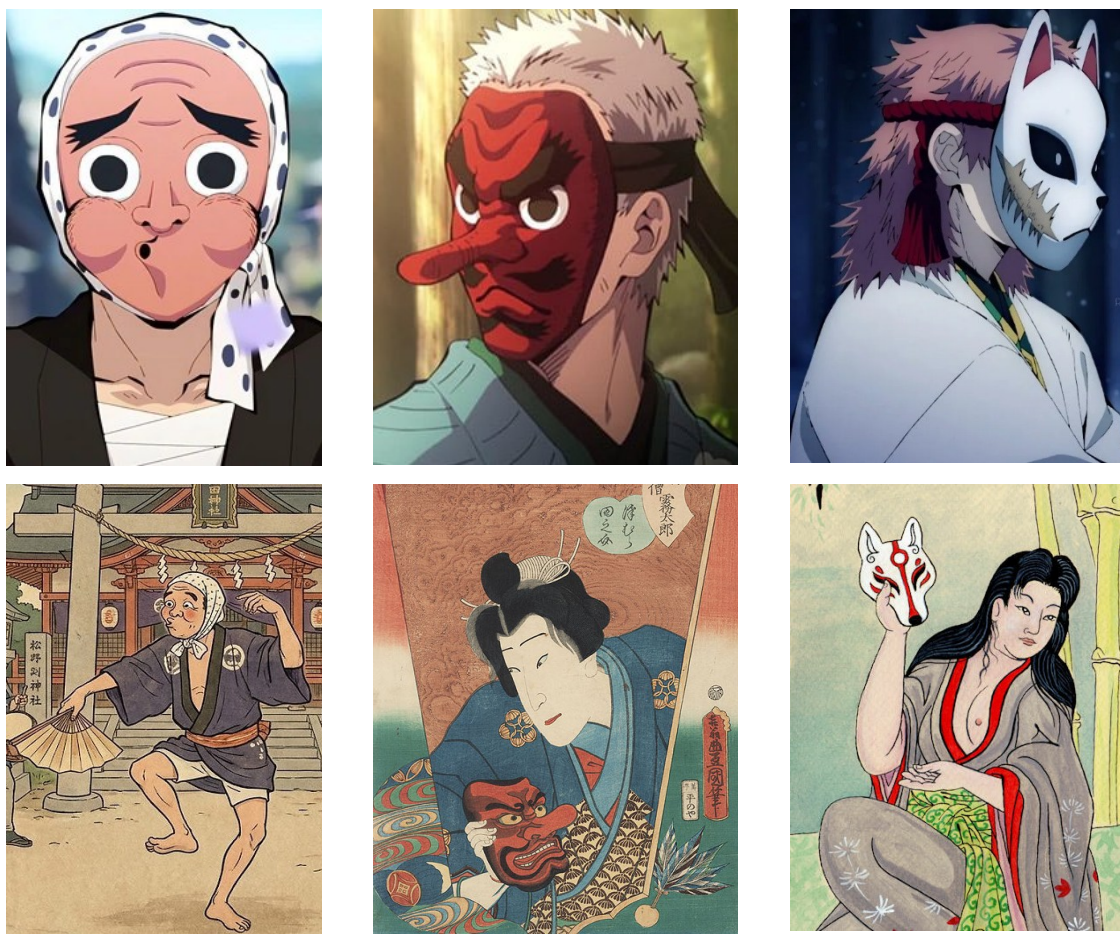


Figure 4.5. Comparison between masks featured in *Demon Slayer* and their traditional counterparts: the *hyottoko* mask worn by swordsmith Haganezuka (鋼鐵塚) (on the left), the *tengu* mask worn by Urokodaki (in the center) and the *kitsune* mask worn by Sabito (on the right).

Underlying *Demon Slayer*'s aesthetic construction is a rich engagement with Japanese folklore, which has long been preserved and passed down through diverse forms of storytelling, conveying a cultural framework shaped by animism, Buddhist influences and a rich array of traditions, practices and narratives, at its core a worldview in which the spiritual and material dimensions are profoundly interconnected. In the postwar era, these cultural elements have increasingly been reframed through modern media, reaching not only domestic but also global audiences, where the international success of anime is strongly linked to the ability to mobilize this extensive mythological and cultural heritage (Tanuchi, 2025, p. 317).

On the one hand, the adaptation of Japanese myths and legends plays a crucial role in ensuring their survival and continued relevance among younger generations; on the other, the animated reinterpretation of folklore has evolved into both a commercial and cultural enterprise, constituting a substantial source of revenue for Japan's cultural industries, generating over \$10 billion annually. In this context, folklore functions as a form of cultural capital with no production or acquisition costs, as it already exists within the public domain and does not require the management of licensing rights. However, transforming it into a marketable product demands significant creative input, artistic vision and investment in technological resources capable of turning abstract narratives into serialized or cinematic content. As a result, animated adaptations are inherently selective and never neutral interpretations that emerge from a process of negotiation shaped by market demands for innovation, accessibility and spectacle: they can thus be defined as “heritage products” capable of resonating with domestic audiences while offering an experience of *Japaneseness* to international consumers (Tanuchi, 2025, pp. 317-318).

This process thus calls for a responsible and self-aware approach capable of preserving the integrity of the source material while commodifying and reimagining it for new media environments and audiences: within this framework, the adaptation of Japanese folklore in anime operates along a spectrum ranging from relatively faithful retellings to more flexible thematic reinterpretations. In the case of *Demon Slayer*, the world-building is grounded in a distinctly mythological logic and the narrative unfolds through encounters with supernatural entities that structure and regulate its universe. Although the central plot revolves around *Tanjiro*'s attempt to restore *Nezuko*'s humanity, the series draws extensively on folkloric elements: demons possess supernatural abilities, the *Demon Slayer Corps* employs *Breathing* techniques and swordsmanship reminiscent of Buddhist practices and the narrative is shaped by the enduring conflict between forces of good and evil (Tanuchi, 2025, pp. 318-319). Importantly, *Demon Slayer* exemplifies how anime can balance strong cultural specificity with global readability, remaining accessible to audiences unfamiliar with Japanese mythology while simultaneously offering deeper layers of meaning to those who recognize its cultural references.

A significant dimension of Japanese folklore is in fact represented by *yōkai* (妖怪), a broad category of supernatural entities that includes spirits, demons, monsters and shapeshifting beings, in which the character “yō” means “strange” or “otherworldly” and “kai” refers to an apparition or mysterious phenomenon. The emergence of *yōkai* is closely tied to animistic belief systems, according to which all entities, both living and non-living, possess a spirit or essence and may acquire supernatural properties under particular circumstances. *Yōkai* have traditionally been used to explain natural events and strange occurrences in everyday life, as well as serving as a means of moral teaching, entertainment and a way for individuals and communities to cope with fears and social anxieties; many *yōkai* narratives also reinforce social norms by illustrating the consequences of neglect, moral transgression or disrespect toward nature. Japanese folklore distinguishes several major categories of *yōkai*, each defined by specific origins and characteristics: among these are animal *yōkai*, such as the previously discussed *kitsune* (狐), a fox spirit often associated with intelligence and transformation, *yūrei* (幽霊), the restless spirits of the dead who remain bound to the human world due to unresolved emotions or unfinished business, *tsukumogami* (付喪神), everyday objects that after a long period of use acquire consciousness and supernatural agency, reflecting the belief that prolonged human interaction imbues material items with a soul, and *oni* (鬼), powerful and often malevolent beings that serve as a key point of reference for the demons in *Demon Slayer* (Rush, 2025).

In Japanese folklore, *oni* are typically depicted as fearsome beings characterized by muscular bodies, minimal clothing and iron clubs, their physical appearance varying particularly in skin color and they are commonly portrayed as hairy, horned creatures, sometimes with additional features such as a third eye centered on the forehead; their large mouths and pronounced fangs further emphasize their monstrous nature. Their immense strength is reflected in the proverb “oni ni kanabō” (鬼に金棒, “giving an iron club to an oni”), which conveys the idea of making someone already powerful even stronger. Historically, however, *oni* were not always imagined as corporeal monsters: in earlier periods, they were often conceived as invisible malevolent spirits responsible for illness and epidemics, or even as metaphors for destructive human impulses. Their violent and cruel

disposition is most evident in their anthropophagous tendencies, as they are known to consume human flesh; additionally, *oni* possess the ability to shapeshift, thus transforming into various forms and even altering their gender (Reider, 2024, pp. 203-209).

These traditional traits are largely preserved in *Demon Slayer*, where many demons initially appear human, often even aesthetically appealing, but reveal their true forms in combat, displaying exaggerated musculature, horns and fangs. At the same time, the series introduces important innovations. The *Twelve Moons*, for instance, have their hierarchical rank inscribed in their eyes, a feature that both signals their exceptional power and evokes a semi-human awareness of status and hierarchy. Moreover, demons are endowed with *Blood Demon Arts* (血鬼術, *kekijutsu*), highly individualized offensive abilities that align them with the logic of action-oriented contemporary media; shapeshifting remains central, notable examples include *Lower Moon One Enmu* (魓夢), who merges with a train in the *Mugen Train Arc*, and *Muzan*, who frequently assumes different identities, such as a woman or a child, often in a seemingly whimsical manner rather than a strategic one. Although the demons in the series bring destruction to humans, *Muzan* also offers them enhanced health, strength and longevity by transforming them through his blood; this power, however, comes at the cost of complete dependence and as such all demons ultimately perish upon his defeat. As in traditional folklore, their strength is linked to anthropophagy, with power increasing in proportion to the number of humans consumed, while higher-ranking demons tend to become more selective in their feeding. Nevertheless, exceptions exist: certain demons sided with humans, such as *Tamayo* (珠世) and *Yushiro* (愈史郎), can survive without consuming human flesh by sustaining themselves on small quantities of human blood obtained under controlled conditions (Reider, 2024, pp. 209-210).



Figure 4.6. “Sessen Dōji offering his life to an ogre” (1764) by Soga Shōhaku (on the left), illustrating the characteristic features of *oni* in Japanese folklore, and *Upper Moon Four Hantengu* (半天狗) in *Demon Slayer* shown in his intermediate form (top right) and final form (bottom right).

The series further hybridizes the figure of the *oni* by incorporating elements commonly associated with Western vampires: transformation occurs through the injection of *Muzan*’s blood, while *Nezuko*’s blood later becomes central to the development of a cure capable of reversing demonization; blood is also integral to combat, as *Blood Demon Arts* require the expenditure of the demon’s own blood and energy. Additional vampiric traits include vulnerability to sunlight, which causes demons to disintegrate, the necessity of decapitation through specialized swords to ensure their death, and the use of wisteria as a substance analogous to garlic used to repel and weaken demons (Reider, 2024, pp. 212-214).

A crucial aspect of *Demon Slayer* lies in its humanization of demons. Unlike many traditional representations, the *oni* in the series are former humans whose tragic pasts often involve extreme social marginalization and suffering, thus encouraging audience empathy.

For example, *Upper Rank Six Gyūtarō* (妓夫太郎) and his sister *Daki* (堕姫) were born into poverty in the red-light district and *Gyūtarō* chose to become a demon in order to save his sister after she was burned alive as punishment for blinding a samurai with a hairpin. Similarly, *Upper Rank One Kokushibō* (黒死牟)'s transformation is driven by deep-seated jealousy toward his twin brother *Yoriichi* and his unmatched abilities. These narratives complicate moral judgment, allowing audiences to sympathize with antagonistic figures while still holding them accountable (Reider, 2024, p. 210).

A particularly notable case is *Upper Rank Three Akaza* (猗窩座). Before becoming a demon, *Akaza*, originally named *Hakuji* (狛治), endured a life of poverty, loss and social exclusion; after repeatedly stealing to support his ill father, he was arrested multiple times and ultimately drove his father to suicide out of shame. *Hakuji* later found a sense of belonging under martial arts master *Keizō* (慶蔵), where he not only trained but also began to rebuild a life grounded in trust and mutual respect, and he formed a deep bond with his daughter, *Koyuki* (恋雪), who became his promised bride. However, this fragile happiness was abruptly shattered when members of a rival dojo poisoned the well from which both *Keizō* and *Koyuki* drank, killing them. Overwhelmed by grief and rage, *Hakuji* brutally massacred his enemies with his bare hands, attracting *Muzan*'s attention and subsequently turning into a demon. As *Akaza*, he retains an obsessive pursuit of strength, an echo of his past trauma, while repressing all memories of his human life, and yet, at the moment of his defeat, these memories resurface with striking clarity: confronted with the truth of his past and the weight of his actions, *Akaza* chooses to abandon his will to fight and accepts death. He is then reunited with *Koyuki* in the afterlife, where she forgives him and welcomes him back, offering a quiet and intimate resolution that reconfigures his story as one not only of violence, but also of loss, love and redemption, thus eliciting both condemnation and compassion from the audience.

In relation to the tension between tradition and modernity, sound design in *Demon Slayer* also plays a crucial role, mirroring the series' visual hybridity through its musical composition. The soundtrack blends traditional Japanese instruments with contemporary orchestral and rock elements, creating a layered composition that reflects both historical

continuity and modern sensibilities. Among the traditional instruments, the *nohkan*, a transverse bamboo flute commonly used in *Noh* and *Kabuki* theatre, stands out for its high-pitched and piercing timbre, which contributes to an atmosphere that is both ethereal and unsettling and is often featured in moments tied to the supernatural. At the same time, the score incorporates Western musical structures, such as piano and strings, that are prominently featured in quieter and emotionally charged scenes, enhancing introspection and character development, while action sequences rely on a fusion of electric guitars, percussion and full orchestral backing to create intensity and spectacle (JustPressPlay, 2023).

A particularly effective example of this hybridization can be found in the musical motif associated with demon slayer *Zenitsu*. His theme is closely linked to his *Thunderclap and Flash* technique, which involves a very fast and powerful slash and combines traditional melodic elements with modern electric instrumentation, especially during combat scenes; the sudden shift from silence to explosive electric guitar and percussive intensity mirrors *Zenitsu*'s own transformation from a fearful and hesitant boy to an overwhelmingly fast and precise demon slayer, thus making the music an extension of character development as well as action choreography. This integration of sound into the narrative becomes even more explicit in the case of *Nakime* (鳴女), the *biwa*-playing demon stationed in the *Infinity Castle*, whose music directly alters the spatial configuration of the environment: in this context, sound transcends its atmospheric function and becomes an active force that shapes space itself.

Finally, the series' openings and endings further contribute to its hybrid identity, as several of its most iconic theme songs are performed by the singer *LiSA*, whose style blends pop and rock influences, bridging traditional themes with globally recognizable musical forms and enhancing the series' international appeal.

Among the key values around which the narrative of *Demon Slayer* revolves are family, sacrifice, strength and a strong sense of duty, all of which reflect the moral-didactic archetypes typical of the *shōnen* genre. However, the series distinguishes itself through a nuanced exploration of what constitutes "true strength", contrasting it with a more destructive and individualistic pursuit of power. In fact, unlike many iconic anime protagonists, such as *Monkey D. Luffy* from *One Piece* or *Son Goku* from *Dragon Ball Z*, *Tanjiro* is not driven by

ambition or the desire for power but is rather portrayed as an ordinary boy whose primary goal is to restore his sister's humanity and reclaim the familial bonds that were violently taken from him: his journey toward strength is not rooted in competition or self-advancement, but in love and perseverance. This process begins with his encounter with *Giyū*, the first *Hashira* he meets. Faced with *Tanjiro*'s desperate plea to spare *Nezuko*, *Giyū* initially responds with harsh criticism, condemning his weakness and vulnerability and asserting that "the weak have neither rights nor choices". At first glance, his harsh words reflect an uncompromising view of strength, while his inner monologue reveals a deeper layer of empathy, as he recognizes in *Tanjiro* his own past trauma. Ultimately, *Giyū*'s actions end up contradicting his words, as he chooses to protect both siblings, embodying a form of strength grounded in compassion and responsibility (Sowa, 2021, pp. 62-66).

A more fully realized model of "true strength" is represented by *Kyōjurō Rengoku*, the *Flame Hashira*. During the *Mugen Train Arc*, *Rengoku* confronts *Akaza* in a battle that becomes a direct ideological clash: while *Akaza* praises *Rengoku*'s strength and repeatedly urges him to abandon his humanity in order to transcend his limitations, *Rengoku* firmly rejects this offer. For him, strength is not an end but a means to protect others, a philosophy stemmed into him by his mother, who taught him that those who are born strong have a duty to support the weak. In contrast, *Akaza* views human life as insignificant due to its fleeting nature and values strength as a tool for domination. *Rengoku*'s unwavering commitment to his ideals, even in the face of death, ultimately defines him as a moral and narrative benchmark, whose final words to *Tanjiro*, which tie to *Giyū*'s when he first met the boy, will serve as an everlasting support and become a testament of what true strength really is (Sowa, 2021, pp. 66-69).



Figure 4.7. *Rengoku's* final moments and his last words to *Tanjiro*: “If you are feeling disheartened, that you are somehow not enough, set your heart ablaze. Dry your eyes and look ahead” (Sotozaki, 2020).

Akaza, by contrast, embodies a distorted and false conception of strength, one that is rooted in a survivalist, Darwinian logic in which power is pursued for its own sake, a worldview that emerges from his deeply traumatic past. Ever since he lost his loved ones he stopped caring for anything except for the pursuit of supremacy: while his past as *Hakuji* strongly resembles that of *Rengoku* and *Tanjiro*, by being turned into a demon he was also forced into the false cult of strength at *Muzan's* hands, his old name and memories forgotten and the tattoos all over his body symbolizing the sins he has committed; nonetheless, traces of his humanity persist, for instance, in his refusal to kill women, a choice most likely dictated by the affection he felt for his promised bride. His final confrontation with *Tanjiro* and *Giyū* in the *Infinity Castle* represents not only a physical battle but also a moral one, and when his memories finally resurface *Akaza* ultimately rejects his demonic nature, choosing self-destruction over continued violence: in doing so, he abandons the false ideal of strength imposed upon him and reclaims his humanity, reuniting with his loved ones in the afterlife (Sowa, 2021, pp. 69-74).

Ultimately, *Demon Slayer* locates the source of true strength in love, whether directed toward family, friends or romantic partners. *Tanjiro's* journey is driven by his unwavering devotion to *Nezuko*, while *Giyū's* gradual self-forgiveness emerges through his bond with

Tanjiro; similarly, *Kanao* (カナヲ) successfully avenges her master *Shinobu*, and characters such as *Serpent Hashira Iguro Obanai* (伊黒 小芭内) and *Love Hashira Mitsuri Kanroji* (甘露寺 蜜璃) embody a form of romantic connection rooted in mutual healing and recognition, promising to marry each other in their next life. These relationships are not merely narrative subplots, but function as structural pillars of the story's ethical framework: love operates as a counterforce to the violence that permeates the series, giving meaning to conflict and transforming it into an expression of protection and responsibility. This is where the fundamental difference between demons and humans lies: in the capacity to form and preserve these bonds, where true strength is not defined by the capacity to destroy but rather by the will and courage to protect others and remain human even in the face of loss.

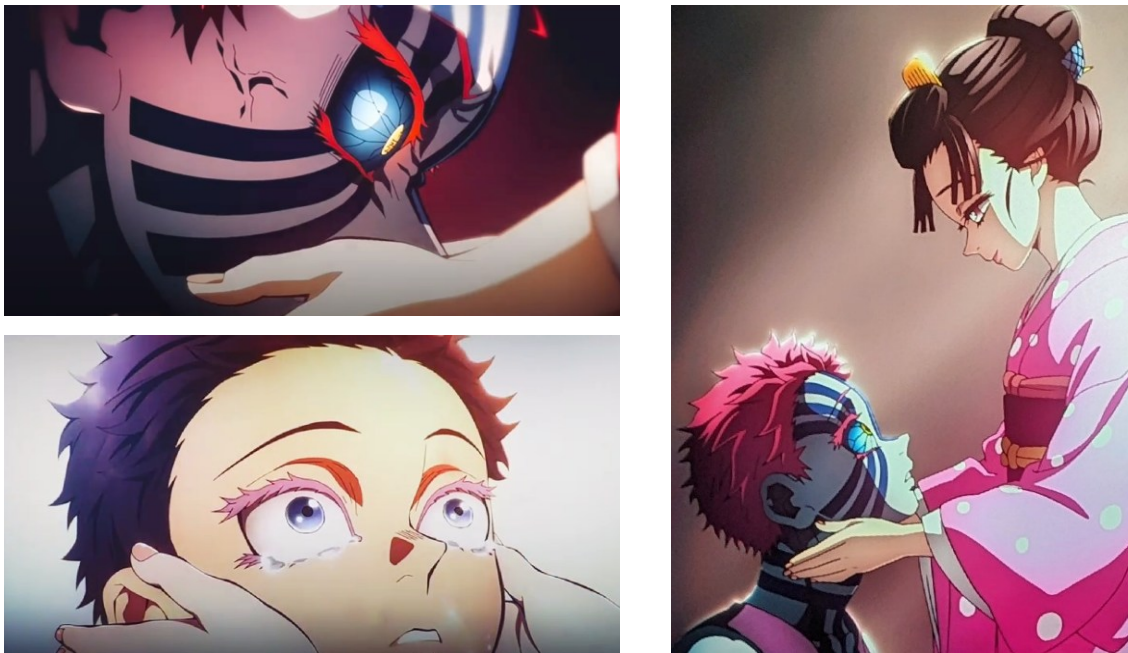


Figure 4.8. *Akaza's* reunion with *Koyuki* and the restoration of his humanity, as the power of love and resurfacing memories allows him to transcend his demonic nature and reclaim his lost self.

4.4 *Demon Slayer*'s platform convergence model as transmedia expansion and value generation

While platform convergence has already been examined primarily as a distributional logic, this section will shift the focus to its economic and transmedia implications, exploring how *Demon Slayer* expands beyond its core narrative into a broader commercial and cultural ecosystem. Within this perspective, platform convergence operates not merely as a mechanism of access but also as a system of value generation, enabling the anime to circulate across multiple media while activating interconnected economic sectors, including cross-industry collaborations, merchandising and branding.

A crucial turning point in this process is represented by the film-event model: rather than functioning solely as a mode of distribution, *Mugen Train* and the subsequent *Infinity Castle* trilogy act as economic accelerators, amplifying audience engagement and becoming a catalyst for consumption practices, thus transforming spectatorship into a participatory and collectible experience. Among the key promotional strategies, in fact, exclusive in-theater bonuses played a central role: screenings in Japan and selected countries offered limited-edition items such as character-designed postcard sets and art stands reproducing original manga illustrations signed by Gotōge, which encouraged repeated viewings driven by collectability and the desire for the acquisition of unique commodities (Agostinacchio, 2025). In this sense, the film-event does not simply expand the narrative across platforms but also intensifies its economic potential by activating consumption practices beyond the cinematic text itself. Moreover, promotional campaigns extended beyond traditional advertising and incorporated cross-sector collaborations and events: major trailers and exclusive content were broadcast during televised events, including high-profile partnerships such as the collaboration with *Major League Baseball*. An additional noteworthy case is represented by the Japanese city of Gyōda, located in Saitama prefecture, which created a large-scale *tanbo art*, or rice field art: developed as part of a promotional campaign for the release of the *Infinity Castle* film, the installation depicts a monumental image of *Tanjiro* and spans an area of approximately 2.8 hectares, visible from the city's observation tower (Baseel, 2025).

In this sense, platform convergence operates not only across media formats but also across previously distinct industrial sectors as well as territorial spaces, connecting them within a

unified and immersive promotional ecosystem and allowing *Demon Slayer* to circulate within heterogeneous spaces while maintaining a coherent brand identity.



Figure 4.9. Tanbo art of Tanjiro in the city of Gyōda, realized in 2025 in occasion of the upcoming *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba – Infinity Castle* trilogy.

Beyond the cinematic dimension, this logic is further reinforced through partnerships with brands such as *Adidas*, *HYPE*, *Uniqlo*, *KFC*, *Kura Sushi*, *FamilyMart*, *All Nippon Airways* and many more: these collaborations range from themed clothing lines and limited-edition retail campaigns to branded transportation experiences, thus effectively embedding the anime's visual identity and characters into everyday practices of consumption, reaching broader markets through repeated and yet low-intensity encounters. Thanks to these partnerships, *Demon Slayer* permeates life through consumer culture, thus becoming a recognizable brand that generates value through its symbolic capital, where merchandising emerges as the primary interface between narrative content and economic value: the exponential proliferation of character goods, including figures, apparel, accessories, plushies and collectible items exemplifies how the franchise capitalizes on affective attachments. Within this ecosystem, the economic exploitation of folklore through anime such as *Demon Slayer* recontextualizes it within a contemporary capitalistic framework: folklore becomes a highly marketable cultural capital with a

distinct aesthetic that can be easily reproduced across commodities, thus allowing cultural specificity to become a resource for economic expansion.

At the same time, social media campaigns play a fundamental role in coordinating and amplifying these strategies on a global scale: official accounts, promotional hashtags and interactive content create a sense of community among fans while creating a continuous communicative flow in between releases. These practices foster a marketing ecosystem that is networked, as it relies on audiences to actively engage and help the anime to circulate, which in turn reinforces its visibility and relevance over time.

The economic exploitation of *Demon Slayer* thus extends far beyond the anime's streaming rights or box office performance, as its broader financial impact lies in its capacity to activate and sustain secondary and tertiary markets, with merchandising representing one of the most prominent and profitable extensions. However, unlike franchises like *Pokémon*, which operates through a long-term and accumulative ecosystem that is characterized by continuous content production and gradual expansion, *Demon Slayer* exemplifies a model of high-intensity convergence burst: its success is concentrated within a relatively short time marked by rapid cross-platform expansion, audience engagement and with an almost immediate economic impact. Rather than relying on prolonged engagement, the anime maximizes its profitability by synchronizing release and saturating media and markets. *Demon Slayer* thus illustrates how platform convergence functions simultaneously as a cultural and economic logic, transforming a narrative property into a dynamic ecosystem of production and consumption: through film-events, brand collaborations, merchandising and digital engagement, the anime exemplifies how convergence is not only a condition of media distribution, but also as a strategic framework through which value, both cultural and economic, is continuously generated and sustained across diverse platforms.

4.5 Global circulation, reception and soft power

Following its anime adaptation, *Demon Slayer* emerged as a media product that circulated across streaming platforms, television broadcasting and cinema, bringing a narrative deeply rooted in Japanese traditions and folkloric mythology to geographically and culturally diverse audiences. Its blockbuster success as an entertainment product must therefore be

considered alongside its broader social and cultural relevance: by presenting to global audiences an image of Japan during the Taishō era, along with the challenges the country faced and the cultural heritage that continues to shape it today, the anime has become a vehicle of cultural transmission and a form of “diplomatic” media, contributing to the international visibility and legitimization of Japanese animation within the global media landscape.

As already extensively discussed in this chapter, the first film of the saga achieved record-breaking results worldwide, becoming the highest-grossing Japanese film in history and outperforming major Hollywood productions during its release period. Its success was in fact not confined to domestic markets but extended across transnational ones, a trajectory that has been further consolidated through the *Infinity Castle* trilogy, which has contributed to elevating, both symbolically and economically, the status of anime as a legitimate form of global cinema. Alongside its commercial success, *Demon Slayer* has also received highly positive critical reception, further supporting the recognition of anime within mainstream media discourse. Coverage by international outlets, most notably *Variety* and *The Guardian*, reflects a growing acknowledgment of anime as more than a niche or subcultural medium: by emphasizing the series’ visual sophistication, emotional resonance and narrative accessibility, these authoritative critical voices frame *Demon Slayer* as a product capable of appealing to both dedicated fans and general audiences, thus increasingly its international visibility.

Beyond industrial recognition, *Demon Slayer* exerts a significant cultural impact in the global diffusion of Japanese aesthetics and narrative motifs: the series’ setting in the Taishō era, combined with its use of traditional elements, such as *kimono* patterns, swords and *yōkai*-inspired demons, introduces international audiences to culturally specific references that are reinterpreted through an accessible and entertaining visual language. Instead of acting as barriers to comprehension and immersion in the narrative, these elements become points of attraction that enable local cultural specificity to be successfully integrated into media products that can be consumed and enjoyed by global audiences. As a result, *Demon Slayer* has played a key role in reinforcing and revitalizing interest in Japanese folklore and the country’s historical imagery, allowing them to

become part of a shared repertoire of transnational popular culture. By creating narratives that are globally resonant while remaining deeply embedded in culturally specific content, the anime ultimately enhances Japan's cultural attractiveness and can thus be understood as a vector of soft power that operates in a decentralized and market-driven manner, emerging from the global success of commercial media and its reception among audiences rather than from direct state intervention. Moreover, in contrast to franchises such as *Pokémon*, whose global circulation often relies on processes of cultural "deodorization", *Demon Slayer* proved how strongly "Japanese" content can successfully reach transnational audiences without requiring excessive cultural standardization.

In conclusion, *Demon Slayer* illustrates how platform convergence, when combined with transmedia circulation and a strong aesthetic identity, can generate not only economic value but also have a cultural influence on a global scale. Through its highly positive global reception, the legitimization provided by authoritative critical voices and the diffusion of culturally specific yet aesthetically appealing and entertaining references, *Demon Slayer* contributes to defining anime as a central component of global media culture, while simultaneously reinforcing Japan's role as a key actor in the entertainment economy. Ultimately, what begins as the story of a young boy risking everything to save his sister, in a world where violence seems to be the only possible language, becomes a narrative where love prevails; enhanced by its cinematic aesthetics, *Demon Slayer* has captured the hearts of audiences worldwide, establishing itself as one of those rare anime that leave a lasting emotional imprint and will mostly likely come to be remembered as a modern classic within anime.

Chapter 5 – Anime as nation branding: *Studio Ghibli* as a case study

5.1 From animation studio to cultural institution

The foundation of *Studio Ghibli* (スタジオジブリ, *Sutajio Jiburi*) took place during a period of significant transformation within the Japanese animation industry. During the 1980s, television anime proliferated and consolidated itself as the dominant form of animation, while production companies increasingly oriented themselves toward transmedia strategies and branding practices; within this evolving industrial context, *Studio Ghibli* emerged as a distinctive entity. However, the exact circumstances surrounding its foundation remain difficult to define unequivocally, as the origins of *Studio Ghibli* are frequently mythologized, particularly through the figure of Hayao Miyazaki, whereas in reality the studio developed out of specific industrial conditions, collaborative networks and economic opportunities rather than purely individual artistic vision. This ambiguity is also reflected in the lack of consensus regarding the studio's first official film: while some scholars identify *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (風の谷のナウシカ, *Kaze no Tani no Naushika*, 1984) as its inaugural feature, others consider *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* (天空の城ラピュタ, *Tenkū no Shiro Rapyuta*, 1986) to mark the true beginning of *Studio Ghibli*; others trace the studio's origins even further back, linking its formation to Miyazaki's earlier work in manga publishing and interpreting his achievements across both manga and animation as foundational to the studio's eventual creation (Denison, 2023, pp. 31-34).

Prior to 1985, Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata had already established themselves within the anime industry, having received early training at *Toei Animation* and later collaborating across various studios, including *Topcraft*: in this perspective, *Studio Ghibli* cannot be understood as a start-up in the conventional sense, but rather as the outcome of pre-existing professional relationships and accumulated creative experience. A decisive turning point was the success of *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, produced in collaboration

with the publishing company *Tokuma Shoten*: the film's commercial and critical success provided both financial viability and institutional support, directly enabling the establishment of *Studio Ghibli* in 1985 by Miyazaki, Takahata and producer Toshio Suzuki. Suzuki's role is particularly significant, as he functioned as an industrial strategist capable of bridging creative production with market-oriented processes such as financing, distribution and promotion: *Studio Ghibli* was thus conceived as a hybrid structure, balancing artistic autonomy with industrial organization. Furthermore, the studio positioned itself as an alternative model within the anime industry, privileging quality and authorship over speed and quantity. Its identity was built on relatively stable, long-term staff employment, a focus on high-quality feature films rather than television production and slower production cycles, where this approach stood in contrast to more common industry practices such as outsourcing and fragmented production systems (Denison, 2023, pp. 34-50).

The perception of *Studio Ghibli* as a "myth" is closely tied to the figure of Miyazaki and the construction of his *auteur* image, often seen as the driving force behind the studio's success and creative genius. This association can be understood through the framework of *auteur* theory, which traditionally identifies three key components: technical competence, a distinguishable stylistic personality and an underlying interior meaning. According to this perspective, the *auteur*, most commonly the director, imprints their films with a recognizable signature through recurring aesthetic and thematic choices. Classic examples from Hollywood cinema include directors such as Alfred Hitchcock or Steven Spielberg, whose stylistic imprints render films like *Psycho* (1960) or *Jurassic Park* (1993) immediately identifiable even to non-specialist audiences. More broadly, *auteur* theory is grounded in the idea that stylistic coherence distinguishes the *auteur* from a mere manufacturer, thereby adding cultural value to the final product and promising specific forms of spectatorial pleasure or even cult status. In this sense, authorship increasingly functions as a commercial strategy, whereby the *auteur*'s name becomes a central element of marketing and product differentiation (Crofts, 1998, pp. 310-322).

In the field of animation, however, authorship is more frequently attributed to studios rather than to individual creators, reflecting their inherently collaborative and industrial

nature: in fact, animation relies on the coordinated work of large teams, including animators, character designers, storyboard artists and technical specialists, and as a result stylistic coherence is often perceived as emerging from institutional practices rather than from a single authorial voice. For instance, productions by studios such as *MAPPA*, *Ufotable* or *Wit Studio* are recognizable through recurring visual features, design conventions, animation fluidity and the use of digital effects, where the “signature” of animation is frequently displaced from the individual to the studio. Individual creators tend to gain prominence under specific conditions: for instance, when their personal style is closely aligned with the narrative identity and success of a work, or when their authorial presence is reinforced through paratextual elements such as interviews or editorial commentary. This is evident in the case of Hajime Isayama, the mastermind behind *Attack on Titan*, and even more with Gege Akutami, creator of *Jujutsu Kaisen*, whose authorial voice comes out through paratextual communication and commentary that are characterized by a sharp sarcasm and sense of humor. This double dynamic highlights a tension within animation between collective production and individual recognition: while the industrial structure of anime tends to foreground the studio as the primary site of authorship, certain figures are nonetheless elevated to *auteur* status when their creative identity becomes recognizable across both the text and its surrounding discourse.

In this context, *Studio Ghibli* represents a hybrid case, where studio-based authorship and *auteur* discourse converge and its success should be understood as both collective and industrial, rather than solely the product of individual genius. The *auteur* image associated with Miyazaki is, to a significant extent, constructed through processes of marketing, critical discourse and global reception; at the same time, this very myth of authorship plays a crucial role in elevating *Studio Ghibli* beyond the status of a production company, contributing to its transformation into a globally recognized cultural icon.

However, before achieving international fame, *Studio Ghibli* had to stabilize itself as an industrial entity, as in its early years it was not yet a stable or dominant institution, but rather a fragile and experimental industrial project that had to face financial risks, distribution challenges and evolving production strategies. In fact, its early productions were not consistently successful: high production costs combined with slow workflows put the studio

in a condition of significant economic vulnerability, that was further intensified by its focus on feature films, a model considerably riskier than the more widespread television anime format. *Studio Ghibli*'s identity as a "quality studio" was initially a financial gamble rather than a guaranteed path to success. In terms of production, the studio deliberately positioned itself against dominant industry practices, avoiding mass television output and investing heavily in animation quality, attention to detail and narrative depth; nonetheless, this model proved to be both expensive and time-consuming, as it required constant negotiation with financiers and distributors. Despite its reputation for artistic autonomy, *Studio Ghibli* was still deeply embedded within capitalist media mix dynamics and industrial networks; by the end of the 1980s, as some films started to underperform commercially and financial pressure intensified, the studio was forced to restructure, adopting more strategic planning and paying more attention to audience reception. In response to this instability, *Studio Ghibli* gradually consolidated its production processes while simultaneously reinforcing its brand identity as well as building audience trust: by doing so, the studio became increasingly associated with qualities such as high production value consistency and emotional depth, traits that are now widely perceived as intrinsic to the *Ghibli* brand. Even prior to its international breakthrough, *Studio Ghibli* had thus already started to develop a consistent aesthetic and a recognizable production model that would have later enabled its cultural prestige and recognition among global audiences (Denison, 2023, pp. 53-56).

With regard to late twentieth-century trends toward digital workflows and the increasing use of CGI technologies, *Studio Ghibli* adopted a notably ambivalent strategy. Rather than rejecting these digital tools outright, the studio employed them selectively, integrating them into hand-drawn animation in ways that rendered their presence largely invisible: CGI functions primarily as a supportive element to traditional animation, allowing the studio to maintain a consistent visual identity even as it undergoes technological transformation. As a result, *Ghibli*'s films continue to convey a sense of timelessness, tactility and craftsmanship, reinforcing the perception of animation as a handcrafted and artisanal form (Starzec, 2023). This aesthetic continuity contributes not only to the studio's distinctiveness but also to the construction of "handmade" animation

as a key brand value. While this position should not be interpreted as a form of pure resistance, since it remains embedded within technological and industrial developments, it nonetheless enables the studio to navigate between tradition and innovation, differentiating itself from competitors while still relying on contemporary production practices. Moreover, the illusion of purely handmade animation plays a crucial role in constructing a nostalgic and culturally authentic image of Japan, aligning *Studio Ghibli*'s aesthetic strategies with broader dynamics of nation branding.

The studio's global success cannot be understood as the result of pure cultural authenticity alone, but rather as the outcome of complex processes of adaptation, localization and industrial mediation. Its films can in fact be described as mutable texts that, as they circulate internationally, are continuously translated and reinterpreted for different audiences and markets. A key mediator in this global expansion was *The Walt Disney Company*, which acquired distribution rights for the United States and Europe: through dubbing, marketing campaigns, trailer production and theatrical release strategies, *Disney* played a fundamental role not only in distributing *Ghibli*'s films, but also in shaping how they were presented to international audiences, frequently reframing them to align with Western expectations and its own narrative conventions. Differences between Japanese and American trailers and promotional materials reveal a process of negotiation between foreignness and familiarity, which aims to make the films more accessible while preserving their perceived cultural distinctiveness. The widespread tendency to position *Disney* as commercial and mainstream, in contrast to *Studio Ghibli* as artistic and authentic, reinforces a broader West versus East dichotomy and suggests that *Ghibli* operates outside global capitalism. However, this opposition is ultimately misleading, as within Japan the studio operates as a form of mainstream blockbuster cinema and its international success is deeply intertwined with the industrial infrastructures and distribution networks of companies such as *Disney* (Rendell & Denison, 2018, pp. 8-12). Following the end of its distribution partnership with *Disney* in the early 2010s, *Studio Ghibli*'s international circulation entered a new phase under *GKIDS*, an independent U.S.-based distributor specializing in international and auteur-driven animation. Unlike *Disney*'s more mainstream and family-oriented framing, *GKIDS* has positioned *Ghibli*'s films within the context of art cinema and cultural prestige, overseeing theatrical re-

releases, home video distribution and curated events such as *Studio Ghibli Fest*, thereby showing how the studio is curated and mediated differently depending on industrial context (D’Anastasio, 2017).

Taken together, these dynamics reveal that *Studio Ghibli*’s transformation from an animation studio into a cultural institution is the result of the intersection between industrial organization, aesthetic consistency, authorial discourse and transnational circulation, where its identity as an authentic and artisanal producer emerges not only as an inherent quality but also as a carefully constructed effect that is sustained through both production practices and global mediation. In order to further examine how this constructed identity is articulated and circulated through specific media texts, the following sections will focus on two key films from the studio’s much wider repertoire: *My Neighbor Totoro* and *Spirited Away*. The former has become one of the most iconic and recognizable representations of *Studio Ghibli*’s aesthetic and thematic universe, even becoming the mascot of the studio itself, and has contributed to the circulation of a nostalgic and affective image of Japan to international audiences. The latter played a decisive role in *Ghibli*’s global breakthrough by winning the *Academy Award for Best Animated Feature* in 2003, which granted the studio unprecedented global visibility and legitimacy beyond both anime and Japanese cinema, transforming it into a transnational cultural phenomenon. Together, these films offer complementary perspectives through which to analyze how *Studio Ghibli* constructs, negotiates and disseminates its cultural identity across both domestic and global contexts.

5.2 *My Neighbor Totoro*: pastoral imaginary and affective Japan

My Neighbor Totoro (となりのトトロ, *Tonari no Totoro*) was released in Japan in 1988 and later distributed with English voiceovers by *Disney* in 2005. The film tells the story of two sisters, *Satsuki* (サツキ) and *Mei* (メイ), who move with their father to the small rural village of *Tokorozawa* to be closer to their mother, who suffers from a chronic illness and must remain in hospital for an undefined period. The motif of the beginning of a new life and of relocation, which is recurrent both in this film and in *Spirited Away*, becomes an opportunity

to narrate the entry into another world, where reality gradually intertwines with the realm of fantasy. In fact, while cleaning the old house and letting some fresh air in, the two girls encounter the *susuwatari* (煤渡り), soot spirits that are visible only to children. By doing so, the film invites viewers to return to a childlike worldview, to believe in what appears before their eyes and to set aside logic and rationality. The events experienced by the girls and their reactions to them are exaggerated to the maximum: when they laugh, they do so uncontrollably; when they cry, tears flow continuously; their courage and motivation translate into an endless reserve of energy. Their amplified facial expressions of joy, disbelief and sadness are typical of childhood, when everything appears larger and more extraordinary, returning to a time when social restrictions had not yet limited the way reality is perceived and emotional responses expressed.

The child chosen to enter the realm of the extraordinary turns out to be *Mei*, and as she follows the trail of acorns left for her by the forest spirits, she reaches the monumental camphor tree where *Totoro* (トトロ) sleeps. *Totoro* is a giant, fluffy spirit that is a hybrid between a mole, a bear and a raccoon, its enormous size and gaping mouth with lots of teeth do not frighten the child, either because he resembles a plush toy or because children tend not to fear what they do not yet understand. He is a friendly, affectionate and *neighborly* troll, *Mei* believes she has seen his image in a story book before but cannot recall his correct name, *Torōru*, and therefore distorts it into “Totoro”. As she tries to guide her sister and father to him, she is unable to reach the entrance to the tree, and her father explains that “not everyone can see the forest custodian”, further reinforcing the idea that only unconditioned childhood perception can access what exceeds adult comprehension, or at least that not everyone has the willingness to believe in fantasies.



Figure 5. *Mei* following the forest spirits through a tunnel-like vegetation (on the top) and the girl finding *Totoro* at the heart of a camphor tree (on the bottom), demonstrating childlike innocence and fearless curiosity as enters the magical dimension and playfully interacts with the giant forest guardian.

One day, while the children wait for their father, who has gone to see their sick mother, they meet *Totoro* at the bus stop. *Satsuki* offers her umbrella to shelter him from the heavy

rain, and he thanks her by gifting her some magic beans, before boarding a magical *Catbus* (ネコバス, *Nekobasu*), a fluffy cat-shaped bus that runs through the sky; the following night, as the girls and the spirits perform a moonlit dance, the beans bloom. The film takes the narrative back to the real world by showing that the next morning the beans have not actually sprouted and through the arrival of a telegram stating that the girls' mother cannot yet return home due to her fragile health. *Mei* then decides to walk alone to the hospital to see her and bring her a corn cob, and while her intention is admirable, she gets lost: *Mei*'s disappearance and the panic that spreads throughout the town, as people begin searching for her and fear the worst, remind us that while children may experience everyday life as extraordinary and believe they can do anything, the real world is structured according to systems of knowledge and basic awareness that children do not yet possess. *Satsuki* begs *Totoro* for help in finding her sister, and the troll allows her to board the *Catbus*: she eventually finds *Mei* and together they reach the hospital to visit their mother, watching her from a tree near the room. The adults, however, cannot see them: only their mother senses their presence, a perception that is later dismissed as ridiculous, since it does not correspond to any logic. As in all fairy tales, the ending is a happy one, where the image of the corn left on the balcony of the hospital room leaves both the viewers and the girls' parents with a lingering sense of magic (Arnaldi, 2020, pp. 99-103).

Set in rural Japan in the mid-Shōwa era (1926-1989), more specifically in the late 1950s, *My Neighbor Totoro* showcases an image of Japan during a time characterized by the restoration of pre-war traditions as well as post-war reconstruction and economic growth. This tension in the film is expressed through a blend of traditional and contemporary elements, while simultaneously providing a nostalgic representation of rural simplicity and communal life. Moreover, the courage and optimism displayed by the two girls despite their mother's illness, as well as the eventual growth of the acorn into a mighty oak, can be interpreted as an echo of the resilience that enabled Japan's post-war recovery.

There is also an autobiographical dimension in *My Neighbor Totoro*: the landscape is a combination of places from Miyazaki's childhood, reinterpreted through memory and a child's perspective, while the girls' sick mother is an homage to his own mother. The girls are confronted with illness and the fear of potential loss in childhood, where the invention of

an alternative reality functions as a form of escapism that protects them from the darkness of the real world. This hidden darkness has given rise to an interpretation, denied by Miyazaki but nonetheless widespread, that associates the film with the so called “Sayama incident”. In 1963, sixteen-year-old Yoshi Nakata disappeared while returning from school and her parents subsequently received a ransom demand. The elder sister brought the requested sum to the designated location, but the victim’s body was later found near a farm with signs that the girl had been raped before being killed. A 21-year-old was arrested, but due to procedural irregularities during the interrogation his death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment; approximately thirty years later he was granted parole, and the victim’s elder sister committed suicide as a result of her grief. According to this reading, *Totoro* and the other spirits would represent the death gods known as *shinigami* (死神), and they become visible to the sisters not because they can only be perceived by children, but because the girls are approaching the moment of their death: *Mei*, interpreted as the murdered girl, is in fact the first to see them. The *Catbus* can be interpreted as a figure similar to *Charon*, the ferryman of the dead in classical mythology, and the *kanji* indicating its destination are read as “tomb” and “road”; this reading is reinforced by the absence of *Mei*’s shadow once she gets lost, the fading of the girls’ colors aboard the *Catbus* and other visual elements later also present in *Spirited Away* as indicators of proximity to death. When the sisters reunite and reach their sick mother, she is the one who senses their presence, while the father remains unaware. He closes the film alone, writing and looking out of the window, possibly narrating the story or imagining a magical afterlife for his daughters. Although speculative, these readings highlight the coexistence of innocence and latent darkness within the film, suggesting that *Ghibli*’s narratives, while often perceived as comforting and magical, are also permeated by themes of loss, mortality and melancholy, which are an integral part of life (Arnaldi, 2020, pp. 103-108).

Despite these darker interpretative frameworks, *My Neighbor Totoro* continues to operate as one of the most widely recognized representations of an accessible and “soft” Japan in international visual culture. The romanticized slow life of the countryside depicted in the film generates nostalgia and a longing for simpler times, distant from the

noise and problems of urbanization. The film often includes moments in which there is little to no dialogue, allowing the sounds of nature to prevail: for instance, when *Satsuki* and *Mei* are waiting at the bus stop, their silence amplifies the raindrops falling, the leaves rustling and the girls' breathing. These moments encourage viewers to appreciate the beauty of silence amidst the noise, inviting them to slow down and remain present as well as experiencing the world with a renewed sense of wonder and attentiveness (Syversen, 2025). In fact, while *Studio Ghibli's* films provide emotional and aesthetic nourishment, they also become spaces for reflection and debates on political and social issues: the ecological and technological threats affecting Japanese society are intertwined with themes of love, friendship and a sense of nostalgia for a purer, pre-industrial time. The film's promotional campaign included posters stating that "We are returning to you something you have forgotten", promising audiences not only a return to childhood wonder but also to a national past not yet polluted by industrialization and capitalism. The film thus attempts to recover that sense of innocence and cultural identity that has been lost and is regained through the characters' journey into the fantastic, which ends up healing a connection with nature and non-human beings (Mandal, 2022, pp. 94; 99-102).

The idealized rural imaginary grounded in the *satoyama* landscape is characterized by slowness, domestic intimacy and a cyclical perception of everyday life, thus contributing to a nostalgic idea of rural Japan as harmonious and emotionally secure. *Totoro* himself, despite his ambiguous and potentially intimidating appearance, is framed through *kawaii* aesthetics and narrative strategies that emphasize familiarity and comfort. In this sense, he functions as an entry point into *Studio Ghibli's* broader aesthetic universe, offering an approachable image of Japan that generates cultural significance not only through its symbolic or folkloric dimensions, but also through the production of attachment grounded in simplicity and nature-centered storytelling. As such, *My Neighbor Totoro* contributes to the construction of an affective form of nationhood, in which belonging is not articulated through explicit ideological discourse but rather through emotional resonance and mediated nostalgia for both childhood and an imagined rural past; in this framework, childhood itself acquires symbolic value as a temporal figure through which Japan is reimagined as a space of innocence and magic, preceding the complexities and disruptions associated with modern times.



Figure 5.2. Images from the film depicting the vibrant countryside, where the use of natural and vivid colors highlights its pastoral beauty, romanticizing the rural landscape to evoke a profound sense of nostalgia for simpler times.

The film's natural and built environments are deeply influenced by Shinto beliefs and folklore, conveying a sense of respect for nature that is deeply embedded within Japanese

culture and is also reflected in the names of the protagonists, as *Satsuki* is an old word for “May” and *Mei* is a homophone of the same English word. *Totoro* himself can be seen as a manifestation of a *kami* (神), a benevolent forest spirit or deity embodying the belief that divine forces inhabit all elements of nature. He functions as a bridge between two worlds, acting as a symbol of harmony between humans and nature, where his kindness and that of the other spirits reflects the possibility of a peaceful coexistence between the two. A similar mediating role is embodied by the *Catbus*, a means of transportation that connects the two realms and mirrors the Shinto belief in the coexistence of the spiritual and physical worlds. Its appearance resembles that of the *maneki-neko* (招き猫), the beckoning cat that is commonly found in Japanese homes and businesses as a talisman for good fortune and wealth and can be interpreted as an invitation for both characters and viewers to enter this magical world. Furthermore, the shrine in the house where the family pays homage to their ancestors serves as a reminder of their lineage and the importance of tradition, connecting past and present while acting as a gateway to the divine; the tree where *Mei* finds *Totoro* can be interpreted as an ordinary place transformed into a site of wonder, functioning as a Shinto shrine-like space. Finally, the *susuwatari* draw extensively on the repertoire of *yōkai* folklore: while they do not appear in traditional Japanese myths, they embody the playful and sometimes mischievous nature commonly associated with *yōkai*, as well as the idea that spirits have the power to influence the natural world in mysterious ways, a belief known as *mononoke* (物の怪), as seen also in the *Princess Mononoke* film produced by *Studio Ghibli* (Syversen, 2025).

The influence that *My Neighbor Totoro* has had in Japan is comparable to that of *Winnie The Pooh* in the United States; however, beyond being a childhood icon, *Totoro* also embodies the endless struggle to preserve the values and traditions of rural life in the countryside. He has become the symbol of the *Totoro no Furusato Foundation*, an organization dedicated to protecting the rich natural environment of the Sayama forest, the very same in which *Totoro* resides, which has been progressively reduced due to urbanization; in the US, similar initiatives have been created to support the Japanese counterparts, including artistic auctions inspired by *Totoro* and his forest. Miyazaki selected

Totoro as *Studio Ghibli*'s mascot because of what it represents but also for his symbolic recognizability and adaptability, and as such the character continues to appear as an easter egg across the studio's films and, in broader popular culture, in works such as *Pixar* productions and other international media texts (Arnaldi, 2020, pp. 108-111).

5.3 *Spirited Away*: liminal imaginary and cultural complexity

Spirited Away (千と千尋の神隠し, *Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi*), released in 2001 and inspired in part by the fantasy novel *The Village Beyond the Mist* by Sachiko Kashiwaba, tells the story of *Chihiro* (千尋), a ten-year-old girl who is moving to a new home with her family. Unlike *Satsuki* and *Mei* in *My Neighbor Totoro*, who approach change with curiosity and enthusiasm, *Chihiro* appears bored, tired and burdened by the obligation to start over. She is portrayed as an ordinary child, neither particularly beautiful nor exceptional, caught in the liminal space between childhood and adolescence, a transitional phase rarely foregrounded in earlier *Studio Ghibli* films. Her physical appearance, suspended between childish and more mature traits, reflects her inner uncertainty and lack of confidence (Arnaldi, 2020, p. 139). After taking a wrong turn, *Chihiro* and her parents arrive at what appears to be an abandoned amusement park and, despite the girl's fear, decide to explore it by passing through a dark tunnel. On the other side they discover an empty town, where a lavish banquet has been mysteriously prepared: driven by greed, her parents begin to eat uncontrollably and are transformed into pigs, while *Chihiro* refuses to eat, either out of stubbornness or because she recalls childhood warnings not to take food from strangers. When the path back to car disappears, she becomes trapped in this unfamiliar world and must find a way to restore her parents to human form.

As night falls, the seemingly deserted town comes alive with spirits, and *Chihiro* begins to fade from existence, but she is rescued by a boy named *Haku* (白), who gives her a berry that restores her physical presence and allows her to survive in the spirit world. *Haku* explains that in order to avoid being captured by *Yubaba* (湯婆婆), the witch who controls the bathhouse, *Chihiro* must find employment there. She succeeds in securing a contract, but at the cost of her name, which is replaced with *Sen* (千), a strategy used by *Yubaba* to

control workers and prevent them from leaving. Through her work in the bathhouse, *Chihiro* encounters a series of symbolic figures: one of her first clients is a foul-smelling spirit, who is eventually revealed to be the spirit of a polluted river, making explicit the studio's ecological concerns and its critique of environmental degradation. Another key figure is *Kaonashi* (顔無し, *No-Face*), a masked and enigmatic entity who offers gold in exchange for food and eventually devours several workers: he embodies greed and consumerism, reflecting the excesses of human desire, but *Chihiro* remains unaffected by his temptations, as children do not yet fully understand the value and allure of money that so strongly influence adults, and her kindness eventually rescues him from his destructive behavior (Arnaldi, 2020, pp. 139-142).

As the narrative progresses, *Chihiro* gradually matures, learning to navigate the complexities of the spirit world, and in doing so develops a strong bond with *Haku*: while he initially functions as a guide and protector, providing her with the knowledge necessary to survive within the bathhouse's hierarchical and often hostile environment, he is also revealed to possess a dual form, appearing not only as a human boy but also as a dragon, a form that draws on East Asian symbolic associations between dragons and water, thereby visually anticipating his true nature as a river spirit. In fact, as the story unfolds *Chihiro* ultimately helps him to recover his true identity, and he is revealed to be the spirit of the *Kohaku River*, who had once saved *Chihiro* during her childhood (Arnaldi, 2020, p. 114). His loss of identity is thus the result of both material and symbolic erasure: the destruction of the river due to urban development has severed his connection to the physical world, while *Yubaba* has taken his name to subject him to her control. It is only through *Chihiro*'s act of remembering that his name, and thus his existence, is restored, establishing memory as a fundamental mechanism through which identity and affective bonds are reconstituted. The relationship between *Chihiro* and *Haku* constitutes in fact a central affective axis within the narrative, their bond is not grounded in possession or desire, but in acts of care and remembrance, which function as mechanisms of resistance against the forces of erasure embodied by *Yubaba*'s system. In this sense, their relationship reflects a broader thematic concern with identity, where the self is built on connections with others and with the environment, further reinforcing *Spirited Away*'s ethical framework.



Figure 5.3. *Chihiro and Haku in Spirited Away: Chihiro hugging Haku in his dragon form (on the top) and the boy escorting her to the edge of the spirit world at the ending sequences of the film, promising they will meet again (on the bottom).*

This motif returns in the final confrontation with *Yubaba*, as in the final test *Chihiro* is asked to identify her transformed parents among a group of pigs, but she refuses to choose, asserting that none of them are her parents. This moment is crucial, as it demonstrates that despite having been stripped of her name and immersed in a system designed to subjugate her, *Chihiro* retains a stable sense of self and manages to recognize beyond appearances. Moreover, her refusal of the logic of the test itself rather than submitting to it shows her

passage from uncertainty to cognitive maturity and clarity, marking the completion of her coming-of-age journey. The spell is thus broken, and she is finally able to return to the human world with her parents.

Spirited Away can be read as a critique of modern materialism and overconsumption, where pollution emerges as a key symptom of these processes. In the film, it is literalized through the polluted river spirit, whose grotesque body renders visible the consequences of human environmental damage: as *Chihiro* cleanses it, she not only removes the accumulated waste and restores it to its natural state but also reveals the extent to which nature has been corrupted. This scene thus symbolizes ecological recovery, while simultaneously suggesting that pollution operates not only on an environmental level but also on moral and cultural ones: it becomes a sign of the disrupted relationship between humans and nature under capitalism and is linked to greed and excessive consumption. Although pollution is framed as a consequence of modernization and a warning of future ecological crisis, the film also suggests the possibility of partial restoration through care and ethical action. This reflection is extended through the idea that identity itself is embedded in nature and that its destruction entails a corresponding loss of the self: this is exemplified by *Haku*, whose loss of name is not just a narrative device but rather signifies a deeper erasure of identity caused by urbanization and environmental destruction. His very own existence depends on being remembered and his connection to a specific natural site, the river: his identity is thus presented as relational to the environment and fragile, as it can easily be erased through processes of modernization but can be recovered through memory and recognition (Mandal, 2022, pp. 95-97).

On the other hand, *Kaonashi* represents the opposite dynamic: not the loss of an original identity but the absence of a stable one altogether. The spirit's sense of self is entirely shaped by external consumption, as he absorbs others both metaphorically and literally, imitates their behavior and, being voiceless and therefore incapable to articulate his desires or needs, uses gold to gain validation. He thus becomes a symbol for consumer capitalism and endless accumulation without meaning, his identity empty and constructed through desire and excess, which is only later stabilized through *Chihiro*'s intervention. A similar critique extends to her parents, whose transformation into pigs reflects their submission to material excess: their

reliance on consumption, suggested through their use of credit cards and their immediate indulgence in the abandoned buffet, positions them within a system driven by desire and instant gratification, where their transformation can be read as an explicit reference to anti-capitalist discourses that associate greed with dehumanization. *Chihiro* herself is not entirely exempt from this critique: her initial apathy and detachment suggest a disconnection from her surroundings; however, as a round character, she undergoes a process of maturation and ultimately assumes the role of mediator. Through her actions, she restores *Haku*'s identity, resists *Kaonashi*'s logic of excess and ultimately saves her parents from their condition; her journey thus becomes one of ethical development and restoration, offering a more hopeful perspective associated with younger generations (Mandal, 2022, pp. 97-99).





Figure 5.4. *Kaonashi* offering gold to *Chihiro* (on the top) and her parents transformed into pigs (on the bottom), illustrating the film’s critique of excessive consumerism and the moral consequences of unchecked desire and greed.

Spirited Away can be read as a cultural flagship film of Japan, intended to “inform children of the richness of our traditions”, as stated by Miyazaki (Quirk, 2021, p. 20). Much like *Chihiro* at the beginning of the film, younger Japanese generations are increasingly growing up without direct engagement with traditional beliefs and practices, a condition partly linked to the reduced accessibility of Shinto spaces in contemporary society. As the family approaches the abandoned theme park, they encounter symbolic markers such as the *torii* gate and the *dōsojin* guarding the tunnel, yet the explanations they are able to provide to their daughter remain superficial. In this sense, *Chihiro* initially embodies a form of both institutional and generational secularization, and it is only through her journey, mediated by encounters with *kami* within the spirit realm, that she gradually acquires a deeper understanding of Shinto cosmology (Quirk, 2021, pp. 21; 29).

Spirited Away constructs a layered cultural space that brings together elements of Japanese folklore, including *kami* and *yōkai*, with Shinto beliefs and modern capitalist logics of consumption and exploitation, creating as a result a complex narrative environment in which tradition and modernity coexist in tension rather than harmony. Unlike *My Neighbor Totoro*, which presents a more transparent and nostalgic image of Japan, *Spirited Away* foregrounds opacity and demands a more active engagement with culturally specific symbols. This ethical

and cultural critique is enabled by the film's liminal structure, which operates not merely as a spatial condition but as a narrative strategy that exposes the contradictions of modern Japan, defamiliarizes capitalist practices and opens up space for moral reflection. *Spirited Away* is structured around thresholds and states of in-betweenness, beginning with the tunnel that functions as a passage in between worlds. According to Shinto beliefs, the boundaries between the sacred and the profane are inherently fluid; however, certain spaces and material objects associated with purity and nature allow for a more visible manifestation of spiritual presence.

The central site of the narrative is the *sentō*, the bathhouse where *Chihiro* is compelled to live and work. In Japanese culture, bathing is not merely a hygienic practice but a ritual act linked to purification, preparing the body and spirit for contact with the sacred and restoring the unity of mind, body and heart, often conceptualized as *kokoro*; while bathhouses historically functioned as important communal spaces, their relevance has declined with urbanization. In the film, the architectural design of the *sentō* incorporates several elements from the Meiji and Tokugawa periods alongside influences from Chinese and European styles, creating a hybrid aesthetic that reflects the entanglement of tradition and global modernity. This visual hybridity becomes a metaphor for the corruption of the spiritual realm under contemporary conditions, a process further embodied in *Yubaba's* excessively ornate and ostentatious office, which materializes the excesses of capitalist greed (Quirk, 2021, pp. 23-26). The bathhouse thus emerges as a space in which ritual, labor and commerce intersect: far from being a purely fantastical domain, it mirrors human systems of hierarchy and capitalist production, where spirits are simultaneously sacred entities and commodified clients.



Figure 5.5. Visual representations of the bathhouse in *Spirited Away*, highlighting its role as a liminal space where tradition, spirituality and capitalist labor and exploitation intersect.

Liminality also operates at the level of identity and interpersonal relations. The loss of one's name, as experienced by *Haku* and the bathhouse workers, produces a destabilization of the self that necessitates transformation and reconstitution. For *Chihiro*, who is positioned between childhood and adolescence, this condition becomes the basis of a coming-of-age trajectory in which she learns not to escape liminality and uncertainty but to navigate it. As the narrative progresses, she gradually embodies Shinto principles, purifying her *kokoro* and, in turn, influencing the environment around her. This ethical transformation enables her to assist *Haku* in reconnecting with his original identity and restoring his unity of mind, body and spirit, and in response he expresses the intention to disrupt the cycle of greed and corruption that governs the bathhouse, suggesting the possibility of reorienting it toward a more balanced and ethically grounded order (Quirk, 2021, pp. 31-32).

Beyond its critique of secularization and the erosion of Japanese cultural traditions under the pressures of capitalism and environmental degradation, *Spirited Away* also deals with themes that resonate with the historical context of female labor and prostitution. The *kami* world structured around the bathhouse recalls the *onsen* culture of the Edo period (1603-1868), where such establishments were often frequented by male clientele who, in some cases, also sought sexual services from female workers. Within the film, a similar gendered division is evident: the clients are predominantly male, while the workers are mostly women, with the few male figures occupying supervisory or auxiliary roles. All forms of service appear to be commodified and purchasable, as further demonstrated by *Kaonashi*, who is able to obtain anything he desires through the use of gold. *Chihiro*'s rejection of the spirit's gifts represents an assertion of agency within a structure that limits individual autonomy, and it is met with surprise precisely because such expressions of free will were not expected or encouraged. Further parallels can be identified in the symbolic loss of identity experienced by the workers, where *Chihiro*'s renaming as *Sen* echoes historical practices associated with prostitution, in which women would adopt new names in order to conceal their identities and protect their families from social stigma; moreover, the girl herself becomes a form of currency through which her parents' debt is effectively repaid, suggesting a commodification of both labor and one's body.

This thematic concern is not isolated within *Studio Ghibli*'s filmography: a similar engagement with the social conditions of marginalized women can be found in *Princess Mononoke*, where the women of *Iron Town* are former sex workers who have been integrated into a new social structure under the leadership of *Lady Eboshi*. In *Spirited Away*, however, *Chihiro*'s trajectory differs: instead of being "rescued" by an external figure, she asserts her autonomy through refusal and perseverance, and although her forced labor could be interpreted as a source of shame, the film reframes it as a site of growth and self-determination, allowing her to ultimately reclaim control over her identity (Arnaldi, 2020, pp. 145-147).

Although deeply rooted in Japanese cultural traditions and symbolic systems, *Spirited Away* strongly resonated with global audiences, where its success lies in its ability to anchor culturally specific elements within universally recognizable emotional

experiences, including fear, loss, growth and attachment. Liminality plays a central role in this process, offering a narrative framework that makes *Chihiro*'s journey both culturally grounded and at the same time relatable for transnational audiences. In this way, the film bridges cultural differences without erasing them, allowing viewers to engage with unfamiliar contexts through shared human experiences. This balance between specificity and accessibility, which proved that cultural complexity and global circulation are not mutually exclusive but can instead operate in tandem, was key to its international success, marked by the *Academy Award for Best Animated Feature* in 2003, which ultimately contributed to establishing *Studio Ghibli* as a major transnational cultural institution beyond the boundaries of anime and Japanese cinema (Arnaldi, 2020, p. 148).

5.4 From representation to ecosystem: *Studio Ghibli* as a controlled transmedia brand

Studio Ghibli occupies a distinctive position in relation to the Japanese media mix model, which is typically oriented toward the development of profitable, cross-platform franchises. In contrast to industry trends that prioritize extensive merchandising and transmedia expansion, the studio has historically limited its engagement with such practices, particularly in international markets: Miyazaki has been openly critical of materialism and the anime industry, even distancing himself from the term in favor of “animation”, a distinction that reflects his commitment to artistic, environmental and ethical values, as well as his critique of production models centered on quantity over quality. This position is further exemplified by the studio's decision to retain control over merchandising rights, refusing to grant them to *Disney* despite its role in international distribution: as a result, a relative “vacuum of official products” has emerged outside Japan (Rendell, 2018, pp. 94-95).

Nonetheless, *Studio Ghibli* cannot be considered entirely detached from transmedia practices: within Japan, it operates in fact as a form of mainstream popular culture, with its films generating strong forms of character recognition and aesthetic appeal that lend themselves to commodification. However, this potential is deliberately managed through a selective and carefully controlled merchandising strategy: official products are primarily distributed through specialized retail spaces such as *Donguri Republic* stores, which usually

display a *Totoro* installation at the entrance and offer a curated range of *kawaii* items including plush toys, stationery and home goods in with the studio's aesthetics of softness and emphasis on craftsmanship. In addition to these permanent retail chains, *Studio Ghibli* has engaged in a limited number of high-profile collaborations with brands such as *Uniqlo* and *Loewe*, which reinterpret the studio's imagery into specific clothing lines, accessories and designs and prioritize quality and artistic reinterpretation over mass-market saturation (De Feo, 2024). As a result, unlike the conventional media mix model, *Ghibli's* merchandising does not function as a ubiquitous system but rather as a more restrained and curated extension of the studio's brand, reinforcing its position between popular culture and artistic prestige. Characters such as *Totoro* function as key branding actors, who contribute to translating narratives and imageries into globally recognizable symbols that circulate across both official merchandise and broader cultural contexts.

However, the relative scarcity and high cost of official merchandise, particularly for international audiences, have encouraged alternative forms of engagement: fans frequently produce their own *Ghibli*-inspired object, including clothing, illustrations and decorations, which are then circulated through online platforms. In this context, fan crafting is not a mere substitute for consumption but rather a participatory and expressive practice through which audiences articulate personal attachment and identification. In fact, these fan-produced artifacts function as paratextual extensions of the films, that are valued more for the emotional investment and authenticity they embody than for their accuracy. *Ghibli* fans thus generate a form of "media mix from below", where grassroots creative practices reinterpret and compensate for the limited availability of official merchandise (Rendell, 2018, pp. 95-104).

A further dimension of *Studio Ghibli's* transmedia ecosystem is represented by its carefully curated physical spaces and experiential domains. The *Ghibli Museum*, opened in 2001 in the Mitaka suburb, west of Tokyo, offers an immersive environment designed to celebrate the studio's artistic practices and imaginative worlds. The museum experience is intentionally non-linear, encouraging exploration and discovery rather than directing visitors along a fixed path. Through a combination of interactive exhibits, staircases that lead to dead-ends, bridges, themed spaces including a rooftop garden, cafés, a bookstore

and a small cinema screening exclusive short films, the museum invites visitors to “Get lost together”. It presents animation as a creative and handcrafted process comparable to painting or cinema rather than as a purely commercial product, an approach that aligns with the studio’s broader aesthetic philosophy and further reinforce *Studio Ghibli*’s identity as artistically prestigious and culturally valuable (Denison, 2023, pp. 128-133).





Figure 5.6. Interior and exterior spaces of the *Ghibli Museum*, illustrating its whimsical exhibitions and non-linear architecture that encourage immersion and engagement over conventional forms of commercial consumption.

At the same time, the museum carefully regulates access and experience to limit commodification: tickets must be booked in advance and photography inside is restricted, reinforcing the idea that the space is intended to be experienced rather than consumed or reproduced (Bricker, 2024). Although the museum also includes a gift shop offering exclusive merchandise, it remains secondary to the overall curatorial logic; the museum functions not only as a cultural and tourist site, but also as a strategic extension of the studio's brand that offers an immersive and curated alternative to commercial anime consumption while still operating within capitalism. However, for international fans, visiting the museum often requires significant economic and geographic investment, which in turn transforms the site into a form of cultural pilgrimage. From the late 2000s onward, *Studio Ghibli* has also been the subject of major exhibitions, both in Japan and internationally, further reinforcing its status as a legitimate artistic institution (Denison, 2023, pp. 133-138).

The logic of spatial immersion is further developed by the *Ghibli Park*, opened in 2022 in Nagakute City, in the Aichi prefecture. Unlike conventional theme parks centered on

spectacle and high-intensity attractions, this park, much like the museum, prioritizes environmental immersion and narrative exploration: its spaces recreate settings from the studio's films, such as the house from *My Neighbor Totoro*, the *Ainu* village featured in *Princess Mononoke* and an almost replica of the moving castle from *Howl's Moving Castle* (ハウルの動く城, *Hauru no Ugoku Shiro*, 2004), encouraging visitors to engage with the worlds of *Ghibli* through a dynamic exploration of the detailed environment. In this sense, the park extends the studio's artistic exhibition practices and spatialization of narrative worlds, while maintaining a relatively restrained emphasis on character-based merchandising (Denison, 2023, p. 141).



Figure 5.7. Aerial view of the *Ghibli Park* in Nagakute City.

5.5 *Studio Ghibli* and nation branding: constructing a global Japan

The global popularity of anime, and particularly the films produced by *Studio Ghibli*, extends beyond media consumption and commercial circulation, having a tangible impact on the tertiary sector and most notably tourism. One of the most significant outcomes of this process is the phenomenon known as “anime pilgrimage” (聖地巡礼, *seichi junrei*), a form of media-induced tourism in which fans visit real-world locations that appear in or inspired their favorite animated works. As discussed in the previous chapters, Japanese animators and *mangaka* frequently draw inspiration from existing landscapes, urban settings and culturally significant sites: as a result, viewers are able to recognize these places and seek them out in reality, translating mediated spectatorship into a physical experience. Anime pilgrimage enables fans to emotionally connect with the places they have only seen on screen, turning fictional narratives and imaginaries into lived experiences. This phenomenon has also contributed to the growing popularity of specific destinations, both within Japan and internationally: for instance, Yakushima, one of Japan’s earliest *UNESCO World Heritage* natural sites and a key source of inspiration for *Princess Mononoke*, has become a popular destination for hiking among anime fans; similarly, Jiufen, often associated with the lantern-lit streets and atmosphere of *Spirited Away*, and the Sekizenkan Ryokan, a historic hot spring inn believed to have influenced the film’s bathhouse setting, attract visitors seeking to immerse themselves in environments reminiscent of the film. This trend is not limited to *Studio Ghibli*: for example, the red staircase featured in *Your Name* (君の名は, *Kimi no Na wa*) has become an iconic site where fans and couples recreate scenes from the film, as well as visiting the nearby shrine (Shadaan, 2024, pp. 2117-2118).

From an economic perspective, anime pilgrimage has contributed to the revitalization of regional tourism, particularly in locations that were previously marginal or relatively unknown. At the same time, it plays a crucial role in shaping Japan’s global image: by encouraging international audiences to travel and engage directly with these physical places, anime functions as a cultural mediator and a bridge between fiction and reality, turning cultural and mediatic consumption into physical mobility. In this sense, anime pilgrimage can be understood as an informal yet highly effective mechanism of soft power,

in which Japan's cultural influence spreads through popular media that lead to emotional attachment and a desire for mobility. As a result, the international recognition of *Studio Ghibli* and other anime productions is not limited to film distribution but also extends into spatial practices that contribute to constructing an image of Japan as an attractive and culturally rich tourist destination (Shadaan, 2024, pp. 2118-2119).

Another relevant cultural dimension that has a direct impact on Japan's image on a global level is food culture and its representation in anime, where particular attention is paid to visual detail and sensory richness. Whether depicting fresh vegetables, *bentō* boxes, pancakes, *rāmen* or simple dishes such as scrambled eggs, animated food is often rendered with remarkable care and emphasis: movements associated with cooking and eating are frequently exaggerated, imbuing even ordinary meals with significance that extends beyond mere preparation and consumption. Through this process, food is transformed into a ritualized practice that conveys specific cultural and emotional meanings. By combining detailed textures with vibrant and saturated colors, these representations stimulate the viewer's senses and enhance the appeal of the depicted dishes. In this context, *Studio Ghibli* occupies a particularly significant position: the iconic meals featured in its films contribute to the construction of warm, familiar and often idyllic atmospheres, where food functions not only as nourishment but also evokes comfort, care and connection. The dishes portrayed, many of which are rooted in Japanese culinary traditions, are frequently romanticized to encourage viewers to develop a sense of desire and curiosity toward their food culture (Weiler, 2025). In some cases, this engagement extends beyond the screen and translates into forms of gastronomic tourism, whereby audiences seek to experience in reality the meals they have encountered through animation. Similarly to anime pilgrimage, this practice reflects the capacity of animated texts to generate embodied forms of cultural consumption, further reinforcing Japan's global cultural appeal.

Taken together, phenomena such as anime pilgrimage and gastronomic tourism demonstrate how animated texts extend beyond the screen, generating forms of engagement that are both physical and sensory; however, their appeal does not depend only on narrative and visual recognition, but also on the way Japan is imagined and experienced through these texts. In the case of *Studio Ghibli*, this framework is often described as a distinctive "Ghibli

aesthetic”: through its emphasis on folklore, recurrent references to Shinto spirituality, the desire for a renewed connection with nature and traditions and nostalgia for a pre-industrial past, the studio constructs a carefully curated image of Japan, which is further shaped by the romanticization of everyday life and by a particular focus on childhood and adolescence as privileged moments of emotional authenticity (Ilfie, 2024). The importance of tradition is not only articulated at the level of narrative content, but also through aesthetic and production choices: *Studio Ghibli*’s well-known preference for hand-drawn animation and craftsmanship reinforces the perception of its films as authentic, artisanal and distinct from more standardized forms of animation, which contributes to positioning *Ghibli*’s works as culturally valuable and difficult to replicate.

Studio Ghibli can thus be understood as a cultural ambassador for Japan that contributes to processes of nation branding: by presenting an idealized and emotionally resonant vision of *Japaneseness*, understood as Japanese life, identity, cultural heritage and landscapes as presented by animated media, the studio contributes to making it at once culturally specific and globally accessible and desirable, thus shaping the way Japan is perceived and experienced by international audiences and reinforcing its position within global cultural flows. However, the enduring power of *Studio Ghibli*’s films lies in their ability to evoke a deeply personal and emotional response. *Ghibli*’s worlds are to be felt, they invite slowness and a renewed sensitivity toward nature and human connections, reminding viewers of the beauty embedded in the ordinary little moments. In a global context increasingly defined by speed and consumption, these films offer us a form of quiet refuge and a space for contemplation, as well as an invitation to rediscover a sense of wonder and belonging. It is perhaps in the capacity to comfort and make us feel deeply that *Studio Ghibli*’s global impact and significance most profoundly reside.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined anime as a complex cultural and industrial phenomenon situated at the intersection of soft power, nation branding processes and global media systems. Through a comparative analysis of three case studies, respectively *Pokémon*, *Demon Slayer* and *Studio Ghibli*, this research has demonstrated how anime contributes to the global circulation of Japanese cultural repertoires and traditions, while simultaneously being shaped by transnational industrial strategies, platform affordances and audience engagement.

When considered through the analytical framework adopted in this study, the three case studies reveal both convergences and divergences in the ways anime function as vehicles for the dissemination of soft power. *Pokémon*, initially conceived as a video game before expanding into anime, feature films, manga, mobile experience and physical spaces, is emblematic of a long-running transmedia franchise, characterized by modular characters that function simultaneously as narrative figures, collectible commodities and visual symbols that can be easily reproduced and recognized across media formats and consumer products. The relevance of *kawaii* aesthetics and the emotional attachment generated through the franchise, combined with processes of reframing and *deodorization* aimed at increasing accessibility, are fundamental to its longevity and popularity within transnational audiences. *Pokémon*'s form of cultural soft power is therefore rooted in a pop and affect-driven model that operates primarily through emotional engagement, consumption and everyday integration, promoting an image of Japan that is playful, approachable and widely marketable, while still offering an insight into a world of fantastical creatures and extraordinary adventures that have shaped the childhood and media imagination of generations worldwide.

Demon Slayer, by contrast, represents a more recent configuration shaped by the phenomenon of platform convergence, in which streaming services, cinematic releases and forms of event-based distribution reconfigure both the way narratives are structured and the modes through which audiences access and engage with content, thereby transforming both production and reception. Unlike the processes of *deodorization* that characterized

Pokémon's global circulation, *Demon Slayer's* international success demonstrates how cultural specificity, articulated through historical settings and the adaptation of Japanese folklore, can be effectively mobilized without extensive standardization. In this sense, *Demon Slayer's* form of cultural soft power is based on a hybrid model that combines spectacle with a dramatized reinterpretation of national heritage and traditions, transforming them into forms of cultural capital and offering audiences an experience of *Japaneseness* that has increasingly become part of a shared repertoire of transnational popular culture.

Studio Ghibli, on the other hand, represents a distinct and hybrid model grounded in artistic authorship and cultural prestige that privileges quality and craftsmanship over continuous production. The emphasis on hand-drawn animation not only contributes to the studio's distinctiveness but also participates in constructing an image of Japan as timeless, authentic and deeply connected to a sense of nostalgia for simpler times. *My Neighbor Totoro* presents an accessible and reassuring representation of Japan: positioned between the memory of pre-war traditions and the economic reconstruction of the postwar period, the film presents contemporary elements while simultaneously offering a romanticized and nostalgic portrayal of rural life, distant from the problems associated with urbanization. Ethical reflection also plays a crucial role in *Spirited Away*, which emerges as a critique of materialism, capitalist greed and environmental pollution as consequences of modernization and signs of a disrupted relationship between humans and nature; nevertheless, the film suggests the possibility of reconciliation through care, empathy and a renewed respect for nature and spirituality. *Studio Ghibli's* form of cultural soft power is therefore rooted in a heritage-oriented model based on authenticity and craftsmanship, deeply intertwined with nation branding processes in which the portrayal of an idealized and emotionally resonant image of *Japaneseness* contributes to shaping the way Japan is perceived by transnational audiences.

When these three case studies are considered together, it becomes evident that soft power is not transmitted in a linear or controlled manner, but is instead continuously shaped by textual features, industrial organization processes and the practices enacted by audiences and consumers. The different models identified throughout this thesis coexist within a broader ecosystem characterized by transmedia storytelling strategies, platform convergence,

commodification, licensing agreements and cross-media expansion, in which multiple representations of the “Japan brand” are produced, negotiated and consumed. In this context, *Japaneseness* itself becomes a flexible and strategically mediated cultural construct, continuously reworked and adapted in order to resonate with transnational audiences while still maintaining a recognizable cultural identity. At the same time, the global circulation of anime is inevitably marked by contradictions and limitations: processes of adaptation and commodification may lead to the oversimplification or stereotyping of cultural elements and discourses, thereby generating a sometimes reductive image of Japan, as well as tensions when reinterpreted cultural symbols become detached from their original meanings and contexts. The increasing integration of anime within global capitalist systems also raises questions about the balance between preservation and valorization of Japanese cultural heritage and its commercial exploitation, as well as the potential risks associated with excessive production and market saturation.

While this thesis has sought to provide a comprehensive analysis of anime as a cultural and industrial phenomenon, it is not without limitations. The scope of the study is restricted by language barriers, the reliance on available secondary sources, including blogs, reviews, videos and interviews, and the focus on globally successful franchises, which may not fully represent the diversity and complexity of the anime industry or the plurality of audience experiences. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating empirical data collection methods, such as surveys and questionnaires aimed at comparing perceptions of Japan among audiences who consume anime and those who do not, in order to better assess the extent to which anime consumption influences the country’s image on a global scale. Additionally, further research could explore emerging developments within the industry, including the role of new distribution platforms, the impact of artificial intelligence on animation production and the growing relevance of global co-productions, such as the recent strategic partnership signed between *Netflix* and studio *MAPPA*.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that anime should not be understood simply as a cultural export, but rather as a dynamic system in which cultural narratives and meanings, industrial strategies and fan practices continuously intersect and reshape one another. The power of anime lies precisely in its ability to operate across these dimensions simultaneously, both

influencing and being influenced by them, thus contributing to the reconfiguration of cultural soft power within the contemporary media landscape, where influence is no longer exercised solely through institutional channels, but also through the circulation of stories, imaginaries and characters across global networks. Far from remaining a marginal form of entertainment, anime has increasingly become a central actor in cultural globalization, a medium capable of connecting audiences across geographical, linguistic and cultural boundaries while preserving forms of cultural specificity and national identity. Their potential goes beyond popular culture itself and lies in the capacity not merely to entertain, but to foster connections and emotional experiences capable of bringing together individuals from profoundly different social and cultural backgrounds. Despite the persistence of prejudices that continue to associate animation primarily with children's entertainment, the global success and cultural impact of anime demonstrate their capacity to engage with complex themes, articulate meaningful social and ethical reflections and portray experiences that are fundamentally human. Anime *deserve* to be recognized not as a niche or secondary form of entertainment, but as a legitimate artistic and communicative medium capable of shaping contemporary discourses and offering audiences new ways of understanding both themselves and others.

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