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Diego Labra & Gerardo Del Vigo

From Analog to Digital, Between Love and Hate

The Birth of Manganime Fandom and Industry in Argentina

ABSTRACT

In the early 1990s in Argentina, comic book fandom entered a new phase when anime hit cable TV, changing the media landscape, reception practices, and popular culture. The ensuing development of a local industry around Japanese pop culture was then shaped by an antagonistic relationship between the old and the new, as well as by a series of broader transformations that are characteristic of late capitalism: deterritorialization, digitalization, transmediatization, and customization of experiences.

In this paper, we approach the case threefold: First, on the publishing side, a fixed exchange rate regime with the USD ushered both local production's terminal crisis and the birth of a specialized retail circuit based on imports from Spain, Mexico, and the United States, mostly superhero and Japanese comics. The dominance of this second hand glocalization ended when a local upstart, Ivrea, made headway at the turn of the century with a heavily glocalized manga line that influenced the development of local fandom. Secondly, said fandom's performativity at media industry events: The rise of big events such as Fantabaires (1996-2001) acted as the backdrop to a clash between the old guard of comics fans and the newcomer otaku. The latter counted many women among them, thanks to fan practices such as cosplay, which brought a change into stereotypically masculine socialization spaces. After Argentina's economic collapse in 2001, manganime events became smaller and more frequent, complemented by a nascent fan-made merchandising economy. The third crucial factor is online sociability. With the spread of Internet access throughout the 2000s, cable TV's broadcasting logic yielded to post-broadcasting. The fandom's socialization practices shifted from live events like conventions to forums and social networks, super-places that allowed the development of new sex-affective subjectivities. Along with previous fan practices, new digital materialities (fan art, fan fiction) generated means of prosumption and sociability that continued to blur the line between cultural imports and local production.

KEYWORDS

manga, anime, fandom, sociability

AUTHORS

Diego Labra holds a PhD in Social Sciences from Universidad Nacional de La Plata and is a Georg Forster postdoctoral fellow with the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung, working at the Institut für Romanistik in both Universität Hamburg and Universität Rostock. He currently awaits to defend his thesis on the glocalization of manga in Argentina to opt for a PhD in Interdisciplinary Studies of Europe and Latin America offered in tandem by Universidad Nacional de La Plata and Universität Rostock. His areas of expertise are cultural studies, print history and comic studies. He also participates in various media outlets, such as the digital magazine Panamá and the comics podcast La Batea.
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0813-695X

Gerardo Ariel Del Vigo holds a master's degree in Communication and Culture from Universidad de Buenos Aires and is currently a professor of Political discourse analysis for the Political Science degree at the same university. His subject of research includes cultural studies, virtual ethnography, sociolinguistics, manga and anime studies, fan studies and postmodernism. He also contributed to several peer-reviewed publications.
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8302-9807

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The Birth of Manganime Fandom and Industry in Argentina

Introduction

In the early 1990s, Argentine comics fandom took shape mostly around American superheroes in their many multimedia incarnations. The creation of a comic shop circuit and the emergence of mass fandom events were both cause and effect of this (cf. Labra 2023). When anime gained immense popularity due to its cable television broadcast, the media landscape, reception practices, and popular culture in general changed significantly. The ensuing development of a local industry around Japanese pop culture was shaped by an antagonistic relationship between the old and the new, as well as by a series of broader transformations characteristic of late capitalism: deterritorialization, digitalization, transmediatization, and customization of experiences.

In this paper, we approach the emergence of Argentine otaku culture in three ways: first, we focus on publishing. A fixed exchange rate regime with the USD heralded both the final crisis of local production and the birth of the aforementioned specialized retail circuit based on imports from Spain, Mexico, and the United States, mostly superhero and Japanese comics. The dominance of this second hand glocalization ended at the turn of the century when the local upstart Ivrea emerged with a heavily glocalized manga line that strongly influenced local fandom.

Second, we analyze the performativity of said fandom at media industry events. Fantabaires, held annually from 1996 to 2001, served as the backdrop to a clash between the old guard of comic fans and the newcomers, the otaku. The latter included women, thanks to fan practices such as cosplay, which brought change to typically masculine social spaces. After Argentina's economic collapse, manga events became smaller and more frequent, complemented by a nascent fan-made merchandising economy.

Finally, we take the transition to online sociability into consideration. With the proliferation of Internet access over the last few years, the broadcasting logic of cable television gave way to post-broadcasting. Socialization practice shifted from get-togethers in conventions to forums and social networks, super-places that allowed the development of new sex-affective subjectivities, along with earlier fan practices, new digital materialities (fan art, fan fiction) generated means of prosumption and sociability that further blurred the line between cultural imports and local production.

To advance with this reconstruction, we resorted to a wide range of primary sources that, as the title indicates, go from the analog (specialized print magazines, mass press) to the digital (ethnography of online sociability spaces). Said corpus is then questioned through an eclectic conceptual framework, drawing from manga studies as well as from sociology and fan studies, all in service of painting a detailed picture of how manganime fandom emerged in Argentina.

It all started on paper: Early otaku sociability on specialized publications

Unsold copies of the Spanish edition of *Akira* (1982-1990) were sold on Argentine newsstands in 1990. The pioneering local publication *Comic Magazine* (1989-1991) announced on its cover: 'Manga has arrived!!'[1] Thanks to the neoliberal economic policies of Carlos Menem's government, which dismantled tariff barriers and fixed the parity of the Argentine peso to USD (cf. Belini/Korol 2012), the following decade was characterized by cheap print imports from Mexico and Spain like this one, feeding a nascent circuit of comic shops in detriment of local comic publishers. Manga and magazines about Japanese pop culture were well represented among the imports. The editor of *Comic Magazine*, Javier Doeyo, launched the comic anthology *Cóctel* (1991-1993), which attempted to seduce *Akira* enthusiasts by including Masaomi Kanzaki's cyberpunk manga *Xenon* in its pages. The novelty of Japanese comics in Argentina was evidenced by the fact that it was accompanied by an explanatory prologue entitled "What is manga?" (Accorsi 1991, p.24).

While the 'Dragon and Dazzle' model conceived by Marco Pellitteri (2010) for the European case presents different phases of pull and push in Japanese-Western cultural commercial relations, the aforementioned text by Accorsi hints that, as a third node appears in the circulation, we need to rethink the model. *Xenon*'s prologue describes manga as a cinematic, violent, post-nuclear, and almost exclusively science fiction comic, which is a construct imported from the United States as the copies of the book used by Doeyo and Accorsi to bootleg the Japanese comic into *Cóctel*. Furthermore, this discourse is evidence of what we call second hand glocalization. In countries on the periphery of the publishing world, like Argentina, Japanese products arrive through the symbolic and material mediation of agents in better-positioned, wealthier publishing markets, for example, Spanish editions of *Akira* or even an American definition of what manga is.

Xenon's truncated run is now largely forgotten by the fandom, but its legacy endures as *Cóctel* not only published this foundational text. The magazine provided one of the first venues for otaku sociability to be expressed in print, a form of communication practiced in the scarcity days of the early 1990s both to meet like-minded people and as a means to access manganime. For example, a group calling themselves Los maestros de la Robotecnia (in reference to *Robotech* [1985]) left a message for reader Patricio Land offering him a "VHS copy of Akira in Japanese" (Correo de lectores 1991, p.56). An exchange that, unbeknownst to them, would spark the creation of the first Argentine fanzine dedicated exclusively to manga and anime.

RAN (1993-1999) was conceived by Land, who combined his childhood taste for spending "leisure hours [...] making 'magazines'" (Oubiña Castro 2015) with a fondness for Japanese animation born out of the 'impact' that *Robotech* had on him. In the beginning, the DIY publication consisted of black and white folded photocopies and was distributed with erratic periodicity. Land and the "big Miyazaki fan" (Oubiña Castro 2015) Marcelo Romero wrote up features on different anime and manga, while Li Chien Chuan, a "*Dragon Ball* and *Gundam* enthusiast" (Oubiña Castro 2015), who worked in the specialized bookstore Rayo Rojo, translated interviews and other material from Chinese magazines. Continuing the bootleg trend started by *Cóctel*, *RAN* included excerpts from manga like Masakazu Katsura's *Video Girl Ai* (1989-1992), translated and lettered by Li. Twelve issues were published between 1993 and 1998. Starting with its thirteenth issue, the publication entered a transformation

1 All translations from Spanish are provided by the authors.

into a mass-circulation magazine that would end, paradoxically, with its disappearance in 1999 (cf. Oubiña Castro 2015).

Reading *RAN* conferred a certain amount of symbolic capital, certifying the reader as an early adopter who watched anime and read manga before it was mainstream. In a text published years later by the dean of Argentine specialized comics magazines, *Comiqueando* (1994-2001), former *RAN* contributors Daniel Acosta and Mariela Carril offered a portrait of these early fans, contrasting them with the 15- to 17-year-old newcomers who discovered manganime thanks to cable TV:

> They think they are great connoisseurs because they know *Knights of the Zodiac*'s, *Sailor Moon*'s, or *Dragon Ball*'s stories and have an inkling about a few current anime series. But those younglings did not live at the beginning of all this in Argentina when there was NO manga material in any comic book shop or book store, and despite everything, one kept looking, trying to find something. They just must turn on the TV; they don't know what it is to have to watch series or movies, find them by a fluke, in Japanese or with Chinese subtitles, and try to guess the plot if you hadn't a synopsis published in some foreign magazine. [...] Nowadays, the audience that made anime mainstream is made up of brats who were given it on a platter. (Acosta/Carril 1999, p.14)

In the text, the symbolic capital that comes with early adoption is given a palpable form as the effort involved in 'getting there before anyone else did.' This commitment, the work necessary to read manga and watch anime before it became widely accessible, is what separates, according to Acosta and Carril, (true) fans like them from 'brats who were given it on a platter.' It was precisely this effort, backed by their autobiography, that allowed *RAN* staff to present as qualified to make a "serious and informative" (Oubiña Castro 2015) publication. They asserted this position by presenting themselves as arbiters of good manganime taste. A critical exercise was carried out in hierarchical sections where popular series such as *Mazinger Z* (1972-1974), *Dragon Ball* (1984-1995), and *Sailor Moon* (1991-1997) were particular targets of their scorn. All of this was done tongue-in-cheek, as another distinctive feature of the fanzine was its self-deprecating tone, which set it apart from the solemnity with which comics, its readers, and their practices were presented in contemporary publications such as *Comiqueando*. This is a tone that, as observant readers noted, was developed and taken to another level by *Lazer* (1997-2008).

Though it would eventually become one of the most important manga publishers in the Spanish-speaking world, Ivrea began as a modest effort by Leandro Oberto and Pablo Ruiz, who used the proceeds from the sale of Oberto's comic shop, Genux, originally founded with his father (and with his father's money). As Oberto declared in his inaugural editorial, which serves as the publication's declaration of intent, *Lazer* aspired to be a "strange mutant spawn that [would] take you, month by month, through the most passionate parts of comics, Japanese animation, cult series", but also to talk about "life itself" (Oberto 1997a, p.2). Explicitly, the publication proposed its model reader as those "who record Sailor Moon at 1:30 in the morning, who visit comic shops in Venice, Paris or Bariloche; but who, despite everything, are not obsessed with" comics and "also like to go out" (Oberto 1997a, p.2). While *RAN* was a fanzine about manga with humor, Ivrea's magazine was presented as an entertaining magazine that happened to focus on comics and animation.

From the beginning, one of *Lazer*'s strengths was its fostering of fan interaction, with hundreds of readers writing each issue with a desire to be featured in the magazine's pages (cf. Del Vigo 2019).

Those who wrote did so to ask when the publication would feature their favorite series, to interact with their peers in a community articulated by a generous readers' mail section, and to be read by the editor himself. In short, they wrote in the hope of being read, of being seen. Bourdieu writes of "sincerity" in this sense as "one of the conditions of the symbolic efficacy" of an actor in a given field (Bourdieu 2010, p.188), and Oberto, who, in addition to directing the mail section was the sole contributor to the publication in its early days, embodied this publishing ethos with conviction. Like a contemporary influencer, he offered up his privacy in long editorials in which he poured out his opinions and experiences to gain the favor and trust of the readers. The magazine "was an expression of my own ego," he half-jokingly admitted in an interview with Juanito Say (2018).

Lazer also took full advantage of the "synergistic spontaneous" (Pellitteri 2010, p.374) relationship between television, press, and merchandise, deliberately placing the most successful anime on each cover. This relationship would be further underscored by Oberto's own fleeting stint on television as the host of *El Club del Anime* on the children's channel Magic Kids. Thanks to these strategies and good word of mouth, *Lazer*'s circulation increased steadily, breaking all sales expectations for a publication of its kind. According to Oberto, in less than three years, it reached 50,000 copies in the print run, of which 30,000 were "immediately sold" (El gurú del manga y el animé 2000). Those outstanding numbers, which multiplied tenfold its competitors' figures, attracted the attention of the national media, encouraged the appearance of dozens of 'clones,' and earned them the right to claim to be "the best-selling Spanish-language comics magazine in the world" (El gurú del manga y el animé 2000) in interviews and advertisements.

In summary, manganime arrived in Argentina at the beginning of the 1990s as a product of second hand glocalization in the form of magazines imported from Spain and discourses imported from the United States. Thanks in part to Ivrea and *Lazer*, homegrown glocalization without foreign intermediaries was a reality by the end of the same decade. Although anime played the part of a Trojan horse, print publications like *Cóctel*, *RAN*, and *Lazer* were instrumental not only in developing said homegrown glocalization but also in fostering a local otaku sociability through reader's mail sections. As could be seen in fan conventions and events of the time, the impact of this cultural phenomenon, now locally mediated, was a generational renewal in the fandom that had its most novel aspect in the unprecedented appearance of women.

Caballero paga, cosplayers gratis: Otaku sociability and specialized events

Leandro Oberto would elaborate on the sociology of Argentine comic events when he described what he perceived as the changing composition of the attendance to Fantabaires, the biggest comic convention held at that time in Buenos Aires. In 1996, when the inaugural event took place, the audience was "95% boys and quiet men who were fans of superheroes and European comics, most of whom dream of becoming cartoonists someday" (Oberto 2001, p.37). In 2000, he observed a definite turnover, as "most" attendants could be described as "teenagers and adults of the type who attend rock concerts," with "the number of women reaching 40% on several days" (Oberto 2001, p.37). For the owner of one of the most famous comic shops of the time, Camelot's Gerardo Busto, the change had been even more pronounced. According to him, "90% of [new] buyers get hooked through anime and buy manga," and "75% of the young people who read manga are girls who come to look for in those sexually ambiguous stories that society denies them to see" (Gabrielli 2022, p.46).

The appeal of shojo manga and its anime adaptations for American and European female audiences, as well as the impact that said new cohort of fans had on the fandom and industry, has already been well-researched (cf. Brienza 2011; Erik Soussi 2015). In the case of Argentina, girls and teenagers were drawn to these works for similar reasons, attracted by stories told by female authors with a female audience in mind, something quite rare in both the tradition of Argentine comics as well as in the American superhero's adventures imported from Spain and Mexico that filled contemporary comic shops. Elsewhere, they were particularly drawn to *Sailor Moon*, which offered in the Sailor Scouts a model of female heroism uncommon in children's television (cf. Álvarez Gandolfi 2014). Not coincidentally, Serena and her friends adorn the cover of *Lazer*'s inaugural issue, contributing to the strong female readership the magazine enjoyed since the beginning (cf. Oberto 1997b, p.26).

The influx of female fans represented a seismic transformation to the fandom and this became most evident at conventions and events. Days away from December 2001's political and social collapse, publishers Ivrea and A4, comic shop Entelequia, and distributor La Revistería organized in Buenos Aires Expocomics & Anime, an event conceived to replace Fantabaires after the previous year's fiasco (cf. Oberto 2001). In the name of "keeping in mind that the artistic part or the entertainment program has to be proportional to the interest of the public that comes and pays the entrance fee" (Accorsi 2001, p.12), mainstays such as panels by comic artists were eliminated in order to give more room to other kinds of activities—for example cosplay contests, an innovation that manganime fans introduced in the circuit years prior, as can be seen in the pictures, attracted young men and women alike (Fig.1).

Vértice, a publishing house focused on children's print products that had been among those that most benefited from the spontaneous synergy of manga and anime, launched a competitor to *Lazer: Otaku* (1999), later renamed *Otaku. Última Generación* (1999-2001). The magazine gave ample space to the coverage of otaku sociability to the extent that it incorporated a dedicated correspondent to its staff. If an important consequence of manganime going mainstream was the emergence of an associative socia-

Fig.1: Expocomics & Anime 2001 included in the "Nuke Data Disk 10" with *Nuke* 17 (Dec. 2001)

bility articulated in fan clubs, then *Otaku* set out to compete with other publications by presenting itself at the service of said sociability, featuring announcements of upcoming events and coverage of past ones. Fan club members were invited to publish op-eds where they could vent sectoral demands. For example, cosplayers protested that they were charged an entrance fee at Fantabaires 2000 when, in previous years, they enjoyed free admission (cf. Sivolella 2001, p.20).

Another chronicled event in *Otaku* was Manganimé II, a fan-organized gathering in a rental movie theater put together by *RAN* and *Comiqueando* veterans Carril and Acosta. The anime movie *Macross: Do You Remember Love?* (1984) was shown, and, more importantly in regards of this article, several manifestations of otaku prosumption were present. For example, Ignacio Rodríguez Minaverry's *El Regreso de Daigar* (1999) was presented by its author and editor, Andrés Accorsi, who dubbed the book "the first Argentine manga" (Rodríguez Minaverry 1999, p.26). Also present was the all-female collective Kurai Corp., "specialists in shojo manga" (Manganimé II 1999, p.6) and pioneers in the Argentine manga fanzine movement. Among its members were the already mentioned Mariela Carril, a key figure in Argentina's otaku culture (cf. Meo 2018), and Patricia Leonardo, who would be the star of Ivrea's now defunct locally-produced manga line years later. They are merely an example of the many women who, through manga and anime, started their own artistic careers, a phenomenon visible in the United States and, particularly, in Germany, too (cf. Erik Soussi 2015).

The same could be said of the event itself: After the 2001 crisis and the end of massive conventions like Fantabaires, these get-togethers organized by fans for fans where prosumers could not only socialize but also commercialize their artisanal and apocryphal merchandise became the main venue for the fandom's sociability.

The fandom's renewal was not only taking place along gender lines but also generational ones. That is why *RAN*'s editorial staff felt the "need" to organize screenings events dubbed *RAN* Parties to educate the "fandom" about "works" that they wanted to "comment on" but that "were absolutely unknown" to an attendance composed "mostly by preteens and *Lazer* readers" (Oubiña Castro 2015). Although said parties consisted of gathering "two or three TV sets and a VCR" to "show the movies and talk over it commenting on what they were about" because they could only attain copies in the original Japanese, with Chinese subtitles or none," people "would pile up at the door and on the stairs" (Oubiña Castro 2015), recalled Land. In doing so, those early adopters who had done the impossible to get a copy of the anime that accidentally arrived in the country, went from being just fans to consolidating their place as suppliers in a market of fans for fans (cf. Del Vigo 2022).

The introductory nature of anime for young audiences is well established in the bibliography (cf. Cobos 2010; Malone 2010; Pellitteri 2010). At the starting point of the sequence, is the act of watching *Sailor Moon* and *Dragon Ball* every day after school, then manga readership and, later, participation in otaku sociability. A distinction of the Argentine case is that the anime boom of the 1990s was not featured in public broadcasts but on cable TV. This is a clarification that comes with an asterisk, as the country presented one of the highest penetration rates for cable TV in the whole world (cf. Marino 2017). More precisely, it was the aforementioned local children's network Magic Kids that acted as anime's main vehicle, recurring to Japanese material to fill its 24/7 cycle once its former American purveyors of content, such as Viacom or Saban, decided to launch their own regional channels in Nickelodeon and Fox Kids.

The intent behind highlighting this causality is twofold. First, it enables us to underline the relation between the democratization of television throughout the 1960s and 1970s, which played a decisive

role in the end of comics as mass entertainment in Argentina (cf. Vazquez 2010). On closer examination, one can see that the relationship between cultural consumption in different media is not so linear. For example, as in the case of manganime, it was the immense impact of the 1966 *Batman* TV show, which premiered in Argentina almost simultaneously to the United States, that drove the sales of Mexican publisher Novaro's DC Comics line, imported to South America on the cheap, and made the Dark Knight the most popular superhero in the country (cf. Labra *forthcoming*). Going even further, those kids who grew up watching Adam West donning the cowl became the first generation of local *comiqueros*, such as Accorsi. What we are getting up to is that consumers of cultural products are—by definition—omnivorous. This is especially true for the case of Japanese pop culture fans.

Second, to link the fact that the on-ramp to manganime fandom was provided by children's channels, where anime was often edited and toned down, to the quick generational turnover within the fandom. A phenomenon that also sets a collision course in the arena of public opinion. Without parents noticing, these cultural products that, as we have reconstructed, were presented by the early 1990s specialized press as predominantly oriented to adult audiences, had sneaked in through supposedly kid-oriented channels into their living rooms. When *Lazer* announced that "for better or for worse, anime [was] definitely a massive product in Argentina" (cf. Lazer News 1999, p.3), it reproduced as proof newspaper clippings and magazine covers where the violent and/or sexual content of Japanese animation was the main point of contention. The alarm expressed in the press shortly began to have material effects, existing several instances where publications were taken out of circulation or forced to be sold in "black bags" with the legend "forbidden for children under 18" (Oberto 2000, p.30) by court order, including Ivrea's publication.

The clash between expectation and reality could be proposed as a feature of manganime global circulation. According to American journalist Fred Patten (2011), the first wave of Japanese animation that arrived in the United States in the 1960s was halted in part because "television moral standards for children's programming were becoming stricter, especially those against violence" (p.99). Similar objections have been identified in France, Italy, and Spain (cf. Malone 2010; Pellitteri 2010), and they help to understand why the popularity of anime expanded only in the 1990s, following the privatization of European television and, in Argentina, the expansion of cable TV.

This clash was in full display on *Otaku* 4 (Fig.2). The magazine's cover featured a partially bare-chested Mayumi Kino, the protagonist of *Blue Submarine No. 6* (1998-2000), as well as a scantily clad female character from *Bakuretsu Hunters* (1995). Conversely, the back cover featured an advertisement for Turbo Z, a 'programmable' toy car and motorcycle from local importer Juegos y Juguetes. As editor Pablo Bernard later acknowledged, teenagers and young adult readers were not pleased to find advertisements for children's products in the publication, and although he adopted a somewhat defensive position ("we have to make ends meet" [Bernard 1999, p.3]), he clearly took note of the complaint, as the situation was not repeated.

In this sense, identifying oneself as otaku was inextricably associated with growing up. Vanina Papalini (2006) points out that where other mass culture products seemed to have exhausted its inventive capacity and lost synchronicity with its audience, relegated to the nostalgia of those who are over 20, manganime was able to capture the contemporary subjectivity of children and teenagers (cf. Papalini 2006, p.24), and even to generate a sociability of its own (cf. Papalini 2006, p.45). In the difference that distinguished it from other cultural products, exacerbated by the antagonism with which we saw

Fig.2: Back and front cover of *Otaku* 4 (Jul. 1999)

mainstream media and even the preexisting comics fandom receive this novelty, young men and women found conditions conducive to the cultivation of a collective identity around this new consumption, which in their own narrative separated them from those who consider themselves as 'normal' or 'ordinary' mass culture consumers (cf. Álvarez Gandolfi 2016, p.32). Perhaps inevitably, a cultural product presented as different, exotic, and "outside the mainstream" (Napier 2001, p.249) generated a strong sense of identification.

In this regard, fandom events acted as a rite of passage. They are spaces where newcomers could novelly socialize outside family or school and meet people with shared interests. This generational relationship could also be a contested one. As Carril and Acosta's text cited in the previous section exemplifies, the contention about otaku credentials ran among several fronts, seniority being the main one. There is even an element of class differentiation, as Álvarez Gandolfi (2014; 2021) analyzes how, in contrast to already established, older otakus (middle-upper class from Buenos Aires), the new cohort of fans that came from the lower-class suburbs were mockingly called *otacos* by the first ones.

Being a cultural import that came from far away, it was not enough to know about manganime titles and authors' names. As affirmed by Bernard (2000b), it was also "essential to know about Japanese culture in order to get the most out of what you see," for these cultural products had their own "laws," reflecting a specific "culture, tradition and idiosyncrasy" (p.62) and therefore demanded knowledge and competencies to be able to truly enjoy them. A certain amount of passion was also necessary to be able to claim the title of otaku. As defined by a contemporary in the magazine *Nuke* (2000-2001):

> [I]n Japanese, [otaku] means a die-hard fan of something. An otaku is a person who, above all, has anime and manga between the eyes. The important thing is to enjoy anime without giving a damn about what others say. You shouldn't care if you don't go dancing like your friends, or if you think your life revolves only around anime and is empty. Just because you have something that you like and makes you want to live, you're not going to have an empty life. (Bombs Away 2001, p.43)

There are many similarities between this quote and Carril and Acosta's column. According to the reader, a genuine commitment to manganime is the most important requirement for otaku. So much so that the lack of it among the "brats" who now approach Japanese cultural products even endangers the "love of anime" (Bombs Away 2001, p.43) of true fans. The missive also expresses that those otakus find themselves in tension with the rest of society, which despises them, and before that, they lack the necessary skills to interact properly. A portrayal that could be identified as a feature of these kinds of fandom (cf. Jenkins 2008). In this sense, the recurring column "Crónicas de un otaku" (1999), which can be found in every issue of Vértice's magazine, satirized and at the same time reinforced this notion of fan's social ineptitude.

To summarize, now locally glocalized manga and anime were embraced by young viewers and readers, who joined the fandom and significantly changed its composition. Both in terms of gender, constituting a novel new proportion of women, and in terms of age. Nowhere was this (re)configuration of otaku sociability more visible than at conventions and events, where not only the contrasts of these changes could be appreciated but also the competition within the fandom, where seniority and even class came into play in defining hierarchies. All these aspects of otaku sociability (or lack thereof) and conflict along generational, gender, and class lines would fully come into focus as the interaction of the fandom moved from print and in-person to an increasingly digital environment.

Meet me online: Otaku sociability, from analog to digital

As the above-mentioned complex relationship between TV and comics might suggest, the transition from analog to digital is never a clear-cut process, and sociability within the fandom was not an exception. Agustín Gomez Sanz, one of *Lazer*'s key figures, attributes the publication's success to the fact that it acted as "the Internet before the Internet," containing "information, news, and novelties, everything we could [directly] translate from the incoming Japanese magazines and immediately put in print" (Say 2018). This analogy delimits *Lazer*'s achievements within a narrow time frame: they benefit greatly, both symbolically and economically, from a specific moment in which a print product could achieve success by exploiting the new possibilities of the Internet and, more broadly, the acceleration of global cultural commerce, but before the general public had direct access to said connectivity.

Even though online venues for information and conversation progressively rendered specialized magazines obsolete, there was a period of time in which they fed back to each other. This is best exemplified by the cited readers' mail sections, where otakus sat on their computers and wrote electronic messages with the hope that they would be featured in print. Ivrea knew it and wielded it as a means to foster consumer engagement not only in *Lazer*, but in their manga line. For example, Yū Watase's *Fushigi Yūgi* (1991-1996) and Masakazu Katsura's *I"S* (1997-2000) (Fig.3) successfully incorporated the reader's mail as an integral part of their edition. This happened to an extent that some wrote to confess that they had not read the manga, only the 'I-mails.'

As it tends to be the case, otakus took this feature and made it their own. Taking a DeCerteausian turn, readers used this digital-to-analog line to cement sexual-affective interactions and build what Esteban Dipaola (2013) would call communities of practice: safe spaces constituted through the vertical exchange of printed e-mails. In the case of *I"S*, the established dialog reinforced the thematic elements of the manga itself, a *shōnen* romantic comedy led by a teenage boy unable to declare his love to a classmate. "I like a girl, bah, I am actually in love with her [and] for two months I said nothing," wrote a female

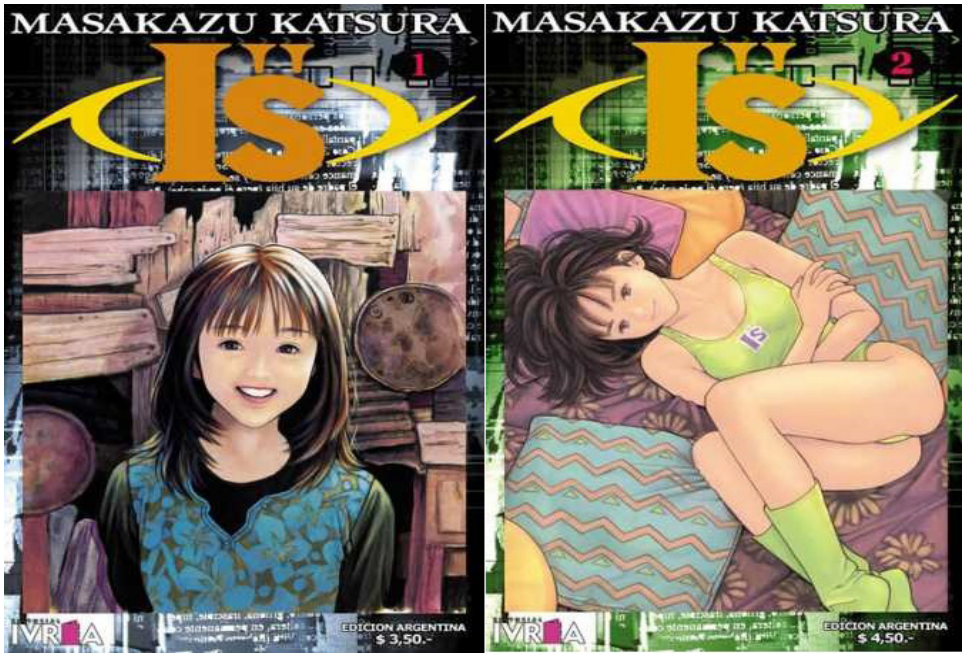

Fig.3: Cover for *I"S*, published in Argentina by Ivrea in 2001

reader, "but it came the day I muster the courage and in San Martín Square I french kissed her and ran away" (Pérez 2003). "Now I understand why this life stage is called *adolescence*," wrote another, reflecting on the fact that adolescence in Spanish means to go through pain. "So many [life] choices all together [...], you begin to wonder about your sexual orientation" (Pérez 2004).

Romance and sexuality were permanent topics in the correspondence published in *I"S*, ranging the interventions from requesting dating advice to confessions on masturbation and virginity. Like Oberto, Ricardo 'Tati' Pérez, the 22-year-old young editor, engages in this exchange not only with answers but confessions of his own, inspiring readers to open up to themselves. He also encouraged and fostered face-to-face meetings between readers. Beyond epistolary contact, fans sought to socialize offline and to be able to fulfill their sexual-affective desires, offering evidence of yet another manner in which the digital and analog overlapped in early otaku sociability.

As explored above, sexuality was a prominent feature of Japanese manganime circulation in Argentina, at least in part, because of its content (cf. Cambursano 2012), as well as the friction this warranted when shown in children's channels. The curiosity and concern it raised among its mostly teenage consumers only inflamed this aspect. Celebrated novelist Mariana Enríquez, then a writer for the newspaper *Página/12*, documented this in an article that devotes most of its paragraphs to elucidating the mix of "gays, asexuals or hermaphrodites" (Enríquez 1999) by which general audiences understood anime. In 'Lazer mail', Enríquez found missives from young female fans whose reactions ranged from "depraved [homoerotic] sexual fantasies" to comments of "alarming homophobia" (Enríquez 1999). As summarized by a reader who wrote to *Otaku*, it was simply surprising "how normal the attraction between two men and two women is portrayed in Japanese animation, they show it as if it were anything" (Bernard 2001, p.61).

Years later, writer Alan Ojeda (2018) called "eating lunch in front of the TV" watching anime a "sentimental education." Before the irruption of an "involuntary trans" character as Ranma Saotome from Rumiko Takahashi's *Ranma ½* (1987-1996), or that *Knights of the Zodiac* scene in which "Shun must save

Hyoga's life, who was frozen and on the verge of death" by warming him with his cosmos, expressing an "erotic bond between partners [that] seems to go back to the ideals of Greek love," he was forced to "reflect early" on his own "desire" (Ojeda 2018). He concludes: "I'm not going to make a taxative statement like 'those of us who watched anime since we were kids are more deconstructed than those who didn't, however, there is something of that" (Ojeda 2018).

The difference and newness of these cultural products, consumed during a particularly complex period in the life of its teenage fans, both attracted and evoked confusion in them, demanding complex symbolic re-elaborations. Nowhere was this combination of exciting cultural consumption and hormones more present than in the nascent online manganime fandom that was developing, in part, as a mixed strategy by print publication and, increasingly, as a standalone space. *Otaku* launched a mIRC channel and other means of communication (La gente Otaku 2000), such as the Otaku Forum and a mailing list, through which its readers could interact, get to know each other and even arrange face-to-face meetings (Fig.4). A "very lonely" 15-year-old reader from the small town of Maipú, where according to him there were "only 3 or 4 'real' Otaku, and I mean those who feel a real passion [for it]," wrote to the magazine to share that thanks to specialized publications, online sites and "chatting on the Internet" (Bernard 2000a, p.45), he now felt like he belonged. In that mIRC channel, he continued, he found "kinship and camaraderie" (Bernard 2000a, p.45) for the first time. Through messaging platforms such as ICQ or MSN, as well as previously existing forums, the expansion of computer-mediated communication would gain strength over the course of the first decade of the 21st century. In the case of Argentine otaku sociability, these safe havens (cf. Zubernis/Larsen 2012) would reside especially in dedicated Internet forums, WhatsApp groups, Discord, Telegram, Snapchat, and Facebook pages and groups, such as Jigoku Eventos.

Combined with new logistic infrastructures and these digital technologies, which enabled the creation and easy access to online storefronts, the previously mentioned fan exchange of manganime prosumption grew into a real fan commerce that allows otakus to purchase official (and not-so-official)

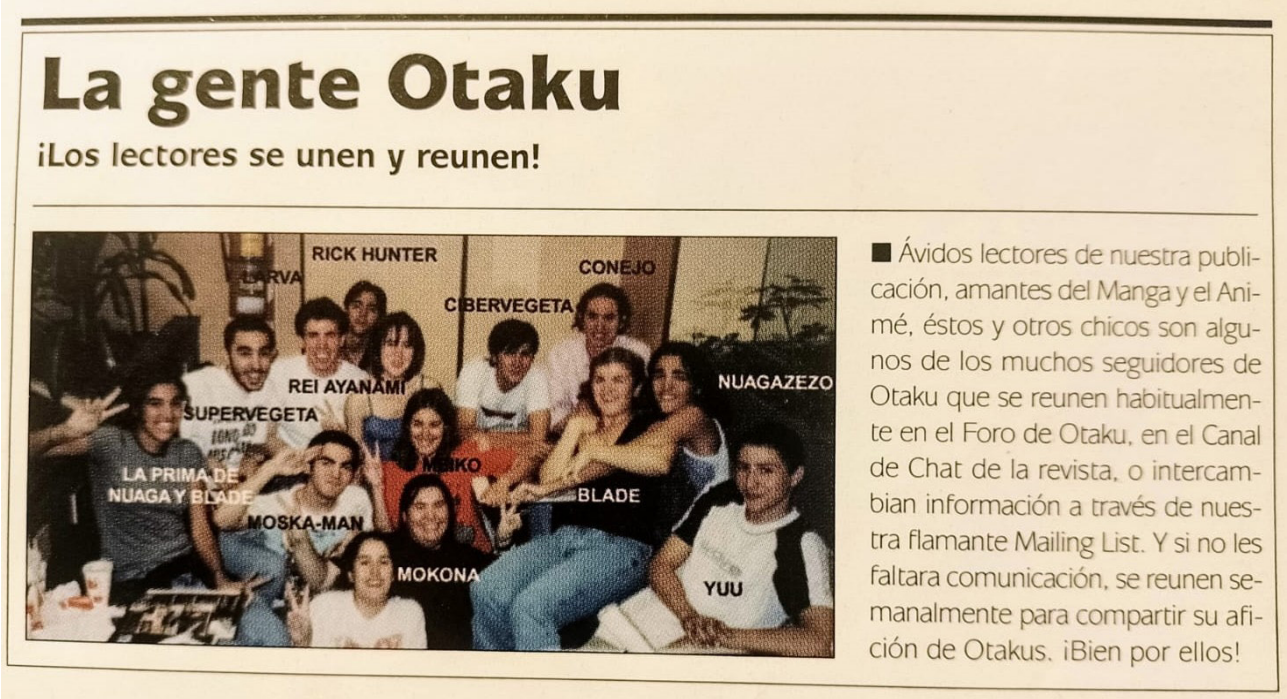

Fig.4: Reader's get-together (La gente Otaku 2000)

products of their favorite series or characters. The use of social networks, both as a market for DIY merchandising and as a safe space for sexual-affective subjectification, provided necessary preconditions for the emergence of complex, hybrid social phenomena, such as waifuism (cf. Del Vigo 2022).

Waifuism is the practice in which an otaku commits oneself to their favorite manganime or videogame character, establishing a 'marriage' relationship with them—a bond that assigns the latter a sex-generic role under the terms *waifu* (wife) for female characters or *husbando* (husband) for male ones. This commitment materialized by the acquisition and collection of all possible merchandising of said waifu or husbando and the exhibition of that relationship, i.e., of said products within the semi-public context of social networks (Fig.5). More elaborate prosumption practices may be involved, such as writing erotic fan fiction. The adoration of these fictional characters is usually condemned by the fan community itself or practiced as a guilty pleasure. This is why waifuism is usually exercised in private or safe spaces (cf. Del Vigo 2022).

Where can you get waifu or husbando merch? Once again, we come upon a bridging between the digital and the material world. Dakimakuras, 'real size' pillow covers with the likeness of an anime character, are available in specialized stores such as Etherion Store or through fan digital places, like Jigoku Eventos and Otakus de Buenos Aires Facebook groups. The same products are also sold at otaku events, where they seem ubiquitous (cf. Carpenzano/Del Vigo 2021). However, despite using social networks as an informal marketing tool accepted by otakus themselves, shaming for those who engage in this consumption practices within the otaku community persists, for example, using the derogatory term 'virgo' (derived from virgin). Other terms that codify otaku online sociability and eventually come to face-to-

Fig.5: Screenshots from Jigoku Eventos Facebook Page

Fig.6: Valentine Waifu Dinner (https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/240300-dinner-with-waifu-otaku-dates)

face interaction are 'pass the Zelda' (publishing links to hentai content based on memes), 'valentine waifu dinner' (the staging of simulated romantic dinner between the otaku and his waifu or husbando) (Fig.6), and 'Laura Sad' (a proper named derived from the English language term 'sad hour' in reference to a specific moment in online sociability when otakus confess and make inquiries of sexual-affective nature to other peers) (cf. Del Vigo 2022).

As the last term indicates, although the sexual-affective socialization of otakus has undergone a dizzying evolution in its independence from print and mediatization during the 21st century, the existential preoccupations and doubts expressed by Argentine teenagers remain the same that could be found twenty years before in reader mail sections such as 'Lazer mail' or 'I-mails.' Even though the Internet has made everything readily available (especially in countries like Argentina, where copyright laws are not strongly enforced), commitment is still highly valued among fans. Just that now, it is not expressed by the possession of rare products or knowledge, but through hybrid analog/digital practices such as the prosumption of fan fiction, fan art, or DIY merchandise. As decades prior, sociability within and outside fandom appeared to be at odds with each other in the fan discourse, expressed by extra-community stereotypes about otaku and pejorative terms.

The (lack) of social skills of those who consume manganime remains an easy punch line. In any case, this assumption of guilty pleasure does not stop otakus from trying to obtain the greatest satisfaction in the emotional investment placed in cultural products (cf. Hills 2015), albeit watching anime, reading manga, chatting online with like-minded people, meeting them face-to-face and, yes, staging a photo-op of a romantic valentine's dinner with your favorite fictional Japanese cartoon character.

Conclusion

In the past thirty-five years, there have been substantial changes in the way manganime is published, accessed, and consumed, as well as how fans form social ties among them. As a byproduct of second hand glocalization, the history of otaku fandom in Argentina began around science fiction titles selected in the United States and oriented to an older audience, such as *Robotech* and *Akira*. As seen in the reader section in *Cóctel*, fans wasted no time socializing in print form, resulting in pioneering efforts like fanzine

RAN. The broadcast of anime on children's channels like Magic Kids, followed by the commercial success of *Lazer*, turned Japanese cultural exports into a more locally glocalized, mainstream phenomenon and exponentially expanded the number of people interested. By the end of the decade, print publications and fandom events reflected a transformed landscape. The outstanding balance was the vast incorporation of women into a typically male fandom but not so much into specialized press and media, with Mariela Carril as the exception that proved the rule.

The popularity of manganime also reshaped fandom events. Organizers were compelled to quickly include cosplay contests and other otaku-oriented activities to attract a more diverse public, which in turn was favored by these Japanese narratives that included dissident sex-gender expressions and subjectivities. When the 2001 economic crisis made massive conventions like Fantabaires impossible to realize, otakus picked up the torch. Fan-organized screenings, fanzine fairs, and gatherings sprung up in the first decade of the 21st century as a means through which previous DIY practices grew into an actual prosumption economy. They were also a venue for gender, generational, and class tensions among the manganime fandom to play out.

As time went on and digital communication technologies developed and became more accessible, otaku sociability (like all sociability) moved increasingly online. Nevertheless, this was neither an instantaneous nor a clean-cut change. Ivrea's inclusion of reader's mail sections in its manga line and *Otaku*'s mIRC channel are examples of how the analog and the digital intertwined in those transitional years. Even as ICQ and MSN gave way to contemporary social networks, otaku sociability remains strongly grounded in materiality. The use of Facebook groups and other platforms as places to meet and gather with people of similar interests, to feel part of a community within the confines of a (virtual) place, is combined with fan events, cosplay competitions, and prosumption commerce. Socialization involves an interweaving of tangible elements, both personal and environmental, which generates tensions between subjects and the spaces they inhabit. Digital belonging is an intermediate step to the development (or not) of face-to-face socialization.

Waifuism (and Husbandism) emerges as a complex example of fan practices that condense both the radically new and the same old present in contemporary otaku sociability. In the comment section beneath a photo of a dakimakura, you can find fan-to-fan commerce, sincere expressions of loneliness, and the assertion of hierarchies, mainly through the condemnatory use of the term 'virgo.' In otaku fandom, there is conflict and hierarchization between members, and these struggles for recognition seriously affect sexual-affective socialization as there has always been/as there has never been before.

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