GENED 1042:
ANIME AS GLOBAL POPULAR CULTURE

Central Questions

Superhero franchises dominate Hollywood blockbuster releases. Major museums and art galleries hold exhibitions on pop celebrities and comic books. Many would agree that we are witnessing an unprecedented blurring of boundaries between high culture and pop culture; and also between the mainstream fandom (of say, major professional sports) and subcultural enthusiasm (for science fiction, comics, roleplaying games and so on). How might we address these cultural shifts in informed and genuinely critical manners? What can we learn about ourselves and our world through pop-cultural trends and our modes of engagement with them? The course responds to these questions by using *anime* and anime culture as a case study.

Why anime? For one, the rising global popularity of anime is a striking example of the cultural current sketched out above. We can learn much about contemporary conditions of global media culture by tracing the process through which anime—which began as children's entertainment in Japan, initially derided for low production value— became a global medium of audio-visual storytelling. Leading creators of animation in Japan such as Hayao Miyazaki, Mamoru Oshii, and Hideaki Anno, have gained admirers among popular audiences, critics, and filmmakers as well as animators around the world.

Secondly, anime exhibits many of the puzzling characteristics of contemporary media culture: at once local and global, *sub*cultural without being *counter*cultural, derivative

while innovative. Much of the most aesthetically ambitious works of the medium are also unabashedly commercial. While it is a popular entertainment, it can also be mind-twistingly complex and demanding of viewers' cognitive and emotional engagement. And anime has generated fan culture that can be hyper-consumerist but also do-it-yourself and frenetically creative. A study of anime offers unique lens into these paradoxes broadly observed in contemporary pop culture.

Finally, in Japan since the 1980s, the "*otaku* (nerd) subculture," revolving around anime and other related medias, has been at the center of debates over contemporary subjectivity and sociality in a media-saturated everyday life. The image of obsessive anime fans who are technologically and media-culturally savvy yet socially awkward, subverting mainstream norms without being explicitly rebellious or political, has become a paradigmatic figure of youth in Japan. By focusing on anime, the course takes advantage of wide-ranging and sophisticated academic and critical writings produced over the last three decades, examining the expanded role of such fandom in contemporary media culture. It is also worth noting here that while in the US, pop-cultural "nerd" is often imagined to be male (white) youths, female fan communities have exerted enormous and distinctive influences on anime culture; and globally, anime has attracted ethnically and racially diverse fans. The study of anime and anime culture help us explore how questions of gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity have been variously negotiated via pop culture in the world.

Why Take This Course?

Many of us binge watch television series on streaming services, pull all-nighters playing video games, or have participated in various forms of fandom. "Geeking out" on pop culture is no longer a fringe phenomenon but a matrix of social network and a facet of identity construction. Yet, most of us are ill-equipped to discuss our enthusiasm with those who do not belong to the community of shared taste. And some can be even quick to reduce pop culture to consumerism (mere distraction, stress relief, or a means of feeding a bad habit). Such dismissal glosses over more fundamental questions. What do we mean by "consumerism"? Are there purely non-consumerist cultures in post-industrial societies today? Is it possible to question, resist, and transform consumerist culture from within? Can pop culture be *both* remedy and toxin for our fraught sense of connection to our world?

In other words, there seems to be a misalignment between, on one hand, the time, energy, and sometimes even passion that we invest in pop-cultural consumption, and on the other hand, the lack of conceptual frameworks, historical knowledge, and methodologies for analyzing entertainment medias and our engagement with them. The wager of this course is to see substantial pedagogical opportunities here, not only to turn ourselves into more discerning users/consumers of media but more importantly, to become more reflective about the everyday cultural life of the twenty-first century.

Humanistic learning is not confined to an established canon of arts, endorsed by long-standing academic disciplines. Rather, it can be extended into the messy world of contemporary pop culture where art and commerce, aesthetic and technology, and producers and consumers are inextricably entangled with each other.