

## Reports and Commentaries

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### 3.7.2. WWW.ANIMEFORUM.RU: A REVIEW OF A TRANSNATIONAL FAN SPACE *by Sudha Rajagopalan*

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Animeforum.ru is the largest site for anime fandom on Runet with the proclaimed goal of encouraging interaction about anime, manga and Japanese culture. Manga are Japanese cartoons and anime are animated manga; both forms of story-telling are rich and densely iconographic. Anime/manga fandoms are widely prevalent the world over, and animeforum.ru is part of this transnational circuit. As dynamic spaces of intensive usage (consumption and production of cultural artefacts), such fan sites deserve our attention, as any other cultural artefact might. This review then takes into account animeforum.ru's architecture—an all-encompassing term that refers to the site's design, accessibility and the quality of its content, including the sophistication of discussions and the level of expertise fans display.

**Figure 1.** The logo of the site animeforum.ru.



Source: <http://www.animeforum.ru> (accessed 10 June 2010).

This site is a peer-to-peer community and it is similar to other major fan forums such as animecom.ru (Russia), animaxindia.com (India) and animeboards.com (U.S.). These sites are groups of like-minded peers exchanging knowledge, learning from one another and performing expertise related to their object of affection. A fan site such as this does not have a single

narrative but holds within it multiple narratives, because each fan brings different needs and experiences to the site and is free (within parameters) to create a discursive space for her/his specific quest. Furthermore, because they are transnational, sites such as animeforum.ru are inherently cross-cultural even though their users may be locally anchored in Russia. Their practices are unfettered by mundane matters such as territory because they can access, download and learn about various anime and manga from foreign fandoms and other cultures of anime production through the internet.

## The interface

Animeforum.ru is a typical fan forum in that its homepage is an interactive interface. Any user with a passing acquaintance with fan forums will recognize that it is ‘interactivity’ that sets such internet spaces apart from a static company website. This interactivity is accomplished by a function that allows users to shape the content and determine trajectories of the discussions. On animeforum.ru, users are the producers as befitting a fan forum. The presence of moderators notwithstanding, fans are just as entitled to open threads, suggest themes for discussion and provide the content for the site. This is what makes sites such as these dynamic spaces, where content is routinely updated, altered and changed.

**Figure 2.** The homepage with its many threads for discussion.



Source: <http://www.animeforum.ru> (accessed 10 June 2010).

Where web sites often have homepages from which the user must further navigate to the discussion forum/community page, animeforum.ru sets up a low threshold for participation. Interactivity being key to the forum site, the multiple threads that act as domains are immediately apparent on the homepage, as evident in Fig 2. The user who is directed to this site is at once made aware of the central role of social interaction in this space, and the impressive volume of traffic the site enjoys. As the screenshot shows, the homepage includes within its fold various thematic threads, with additional indicators of the number of open threads and the replies each theme has generated. The homepage draws the user's attention to ongoing discussions; for the regular poster, it is easy to locate the most recent posts at once by clicking in the last column. The site also holds archived materials, and threads can be traced back to the month/year of the site's inception, December 2003. The forum's threads can be read by non-members; only threads dedicated to hentai (an anime genre) are not accessible to guests, perhaps because of their sexually explicit content. Membership is required in order to be able to post messages. The site is visually unexciting but it is accessible and clearly foregrounds user-generated content.

### **Discursive domains**

Animeforum.ru is truly a comprehensive site in that its hyperlinks create spaces for commercial and non-commercial interactions within the site. Here there are threads for private and retail sellers of anime and manga to advertise their 'wares', and threads for those seeking to buy anime and manga to raise pertinent issues. This confluence of web retail and the consuming audience in one forum is not a standard feature of anime forums. It is absent in other sites such as yuri.ucoz.ru, anime.2xn.ru or anime-forum.su, where private and official sellers of anime have no place and activity is purely non-commercial and 'limited' to debate among fans.

The 'marketplace' dimension of the forum, however, is only a marginal aspect of animeforum.ru. In fact, the administrators take pains to state in FAQs that the forum is mainly about enabling discussion among its members. With more than 70,000 registered members animeforum.ru has a perplexing spectrum of thread topics ranging from anime-centred threads to multiple threads about completely unrelated things. They are, in this sense, a public sphere to which fans bring various needs and experiences. Once they have bonded over their common interest, they appear to derive pleasure from a broader range of interactions about larger socio-political issues. For example, threads have titles such as 'Should there be a monument to Stalin?', 'What draws women to men?' and 'What do you think of political correctness?' A certain plurality of threads is fairly common to large Russian fan sites. This tendency of using fan spaces for tangential public debates is a feature that distinguishes Russian fan sites from some other major anime fandoms. For instance, sites such as animaxindia.com (India) and animeboards.com (USA) avoid tangential debates and focus on sharing content related only to their common interest. This cursory comparison highlights the need for a serious study of Russian online fandom as a cultural-political practice where the common object of interest is also a pretext for a public to engage on other issues.

Among the site's distinctive features are the extensive city-specific discussion threads that facilitate offline fandom. For instance, *animeshniki* (anime fans) from Moscow, St. Pe-

tersburg, Vladivostok or Krasnoïarsk use these threads to identify local anime bars and restaurants, to seek out friends in the neighbourhood with whom they can socialize, to organize festivals or simply to meet to carry on the conversation. This reinforces the need to understand how ‘virtual’ communities of practice facilitate other forms of social and civic interaction and do not preclude a meaningful life offline.

In these discursive spaces, fans also get to show their expertise for which they draw on knowledges they have accessed on other sites. Anime fan practices demand a conversance with Japanese anime traditions that is acquired through intensive online engagement, and thus presuppose a high degree of media literacy. On animeforum.ru fans show themselves to be ‘serious’ fans who are typically sceptical about the impact of commerce on anime and frequently mock anime characteristics that are designed for the ‘mass audience’. What is significant is their exposure to other anime fandoms and cultures in the global circuit, even discussing the merits of various traditions of anime. For example, in a thread entitled ‘The problem of Russian anime’, a sophisticated discussion takes place on the applicability of the term ‘anime’ to other traditions of animation, on the specificities of Japanese anime culture and on the possibility of replicating this practice in other centres of production. While some insist ‘anime’ refers only to animation produced in Japan with specific Japanese characteristics, others disagree:

This is all just semantics. ‘*Anime*’, or ‘*Russian animation in the anime style*’, what difference does it make? The word ‘anime’ has as yet no strict or precise definition (as with many things in art, because much of this is subjective rather than objective). Therefore, the word ‘anime’ can be understood in a variety of ways; it depends on how a majority of those involved (creators, consumers etc, i.e., those ‘in the loop’) understand it (J@mis, 5 February 2008).<sup>1</sup>

Yet, not everyone is as accommodating about anime’s universal applicability. Some observations in the forum about the production of Russian anime reveal members’ scepticism:

ИМНО [ed: In my humble opinion], the production of Russian anime is a bad idea. We need to create something of our own, not co-opt from Japanese animation, i.e. Russian animation films are acceptable, but Russian anime – a categorical no (Moisha Tsukerman, 5 February 2008).<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps we should pose a question worth addressing: do we need Russian anime? Why do we not want to do what we are accomplished in, instead seeking to do that which others do

<sup>1</sup> ‘Это же всего лишь игра слов. “Аниме”, или “российская анимация в стиле аниме”, какая разница? Само это слово, “аниме”, до сих пор не имеет строгого и чёткого определения (впрочем, как и многое другое в искусстве, так как тут гораздо больше субъективного чем объективного). Так что его(слово “аниме”) понимать можно по-разному, это скорее вопрос восприятия большинства из тех кто имеет к нему то или иное отношение(создатели, потребители т.д., т.е. тех кто “в теме”)’ (J@mis, 5 February 2008). <<http://www.animeforum.ru/index.php?showtopic=62125&st=20>> (accessed 12 April 2010).

<sup>2</sup> ‘ИМХО.снимать русское аниме изначально плохая идея.необходимо делать что-то свое. а не перетягивать штампы из японских мультиков. т. е. русским анимационным фильма - да, русскому аниме твердое нет’ (Мойша цукерман 5 February 2008). <<http://www.animeforum.ru/index.php?showtopic=62125&st=0>> (accessed 12 April 2010).

well. ... in Russia we say: this is what we are good at and this is what others do well, so let us abandon what we do well and learn to do what others are capable of doing (Seirei, 5 February 2008).<sup>3</sup>

The idea of Russian anime seems imitative and unnecessary to members but they are not much kinder about other anime traditions. Note this observation: ‘Amerikosy [ed: pejorative reference to Americans] already make their own crap claiming it to be “like that of the Japanese, only cooler”. The result is horrendous’.<sup>4</sup> In discussions about the work in Avatar, the recently released American 3D film, *animeshniki* here attribute its impressive results to the outsourcing of the work to Korean artists, comparing their skills favourably to the anime work of Chinese artists. In the following dialogue, note the self-conscious ‘slip of tongue’ in using ‘slaves’ instead of artists and ‘white proprietors’ instead of commissioners, which points to their savvy understanding of the political underpinnings of transnational cultural production.

Korean ~~slaves~~ artists helped with Avatar; they have become experts at this in service of the Japanese ~~master~~ studio (Krasnyi Bukavshchik, 20 April 2010).<sup>5</sup>

I have a dim suspicion that the Chinese were involved. Koreans have a different drawing style, less crude. Although, it is possible that the style was specifically stipulated in the contract with the ~~white overlords~~ commissioning studio (Aloner, 20 April 2010).<sup>6</sup>

Such judgements about quality and authenticity indicate that these fans, as a community of critics, enjoy familiarity with the tradition of the source text, even if that familiarity is often superficial. Animeforum.ru can be said to have a high proportion of active, knowledgeable members who post in the main discursive domains of the site.

Many threads in the forum make evident members’ interest in the cultural apparatus that sustains their fandom. They use the forum to give ratings and reviews of Russian translations available in the market and question editors’/publishers’ choices. Since representatives of anime publishing companies in Russia are said to be members of the forum, fans’ questions are addressed to them, directly requesting the publication of favourite genres and pleading for

<sup>3</sup> ‘Может, прежде чем ставить подобную проблему, стоит решить: а нужно ли нам вообще русское аниме? Почему все любят делать не то, что получается хорошо у самих себя, а то, что получается хорошо у других? ... Почему все любят делать не то, что получается хорошо у самих себя, а то, что получается хорошо у других? ... У нас предлагают: вот мы хорошо умеем делать это, а другие хорошо умеют делать вот это, так давайте мы забросим то, что мы хорошо умеем делать, и будем учиться тому, что хорошо делают другие’ (Seirei, 5 February 2008). <<http://www.animeforum.ru/index.php?showtopic=62125&st=40>> (accessed 10 April 2010).

<sup>4</sup> ‘Америкосы уже активно делают свое дерьмецо "как у ипошек, только круче". Получается ужас’. (Anti-bot, 20 April 2010). <<http://www.animeforum.ru/index.php?showtopic=62125&st=500>> (accessed 10 April 2010).

<sup>5</sup> ‘С Аватаром помогают корейские ~~рабы~~ художники которые уже набили в этом деле руку для японских ~~феодал~~ студий’. (Красный Букавщик, 20 April 2010). <<http://www.animeforum.ru/index.php?showtopic=62125&st=500>> (accessed 12 April 2010).

<sup>6</sup> ‘У меня смутное подозрение что его китайцы рисовали. У корейцев стиль отрисовки другой, менее грубоватый. Хотя, возможно стиль рисования закреплен в контракте ~~белым владельцем~~ американским заказчиком’. (Aloner, 20 April 2010). <<http://www.animeforum.ru/index.php?showtopic=62125&st=500>> (accessed 12 April 2010).

better quality publishing. These meta-textual discussions are critical to an assessment of the site because fans are effectively performing their expertise by intervening in the work of media producers as fans seek to shape the production process.

### *Fan tvorchestvo.*

A review of a fan site must also consider the cultural production that these *animeshniki* engage in. Very often fan sites offer spaces for transmedial storytelling, where source texts get transmitted or retold through various media. Just as anime takes different forms (print, television, music clips), so too do fans who create all kinds of anime products. Among these are anime music videos (AMVs), which are anime video clips of short duration (5-10 minutes), mounted and edited to become a new story-driven video with music of any genre used as a background score. Animeforum.ru has enthusiastic members who post videos; however, discussions are sporadic and insubstantial, in contrast to a site such as amvnews.ru that has extensive discussion threads about videos, subtitling and editing.

**Figure 3.** An AMV thread in which fans embed videos or link to video hosting sites.

The screenshot shows a forum thread on AnimeForum. The thread title is "Мои AMVшки". It contains three posts:

- Post 1 (Youkai, 20 February 2007, 00:07):** Discusses an AMV titled "Первая AMVшка". Music: HAL - Starry Sky. The user mentions it was made in two days and received positive feedback.
- Post 2 (Youkai, 20 February 2007, 03:04):** Discusses an AMV titled "Вторая AMVшка". Anime: Wolf's Rain. Music: Мальчишка - Оборотень. The user mentions it took about 100 hours to make and received feedback.
- Post 3 (Limm, 5 March 2007, 15:00):** A short comment praising the work, mentioning "Хеланиссы" and "Лилалай".

Source: <http://www.animeforum.ru/index.php?showtopic=54241> (accessed 12 June 2010).

In the process of embedding and circulating their work on the website with QuickPlayer or by providing links to YouTube and video.mail.ru (as seen in Fig. 3), fans provide an audience for each other's handiwork and also share software and other technical tips for remixing. An AMV involves selecting a favourite anime character and story, removing the original soundtrack, re-editing and mounting the new bricolage of images to a song that the fan be-

lieves conveys the mood of the clip appropriately. Fig 4 presents screen grabs from the AMV of one of the site members, Youkainoniichan.

**Figure 4.** Screen grabs from an *animeshka* or Anime Music Video posted on YouTube by Youkainoniichan.





Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BW8z22E85s8> (accessed 12 June 2010).

Youkainoniichan has reworked clips from the anime series ‘Wolf’s Rain’, in which four wolves set out to find paradise. In a post-apocalyptic world with no room for wild wolves, they take on human form to evade being hunted down. In this AMV, visuals from the anime are overlaid with the audio track ‘Oboroten’ [Werewolf], a folk rock composition by Russian band Mel’nitsa. The end result is an intense 5:43 minutes of wolves tearing across the screen, interspersed with forlorn faces of young human characters and haunting shots of the moon, all to the accompaniment of a relentless cello, flute and guitar. The AMV is an autonomous cultural artefact; however, it cannot function independently of the original work because its audiences need to be familiar with the original story in order to appreciate it. My limited acquaintance with the original anime means I am unable to appreciate or judge the quality of this fan video. However, below the video there are comments by English and German-speaking users who compliment the skilful combination of clips and song, attest that it is one of the best AMVs they have seen and ask for a translation of the lyrics, which Youkainonichan provides. Because the video is posted on YouTube, its audience extends beyond the confines of the fan forum to include other people inhabiting the same story world across cultural contexts. Animeforum.ru is a bounded space, but the use of hyperlinks to video hosting sites opens up the work of its members to a larger audience.



Many *animeshniki* here write fan fiction (fanfic), which involves taking the main characters from source texts and developing new texts around them. In this space, the fan has the freedom to change the anime or manga character's features, impute other values and motives to the protagonists and change the story's trajectory and resolution. Usually, a member posts three or four long entries that constitute the first segment of the text. Sequels follow many days, weeks or months later. For example, the user Murka-chan is one of the most prolific writers in the forum and her fanfic is open to readers' comments, often during the writing process itself. When one member engages in a detailed analysis of the fanfic, another fan Tapka-kun wonders if such contemplation is necessary: 'You are much too serious about fanfic. These are fanfic texts and not monumental, philosophical tracts' (12 December 2008).<sup>7</sup> A fascinating exchange follows this provocative statement, as members argue whether fanfic is literature and whether it should be subjected to the same criticism and commentary as is literature. In this stream of posts about Murka-chan's work, many fans pronounce that fanfic has replaced the classics as their literature of choice. Therefore, in response to those who write that it is 'merely fanfic' and meant for entertainment, these members assert fanfic's status as a work of art that must therefore also be open to dissection and deconstruction. In an illustration of how criteria from literary canons retain their applicability in the assessment of fanfic, one fan praises Murka-chan for her clever use of *stiob* in her work. The actions and motivations of characters in the fanfic are also analyzed and the author makes a regular appearance to explain her narrative choices. Suggestions pour in from fans on what they would like to see happen or compliments ensue about the author's writing prowess. Therefore for the author it is imperative that a story be posted where readers inhabit the anime story world; like with the AMV audience, this means readers should know the original source text just as well as the author does, be able to comment on how a character has been modified and articulate how their familiarity with a certain source text shaped their expectations of the fanfic. Some fanfic have close to a 1,000 comments and others have fewer than ten. Therefore, the success of a fanfic text can easily be measured in a forum such as this. Notwithstanding instances such as the fan conversation cited above, there is little discussion in the fanfic threads (as in the AMV threads) and ultimately very few of the fans on this site appear to be 'serial' authors, unlike more devoted fans on other sites.

In general, fan cultural production on animeforum.ru is not substantial and seems to excite discussion only among a small segment of members. Surprisingly, there is no clear enunciation of copyright rules, rules for creating and uploading content or even an explanation of 'fanon' (aesthetic criteria developed by fans), which is a standard feature of fan forums. Such communities vary in the liberties they permit their members but conventionally they have minimal criteria in this regard. The absence of similar guidelines on animeforum.ru could be read as complete freedom to create fannish works as one pleases. However, this renders the forum more a portal leading to disparate but related threads, rather than a community that frames fan interactions within parameters that articulate a certain sub-cultural identity. It is, therefore, nearly impossible to state categorically how or even whether the members here constitute a cohesive group with a well-articulated idea of what it means to be a member of

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<sup>7</sup> 'ты слишком серьезно относишься [sic] к фикам. Это фики, а не монументальные философские тракты' (Tapka-kun, 12 December 2010). <<http://www.animeforum.ru/index.php?showtopic=8210&st=1100>> (accessed 16 April 2010).

this particular fandom. Significantly, there is a thread in which members ponder over this very issue and most concur that the *animeshniki* in this forum display diverse modes of engagement with anime and, therefore, do not constitute a sub-culture.

Animeforum.ru is ambitious and all-embracing and it lives up to its promise of allowing a freewheeling discussion about anime and manga. For the fandom researcher, a site such as this is a rich source for appreciating transnational cultural reception, specifically fan appreciations of authenticity or their potential reframing of anime in culturally familiar terms (that is, the localized or ecumenical nature of their reception). Moreover, such a fan site is emblematic of what Henry Jenkins calls 'grassroots convergence' (Jenkins 2006a, 18, 285) on a transnational scale as fans access both remote and proximate sources through the web to learn about Japan, anime and other fandoms in order to shape their reception and their remixing and reproduction practices of anime fan artefacts. This pop cosmopolitanism, as Jenkins defines it, lies somewhere between dilettantism and connoisseurship (Jenkins 2006b, 152-153,164); it is more than a passing interest in a foreign artefact and is a quest for a broader but not necessarily deeper engagement with the source culture. Animeforum.ru is a rich resource for understanding this aspect of media reception in contemporary Russia. For the fan, other Russian online communities that have selective interest in particular stories and genres of the anime/manga world may be preferable. For instance, if you are a fan of the anime series about the protagonist Naruto, there are sophisticated fan sites specifically for that story world, such as naruto-epidem.myl.ru. Similarly, 'hentai' or erotic anime have a fair share of sites dedicated to that one type of content.

Animeforum.ru is a portal with gateways to many kinds of content. So disparate are its discursive domains, that it cannot be said to exemplify a cohesive, fan community. Yet it has much to recommend it aside from its low-threshold interface. The sophistication of discussion is evident and members' expertise and exposure to other fandoms is considerable; thus, fans who are keen on learning all about anime would do well to visit this site. Moreover, if you are in search of a one-stop shop to become familiar with every contemporary practice of the Russian anime fan (buying, selling, drawing and deconstructing anime), then animeforum.ru is a sterling place to start.

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