This little ditty, sung to an upbeat tune, was a constant refrain of Saturday mornings in my childhood home. It was a “bumper,” a short segment between the program and the commercials, on the American Broadcasting Company’s Saturday morning cartoon lineup, which I eagerly tuned into on cable television in Canada in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Each bumper was a cartoon in itself, a fun five-second Claymation sight gag based on a comic reversal. I still remember laughing at the singing fire hydrant that turns the tables on a nosy dog by spraying it with water, or the cowboy who whistles for his horse only to have it fall on his head at the end of the song. With the ABC logo appearing on a red-brick wall in the background of every cartoon, these bumpers acted as station identifiers, not-so-subtle advertisements for the network. They also advertised—that is, drew attention to and made known—the fact that a commercial break was coming up.

The function of the bumper is simple. It acts like a punctuation mark, a comma in the grammar of television, allowing fascinated children in the audience to parse the structure of the broadcast and understand that the cartoon show is one clause and the commercial break is another clause, somewhat related but also distinct. In this light, the bumper appears to be a natural, even necessary, part of televisual communication. Like so much that seems natural about media, however, ABC’s Saturday morning bumpers were in fact the product of a series of intense debates about the nature and effects of television. Bumpers were not an intrinsic element of televisual language, but were made mandatory by the Federal Communications
Commission (FCC) in 1974, under pressure from public interest groups such as the Action for Children’s Television (ACT) who aimed to defend young minds from unexpected commercial assaults. Similar activist groups could be found around the world in the decades between 1960 and 1990, from Japan’s Association of Mothers (Haha no kai), which began promoting “organizational surveillance of television programs” as early as 1963 (Chun 2007, 193), right up to Canada’s Concerned Children’s Advertisers (CCA), founded in 1990 to produce live-action and animated public service announcements promoting children’s media literacy.

The intense focus on children in the postwar period is not surprising, since children were widely recognized in Japan and North America to be among the primary audiences for the new media technology of television (Chun 2007, 180), especially when it came to animated cartoons and advertisements. With the airing of programs such as The Mickey Mouse Club (1955–60), child viewers were increasingly separated from the broad national audiences of cinematic and propaganda animation, and were repositioned as both fans and consumers in a new media environment. Debates about this new audience of young TV fans spanned public and governmental forums, academic classrooms and family living-rooms, and the questions they raised continue to resonate in cultural and media studies today. To what extent can children understand and critique what they see on television? How are children who join media fan clubs constructed as vulnerable and manipulable or as active and creative audiences in public and commercial discourses about television viewing? And what happens when television programs are distributed in countries with different official policies and cultural attitudes about what is appropriate for youth audiences, such as Canada, the United States, and Japan?

These questions provide a starting point for understanding fan culture, since the children influenced by such debates in the 1960s would grow to become the first generations of “anime fans” or “otaku” as we know them today. Science fiction television programs have proven to be particularly conducive to fan activities that extend from childhood into adulthood. In this chapter, then, I discuss two seminal science fiction cartoons that were distributed on television between the 1960s and 1980s, namely, William Hanna and Joseph Barbera’s The Jetsons (1962/1985) and Tezuka Osamu’s Astro Boy (1963/1980). In The Jetsons’ 1962 depictions of children and teens as boisterous TV fans, and in actual audience reactions to commercial children’s television programming in North America, I show how even the most apparently active models of spectatorship may be inextricably bound up in the marketing practices of national mass media industries. I then turn to the ways in which animation “went global” through the creation and reediting of “culturally odorless” (Iwabuchi 2002b, 28)