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Aesthetic journeys and media pilgrimages in the contexts of pop culture and the creative industries from and to East Asia

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REVIEWS

The virtual cultural tourist: Film-induced tourism and *Kubo and the Two Strings*

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ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades, there has been growing research in film-induced tourism. Much of this research is focused on how film influences tourist destination choices. There has been less emphasis, however, on the nature and types of movies that may induce this attraction to such locations. By examining Kubo and the Two Strings *(Knight, 2016), a stop-motion animation produced by Laika Studios, this paper aims to apply film studies to explore current understandings of film-induced tourism. This paper argues that Kubo is itself a form of film-induced tourism by positioning the viewer as a virtual cultural tourist whose cinematic experience may be likened to a veritable media pilgrimage through Japanese culture, history and aesthetics. The movie introduces the viewer into an imagined world that borrows from* origami, Nō *theatre,* shamisen *music,* obon *rituals and Japanese symbolism, philosophy and mythology. The resulting pastiche is a constructed diorama that is as transnational and postmodern as it is authentic and indigenous.*

Introduction

In their seminal work, Riley, Baker and Doren (1998) firmly established the relationship between the box-office performance of particular movies and the increase in tourist footfall at iconic attractions featured in these movies. Movies act as a catalyst of tourist interest in a quest for "sight/sites" (1998: 920) seen onscreen. Coupled with a fanatic obsession with celebrity, this drive to relive experiences, re-enact narratives, and reimagine fantasies expresses an emotional connection between film tourists and movie locations, characters and stories. Over the past two decades, there has been growing research in film-induced tourism. Much of this research is focused on how film influences the tourist destination choices; there has been less emphasis on the nature and types of movies that may induce this attraction to such locations.

Instead of "simply repeating what is known" about film-induced tourism (Beeton, 2010: 5), Connell notes that "what is particularly notable is the dearth in cross-disciplinary working between tourism and media studies (Beeton, 2010; Kim, 2012), given the consumption-related focus and approach adopted widely in both subjects" (2012: 1025). By examining *Kubo and the Two Strings* (Knight, 2016), this paper aims to apply film studies to explore current understandings of film-induced tourism. Released in August 2016, *Kubo and the Two Strings* (*Kubo: Nihon no Gen no Himitsu*) is a stop-motion animation film directed by Travis Knight and produced by Laika Studios in Portland, Oregon. Set in Japan, the movie was initially pitched as a 'stop-motion samurai epic' and in the words of Knight, 'What we're trying to do is create an impressionist painting of Japan' (Knight, Wired, 2016). The production of this mutual image of Japan stands at the crossroads of cultural and creative imagination of two different countries. This paper argues that *Kubo and the Two Strings* (hereafter referred to as *Kubo*) is itself a form of film-induced tourism. As 'a wholehearted love letter to Japan' (Knight, Jennifer Wolfe, AWN, 2017), the movie positions the viewer as a virtual cultural tourist whose cinematic experience may be likened to a pilgrimage of Japanese history, culture, and aesthetics.

Film-induced tourism and contents tourism

Film-induced tourism occurs when people are attracted to and motivated by television or cinema to visit a featured film-related destination. Research papers cite instances in which the identification of travel destinations as film locations has resulted in an increase in tourist numbers. Dann (1977) suggests that there are 'push factors' and 'pull factors' in a decision to travel. As push factors, Carl, Kindon and Smith (2007) stress that travelling or watching films are both forms of escapism; but films also act as effective pull factors to motivate tourists to visit a specific place. Although movies are not primarily produced to induce tourism, they convey powerful impressions of potential tourist destinations, often creating a mythical aura around the appeal and reputation of various countries and cities that is enhanced by imagery, narrative and imagination. Schofield (1996) concurs that these images of travel destinations are shaped through the vicarious consumption of film and television without the perceived bias of promotional material. Kim (2012) proposes that the lure of television destinations is potentially more powerful than that of films as a television serial can

continuously and create the addiction to the series, the familiarity of these locations, and the emotional involvement with the characters and actors. With the ability to now own films or watch them at our own leisure and convenience, Monaco (2009) observes that "the frequency of film watching has increased tenfold, thus making this medium inseparable from and very influential on people's lives". The high consumption of movies as entertainment has also been bolstered by streaming platforms like Netflix, which has made movies more accessible.

A prominent example of film tourism is anime pilgrimage. In anime tourism, *otaku* identify and access real locales depicted in animated form and that are associated with these storylines in terms of 'place, protagonist and production' (Wing *et al.*, 2017: 1424). The *otaku* fan base refers to these film sites as *seichi junrei*, which is a portmanteau of "*seichi*" which means "sacred site" and "*junrei*" which means "pilgrimage". Thus, to an anime fan, embarking on a journey to these *anime seichi* is a spiritual experience, and a fulfilment of a dream fantasy, as it actualises 'the two-dimensional world of the anime to the three-dimensional setting on which it is modelled' (Andrews, 2014: 218). Even though anime is considered a major export of Japanese culture, anime is intended for a local or regional audience unless it achieves global recognition and garners a massive international fan base. 'By watching and growing up with anime, individuals potentially develop deep emotional connections and relationships with characters that affect their later self-identities' (Wing *et al.,* 2019: 1430), eventually, the child becomes an adult with spending power to buy paraphernalia and travel on specially designed tours that identify locations featured in anime, and who may, in turn, introduce anime to their children. The popularity of anime, and other animation forms and genres, thus has a long-term impact and a sustained popularity that spans generations.

Anime, however, distinguishes itself from animated films that are international and target a global audience. A study of the history of anime in the UK reveals, for instance, that despite its cult status, the presence of anime is limited to Ghibli Studio productions, particularly Hayao Miyazaki's films. It notes that "not a single anime title was found in the Top 100 charts of the last five years (The Official UK Charts Company, 2015)" (Hernández-Pérez *et al.*, 2017: 21). In contrast, Laika stop motion animation features like *Coraline* (2009), *Paranorman* (2012), and *The Boxtrolls* (2014) has been distributed worldwide. *Kubo* grossed a modest box-office profit, but it has won acclaim. It received ten Annie Award nominations, won a British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) Award

for Best Animated Film and was selected by numerous film critics associations as the top animated movie of 2016. It was also the first movie to be nominated for both Best Animated Feature and Best Visual Effects at the Academy Awards. Recently, it was made available worldwide on Netflix in 2020. This attests to the global reach and economic impact that an animated production is capable of.

In his study of movies from 2003 to 2015 that are set in Japan "or are at least related to Japanese culture, music, or mythology (sometimes all three)" (198), Strielkowski selects a 2015 Hungarian dark comedy entitled "Liza, the Fox-Fairy" ("Liza, a rokatunder"), directed by Karoly Ujj Meszaros as his point of discussion. The obscurity of his choice is telling. In terms of the way Japan has been portrayed in Hollywood cinema, films usually focus on limited aspects of Japanese culture, for example, samurais (*The Last Samurai* (Zwick, 2003) or *47 Ronin* (Rinsch, 2013)), geishas (*Memoirs of a Geisha* (Marshall, 2005)), the *yakuza* (*Black Rain* (Scott, 1989) or *The Outsider* (Zandvliet, 2018)) or its urban cosmopolitanism (*Lost in Translation* (Coppola, 2003) or *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift* (Lin, 2006)). The influence of Japan on Hollywood production is also evident in remakes of Japanese movies like *The Ring* (Verbinski, 2002), *Ghost in the Shell* (Sanders, 2017) and different iterations of *Godzilla* (Emmerich, 1998; Edwards, 2014; Dougherty, 2019; Wingard, 2021) and sequels of *The Grudge* (Shimizu, 2004, 2006; Wilkins, 2009; Pesce, 2020). Japan also provides the setting for cult favourites like *Kill Bill: Volume 1* (Tarantino, 2003), *Inception* (Nolan, 2010), *The Wolverine* (Mangold, 2013) and *The Isle of Dogs* (Anderson, 2018). While this diverse range of films may hint at the richness of Japanese culture, most thrive on trite stereotypes, even caricatures.

This misrepresentation is significant as film-induced tourism is a type of cultural tourism (Busby *et al.*, 2001). A cultural tourist learns, discovers and experiences the tangible and intangible cultural expressions in a tourism destination, including its history and heritage, arts and architecture, and lifestyle, beliefs and traditions. In modern Japan, pilgrimages are performed more for cultural identity than for religious devotion. This secularisation of the concept of pilgrimage extends the scope of motivations and desires that undergird global tourist traffic. "Modern pilgrimage is deeply embedded in ordinary secular institutions and activities—the travel industry and tourism, the mass media and advertising, the economic production and the mass consumption of pilgrimage-related consumer goods, and so on" (Wilkinson, 2016: 20); the pilgrim has been replaced by the

traveller in search of his roots. The pilgrimage of the cultural tourist is devoid of faith "as long as it remains photogenic" (Reader, 2007: 28).

This paper argues that *Kubo* offers its viewers a veritable media pilgrimage through Japanese history, culture, and aesthetics, in an article entitled *Japan's Gross National Cool*, Douglas McGray observes that 'from pop music to consumer electronics, architecture to fashion, and food to art, Japan has far greater cultural influence now than it did in the 1980s, when it was an economic superpower' (2002: 47). This resulted in efforts by the Japanese government to promote Japanese culture abroad targeting Contents Tourism (*kontentsu tsurizumu*) which intended to feature Japanese *poppu karucha*. The Investigative Report on Regional Development by the Production and Utilisation of Contents such as Film states that the essence of the approach of *kontentsu tsurizumu* is 'the addition of a "narrative quality" [*monogatarisei*] or "theme" [*teemasei*] to a region namely an atmosphere or image particular to the region generated by the contents and the use of that narrative quality as a tourism resource' (Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism *et al.* 2005: 49 qtd. in Yamamura, 2015: 61). This meant that 'at the heart of tourism promotion was not 'objects' but 'contents', namely stories' (Yamamura, 2015: 61) and the relationships/ connections (*kankeisei*) that readers shared with fictional characters. In Japan, contents tourism focuses on narratives, character, and location, and considers anime as its primary resource. This centrality of storytelling can be extended to include other forms of Japanese cinema as well.

Kubo goes beyond the mere surface of using Japanese culture as token tropes but features p*oppu karucha*, 'culture produced in the course of the daily activities of ordinary people (including traditional culture) … refined through people's daily lives; and it is through this culture that the sensitivity and spirit of the Japanese people is communicated, and a portrait of the nation is presented' [Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2006), qtd. in Beeton *et al.*, 2013: 143].

The Virtual Cultural Tourist

It may appear obvious that the more successful a film is, the more awareness it will create about where it was shot, but not all films will motivate travel, and even if they do, may influence only a particular segment of film enthusiasts. Seaton and Yamamura (2015: 3) propose five types of cultural tourism: the purposeful tourist where visiting a cultural destination is its primary motivation, the sightseeing tourist who includes a cultural

destination as part of a broader holiday, the serendipitous tourist that has a chance encounter with a cultural destination which stimulates deeper interest in the country's culture, the casual tourist who is motivated by a weak motive to visit destinations like Disneyland, and the incidental tourist whose visit to a cultural destination is not the reason for travel but is part of a detour. These same categories can be found relevant to film tourism, for instance, the purposeful film tourist who visits a destination specifically to seek film locations or the sightseeing tourist who may go on a film tour without even having watched the movie. This may indicate that the rising numbers attributed to film tourism may be fallacious as "film tourism is merely incidental and neither the main nor the sole motivation of most tourists traveling to a film destination" (Rittichainuwat, 2015: 137). Tourists may visit a film set as it is included in the tour itinerary (Cray & Buchman, 2009). The film may also not be the sole reason why a tourist visits a country (Croy & Heitmann, 2011). Besides practical matters like time, money and distance, the desire to travel to a specific film destination may be stimulated by a multitude of other reasons. Rittichainuwat concludes that "a less well-known film but an individual favourite film and a favourite actor can motivate one to participate in film pilgrimage, rather than a more well-known successful film" (2015: 144). For film tourism to gain the most mileage from a film, Destination Management Organizations (DMO) have to launch a strategic extensive international media campaign that intentionally connects film images from the movie to the destination country before, during, and after the release of the film (Croy, 2010).

Advances in digital technologies now provide access to virtual spaces that alter the way by which we know, experience, and remember the world. 'Indeed, spaces and practices of everyday life are mediated not only through the physicality and materiality of our surroundings, but also through virtual media spaces' (Lester *et al.*, 2013: 255). Due to the mediatisation of culture, the Internet has "collapsed the distinction between 'media' and 'tourist sites' by unifying the act of consuming media products with the act of visiting (web)sites" (Beeton *et al.*, 2013: 149). Building on the work of Seaton and Yamamura, this paper proposes a sixth type of cultural tourism: the virtual cultural tourist. The virtual cultural tourist may encounter the culture of other countries through documentaries, that may feature landscape, tradition or history, or vicariously through travel vlogs of amateur tourists or professional guides on the Internet. 'Consuming visualised images and representations of a place or a country through popular media forms some basic perceptions of an individual's understanding of the place, and thus creates expectations

and imaginations of what he or she would experience at the place when he or she actually becomes a tourist' (O'Connor *et al.*, 2013: 13). While these videos feature the real place, virtual cultural tourism includes a film-induced experience through the cultural cinematic products that feature the destination.

Tourism research generally presumes that a destination can only be experienced through actual visitation. Most tourists, however, have vicariously travelled their destination even before they set off through the reception and interpretation of photographs, video, brochures, and other authentic or inauthentic representations of the location. The constructed reality of a place offered by the media may even dominate or alter objective reality. Authenticity is a key motivator for film tourists who want to live out their projected fantasies of reliving scenes from the movie or connecting with celebrities who may once have been physically present at the site. This may call into question the impact of movies like *Kubo* which do not have a specific location, and thus do not offer any on-site experience. In truth, "it is not the objective reality of the place ... but instead the meaning it represents that transforms places depicted in motion pictures to symbolically meaningful tourist attractions" (Kim *et al.*, 2003: 234). It must be noted that while Tolkien located *The Lord of the Rings* in a mythical place, Middle-earth is now associated with New Zealand. On the other hand, tourists visited Scotland, the setting of *Braveheart* (Gibson, 1995), even though the movie was shot in Ireland. Reality becomes secondary to the tourist experience. Film destinations are constructs that merely allow the film tourist to superimpose their imaginations on a real backdrop, and may not translate into any acquisition of cultural capital. The "tourist gaze", posited by Urry (1990), is fulfilled by this visual encounter that constructs place imagery as their next Instagrammable background. The very quest for fictional characters in an imaginary place reveals that any meaning attributed to these spaces is imposed thus rendering authenticity "highly personalised, subjective and unique to each individual based on their own pleasure, emotion, imagination, interpretation, and memory" (Kim, 2012: 389). This creates a simulacrum in which reality is mediated, sites of simulation and fiction made accessible, and mythologised spaces fabricated as authentic.

The interest of fans in a narrative world that will be enough to encourage travel to the actual place of the film can be inspired by an identifiable, attractive and accessible location, a popular narrative that rings true, and a deep emotional engagement with the characters. In film, the basic perceptions and understandings that a tourist has of a country, place or

culture are already shaped through the camera when they identify with the perspective of film characters. The film tourist becomes personally engaged and emotionally involved when they relate to screen characters as if they were real people. Celebrity Involvement (Lee, Scott & Kim, 2008) can further amplify the identification and empathy fans may feel creating a mix of fantasy, nostalgia, memory and emotion. This attraction may express itself in an attachment to location, storylines, character, dialogue, scenes, music and the degree to which these elements are related to personal experience. This infatuation endures with a film that is durable with multiple viewing, especially if it achieves classic or cult status. While the absence of human actors and a specific location in *Kubo* may appear to do a disservice to the purposes of contents and film tourism, this instead removes the limitations of physical boundaries and feeds into the aspirations of going to Japan and to embrace all the culture that it offers. "A film that can induce tourism will need to have a storyline that smoothly intertwines with locations so as to create settings that will entice viewers to relive or recount the vicarious cinematic fantasy or déjà vu" (Pan *et al.*, 2014: 408). Because it is based on fictional characters who inhabit imaginary spaces, *Kubo* possesses greater potential to inspire a deeper interest in the intangible culture of Japan, rather than being contained by a physical 'landscape' of a specific film destination. In a way, this fulfils the objective of 'promoting the attractiveness of localities and Japan as a whole, and for the overseas promotion of the Japanese brand' (Yamamura, 2015: 62). Film tourism is thus not a physical pilgrimage to a location but the "post-modern experience of a place that has been depicted in some form of media representation" (Macionis, 2004: 87) that reinforces myth, storytelling or fantasies.

The representation of our national spaces, histories, cultures and philosophies in the creative works of artists from other countries produce mutual images that may evoke pride or anger depending on our evaluation of the accuracy of these manifestations of our identity. It may be argued that *Kubo* presents a fictional, fantasised pseudo-Japan that is of a foreign origin and subject to stereotypes of exotic otherness. *Kubo* can be described as a pastiche film that mixes "cultural artefacts and spaces without an established sociological or historical context" (Hernández-Pérez, 2017: 48). In many of his interviews, Knight recalls his fascination with Japan when he first visited the country when he was eight years old, and how he returned home with a bag of manga books. In his work on *Kubo*, he says 'I was trying to capture visually the feeling I had going to Japan for the first time' (Knight, Wired, 2016). Knight's pilgrimage to reconstruct a memory is a spiritual one. Stop motion

animation is a meticulous gruelling process. To give an idea of how painstaking stop motion animation is, it takes over an hour to shoot a frame. Shooting at eight frames a day, it takes a whole week to shoot three seconds of film. The entire world of *Kubo* had to be built by hand from scratch in eighty miniature sets in proportion to 9.5 inches tall puppets. The next sections will illustrate the meticulous care and respect that Laika employed to research and depict the vivid landscape and rich culturescape of Japan. Even though the Japanese content is being created by a foreign studio, the movie powerfully conveys Japanese beliefs and values, and its global dissemination has an enormous impact on the perspectives and impressions of other countries and their desire to learn more about Japanese culture.

Japanese History

The *mise-en-scène* of *Kubo* sets the movie in sixteenth century Japan. The hamlet at the start of the movie is designed in the style of the Heian period (794-1185 A.D), a period of peace in Japanese history when national culture matured and flourished. The character design of Kubo and the other human characters was inspired by the doll-making of *Edo Kimekomi ningyo* from the late Edo period in Japan, from the early 1600s to the mid-1800s. Careful research ensured cultural authenticity while blending the old and the new. The town folk wear Heian and Nara (710 – 794 A.D.) dress but the costumes are tinged with the aesthetic folds and drapes characteristic of Japanese fashion designer Issey Miyake (b. 1938). Each costume is individually crafted. Kameyo's clothing, for instance, emulates patchwork from the *Boro* tradition and the Moon King's *sokutai* robe is from the imperial court. Even the kimono that Kubo wears is modelled from an earlier historical context from the story as it belongs to his father. Kubo's helmet is of an early-neolithic *Jōmon*-era Shinto bell with its rope markings (about 300 B.C.). The costume of the sisters is inspired by Tomoe Gozen who was a *onna-bugeisha*, a fourteenth century female samurai warrior. Tomoe Gozen was celebrated in literature and culture and impacted future generations of samurai. The representation of different props and styles from different periods of historical Japan in the production design illustrate how the history of Japan is intricately woven into the detailed attention to the fabric of Japanese culture in *Kubo*.

The anthropomorphism of the protagonists in the narrative borrows heavily from Japanese mythology. Kubo's father is named after Hattori Hanzō (1542-1596), a famous ninja of the Sengoku era (1467-1615). The cult personality of Hanzō has taken on

legendary proportions in depictions of him in modern popular culture and with the attribution of supernatural abilities like teleportation, psychokinesis and precognition. In *Kubo*, Hanzō takes the form of a rhinoceros stag beetle or *Kabutomushi*. The word "*kabuto*" refers to the horned helmets worn by ancient samurai warriors. This warrior bug is popular in anime and *tokusatsu* and is the basis of characters from the *Kamen Rider*, Godzilla and *Pokémon* franchise. To Travis Knight, the beetle is a 'symbol of transformation and metamorphosis' (Haynes, 2016: 95). Kubo's mother is represented by a Snow Monkey. The Japanese macaque, *Nihonzaru* is native to Japan and is a prominent feature of Japanese religion, folklore and art, for instance, in popular Japanese fairy tales like *Momotarō*, or 'Peach Boy' or *The Crab and the Monkey*. In historical records of the eighth century, monkeys were sacred mediators between gods and humans. In Shinto belief, mythical beasts called *raiju* appeared as monkeys and monkeys are said to have healing properties. Originally, the monkey in *Kubo* is a small, handcrafted token that protects Kubo called a *netsuke*. Significantly, *netsuke* were talismans that fastened items to the *obi* (sash) so that it would not be lost or stolen. A *netsuke* shaped as a macaque was common during the Edo period. In this clever use of animal symbolism, their associative significance makes them aptly chosen to enhance the narrative and characterisation of the movie. Kubo thus presents to the virtual cultural tourist iconic visual references that draw from and allude to deeply rooted Japanese associations.

Kubo is a story about stories, or about telling stories. All three main characters relate narratives. Monkey's tale of how she met Hanzo and fell in love echoes the well-loved tale depicted in Studio Ghibli's *Kaguya-hime no monogatari* (*The Tale of Princess Kaguya*) (Takahata, 2013), which is based on the oldest surviving work in the *monogatari* form written in the Heian period, *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter*. Harassed by the Emperor of Japan, Princess Kaguya had asked the moon to remove her from earth. The Moon Emperor causes her to forget everything about her life on earth by making her wear a shroud, a cost of feathers similar to the ones worn by the Sisters in *Kubo*. Princess Kaguya leaves earth to join him in her celestial home on the moon. *Kubo* finds resonance in Japanese folklore by exploring parallel themes of captivity, domination and freedom. This also echoes the Shinto mythology of the celestial relationship between Tsukuyomi, the King of the Moon, and his wife, Amaterasu, the Goddess of the Sun and the Queen of Heaven. The power of storytelling is demonstrated in the denouement when the villagers use narrative to convince the Moon King of his goodness when he believes their version of him. The movie's thematic emphasis

that identity and reality is a product of narrative is demonstrated when Kubo forges his powers through the imaginative reframing of his personal story. The movie rewrites history and retells myth, creatively fictionalising a national identity in the collective imagination.

Japanese Culture

The cultural experience is rendered more authentic by the foregrounding of Japanese handicraft, the rich heritage of theatre, storytelling and music, and the re-enactment of traditional festivals and practices. The magic of Kubo's imagination brings his creations of *origami* and *kirigami* to life at his command. While Kubo is literally a puppet in the hands of the invisible Laika puppet masters manipulating him, he is himself an animator of puppets. As stop motion animators working with puppets, Laika draws upon the Japanese puppet tradition of *Bunraku*. Animating Japanese dolls called *ningyō*, which literally means "human form", *Ningyōtsukai* or *Ningyōzukai* puppeteers appear on stage dressed in black but are "invisible" to the audience. *Bunraku* draws upon the strong oral tradition of the *Joruri* who narrates the action while playing a *shamisen* and Kubo's street performance also blends the storytelling of the *tayū* chanter and the *shamisen* musician. This street act is also reminiscent of the itinerant *Biwa hōshi*, travelling minstrels who were often blind. This is especially since Kubo is himself blind in one eye.

This music belongs to the *Tsugaru-jamisen* genre of *Shamisen* music. In the movie, the music produced by the *shamisen*, a 150-year old folk instrument, is seen to weave a magical spell, animating objects and as a powerful weapon to fight against evil spirits. This belief in *shamisen* music as magical is expressed by Kenichi Yoshida of the Yoshida Brothers, a popular Japanese *shamisen* playing duo,

> Kubo is always threatened with the possibility of not being able to see. That resonates very deeply with anyone playing *Tsugaru-jamisen*, and not just because the first players were blind. It's because we don't have music sheets … We're not seeing so much as feeling or doing battle with some unknowable force. We're beating the *shamisen* like it's a weapon, and still there's a beautiful melody. We don't know if there's any other instrument like that in the world. ("The Yoshida Brothers get in on Kubo's big adventure" by Kaori Shoji, *The Japan Times*, Nov 22, 2017)

In the climax of the movie, it is the music, magic and story-telling powers of the *shamisen* that proves instrumental in defeating the Moon King.

Kubo's story is accompanied by the soundtrack of *Taiko* drums and *koto*, a zither which is the national instrument of Japan. *Taiko* drums provide rhythm, atmosphere and tension in Japanese theatre. The story that Monkey tells of her falling in love with Hanzō is depicted in the form of *Kabuki* opera. As Kubo plays his *shamisen*, the *origami* figures that appear this time are made of a Katsura pod, Maple leaf and Japanese crane orchid, flora and fauna native to Japan and East Asia. The two sisters wear *Nō* masks which often represent supernatural creatures taking human form. The *Nō* mask looks different depending on how the mask is held or lit and this gives the Sisters an uncanny ambivalence and a phantasmic quality. In *Mugen Nō*, supernatural worlds are presented with gods, spirits and ghosts in the role of the *shite* or main actor. The performance of storytelling dramatically delivers a narrative that serves as a spectacle for a cinematic audience but with recognisable Japanese theatrical elements.

Besides the personal narrative of identity, the collective narrative determines the cultural identity of the community and the nation. *Kubo* features the rituals, beliefs and festivals that are an integral part of Japanese culture. Kubo participates in *Obon* or just *Bon*, which is a Japanese Buddhist-Confucian custom to honour the spirits of one's ancestors by visiting their graves. The elderly Kameyo tells Kubo that at the festival "we listen to their tales and guide their safe return" reiterating the importance of narratives and storytelling in Japanese culture. The celebrations are represented as accurately as possible. A Japanese choreographer was consulted to ensure the authenticity of the *Bon Odori* dance at the festival and a *Tankō Bushi* song is diegetically used. The movie also stays true to the Japanese reverence for the sacredness of nature as seen in the cemetery scene. In the movie, these traditions are explained and passed on to the next generation suggesting a continuity of cultural practice. Beetle's assurance to Monkey that her story will never end is also an affirmation that the culture of Japan embodied in the movie will continue to live on through the movie.

Japanese Aesthetics

Kubo transcends the mere application of Japanese tropes by rooting itself firmly in the appreciation of Japanese philosophy and aesthetics. To Knight, 'Japan is the birthplace of the modern cinematic epic' (Knight, Laika, Crafting an Epic). Its *homage* to Japanese *auteur* Akira Kurosawa is evident in its cinematography and intertextual allusions. The appearance of Kubo's father, for example, is based on Toshiro Mifune. As Kubo matures,

he exhibits the seven virtues of the *Bushido* code of the samurai – integrity, respect, heroic courage, honour, compassion, honesty and duty. In this coming-of-age Bildungsroman, it comes as no surprise that Knight sees 'Laika as a kindred spirit to Ghibli' (Knight, Associated Press, Japan inspired 'Kubo' director), especially in Hayao Miyazaki's whimsical sensibility in his creation of juvenile heroes in fantastical Japanese worlds. 'The kind of prism that Miyazaki applies to Europe is what I wanted to apply to Japan, offering my view on a place and culture that have been vital to me for so long' (Knight, in *Nichi Bei*). While the movie has the sweeping scale of David Lean and the animatronic fantasies of Ray Harryhausen, the production worked with Japanese culture consultant Taro Goto to create a world that borrows freely while constructing an accurate representation of the traditional heritage of Japan. The most prominent visual influence on the movie was the aesthetic of *Ukiyo-e*, which literally means 'picture[s] of the floating world'. Since the movie was shot frame by frame, this served as an apt description of the enterprise of stop-motion animation. The aesthetics of *Kubo* was influenced mostly by the woodblock prints of twentieth century graphic artist Kiyoshi Saito, who was part of the *Sōsaku-hanga* art movement. Saito was inspired by painters like Gauguin and Matisse but blended their styles with his to create something new and progressive. In Saito, Laika saw an artistic kinship of someone working with a traditional artform but applying the craft in a modern context; a philosophy which "was completely consistent with the way we make films at the studio. It's a fusion of old and new. It's a fusion of the east and west. It's a fusion of the real and the imagined" (Knight, Interview with Dan Sarto). Saito's work also inspired the grainy texture of the movie. Laika wanted *Kubo* 'to look and feel as if it's a moving woodblock print' (Knight, Wired, 2016). The first scene in *Kubo* alludes to *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* by Katsushika Hokusai, a *Ukiyo-e* woodblock print (1829-33). For a scene when Kubo meets a Giant Skeleton in the Hall of Bones, Laike created the largest stop motion puppet. This eighteen-feet centrepiece is another tribute to *Takiyasha the Witch and the Skeleton Spectre* by Utagawa Kuniyoshi, a classic *ukiyo-e* woodblock triptych (1798–1861). Together with the Giant Eyes and the Moon Beast, this hearkens back to the *yokai* or monsters that inhabit Japanese folklore, anime and pop culture.

Another Japanese aesthetic that resonated with Laika was that of *Wabi-sabi*, a concept in traditional Japanese aesthetics constituting a world view centred on the acceptance of the transience and imperfection of beauty. 'The specter of impermanence' (Haynes, 2016: 6) was likened to the imperfect nature of stop-motion animation. 'They're flawed. They're

imperfect. And there are mistakes in every single frame of one of our movies but I think that's part of the beauty of stop motion. There's an inherent humanity to how these things are done' (Interview with Al Moloney, BBC Click). This idea of process, transformation and incompletion also pertains to identity, culture and narrative.

A pilgrimage is a quest. Kubo is on a quest and his pilgrimage brings him home to a sense of family and belonging. Hanzo tells Monkey "you are my quest" and his journey ends just when both of them discover their true identities. Still, the true pilgrimage in *Kubo* is the resulting postmodern bricolage of Japanese history, culture and aesthetics. This pastiche is a constructed diorama that is as much transnational and postmodern as it is authentic and indigenous. The pilgrimage of the viewer in *Kubo* is a quest not for a film location but something more intangible, a sense of connection with a narrative. *Kubo* offers an immersive experience that will bear repeated audience viewings and multiple virtual visits to Japan.

Conclusion

By showcasing a destination in the context of a narrative, films can potentially be instrumental in enhancing the image, appeal and profitability of a media-related tourist destination in encouraging an actual visit to the country. "Increased visitor numbers is not the only measure of "success" in film tourism; rather enhanced awareness of and familiarity with a destination should be viewed as indicators of success" (Beeton, 2010: 2). Furthermore, film can compensate for traditional tourist promotion campaigns which lack the resource to prolong destination exposure to sustain the interest of potential holidaymakers, especially for lesser-known locations. With online streaming on-demand, movies have both a wider outreach of millions and an extended shelf life of reruns and reboots. With audiences viewing movies repeatedly, every encounter has the potential to inspire actual travel to a film location.

To leverage on film tourism, DMOs need to work with film distributors to ensure maximum exposure of the location as a tourist destination. In 2018, the Singapore Tourist Board (STB) partnered with Warner Bros during the Hollywood premiere of the movie *Crazy Rich Asians* (Chu, 2018) and collaborated with American public relations companies Edelman and Bullfrog + Baum to ensure that it was featured heavily in promotional activities that included offering journalists exclusive interviews with cast members and tour experiences of the city. In February the following year, the STB reported that "organic search

interest in Singapore increased by more than three times in the US during the movie's release, according to Google data, while there was a 110 per cent spike in searches on travel planning site Orbitz" (*The Straits Times* 13 Feb 2019). *Kubo* had offered Japan a similar opportunity which would have resulted in a win-win situation for both Japan tourism and Laika studios. Film-induced tourism is a post-film phenomenon but DMOs should identify upcoming films that feature their country to optimise tourism opportunities.

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