

Introduction

On politics of visual media

David CHRISTOPHER | University of Leicester, UK

Marco PELLITTERI | Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, China

[HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.32926/2023.11.4](https://doi.org/10.32926/2023.11.4)

“The visual” is the dominant social mode of modern media in what some have come to call the “post-literate age” of international mass media distribution and cultural hegemony. Media images are suffused with culturally-inflected visual meaning at both their points of production and moments of reception. But their very ubiquity, or mere “commonality”, often results in the dismissal of their political significance. In terms of comics, animation, video games, and especially the visually troubling horror sub-genres of each, for example, Robin Wood has argued that such fare was originally “dismissed with contempt by the majority of reviewer critics, or simply ignored” (2004: 202). Indeed, Eric Greene argues:

[Enigma constructs] their medievalism so that medieval themes inserted into the music function first and foremost as a direct conduit to the spiritual and mysterious. Interestingly enough, in most cases, this vision of the Middle Ages creates an aura of spirituality for renditions of sacred and secular works effectively combining the sacred and secular repertoires into one aesthetic category. This construction of the Middle Ages – the use of medieval music to convey a non-denominational and in some cases, non-Christian spirituality – could only occur after medieval music was removed from its academic, and to a certain degree, Catholic, context... (Greene, 2004: 106)

This same dislocation of politically-charged implications occurs in the transposition from traditionally literary (or at least linguistic) narrative representations into a visual modality.

These visuals are frequently attached to narrative and otherwise linguistic formulations that work to limit or even specify the meanings that are consciously associated with them: “the viewer’s process of picking up cues, developing expectations, and constructing an ongoing story out of the plot will be partially shaped by what the

narrator tells or doesn't tell" (Bordwell and Thompson 2010: 100). In their now canonical *Film Art: An Introduction* (2010, 2020), David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson give a compelling example of Chris Marker's experimentation with narration over a sequence from the film *Letter from Siberia* (1958). As each narration unfolds, highly varied in their respective meanings, the otherwise identical visuals that accompany them take on different valences that respectively seem to be the perfect indication of what the images present (Bordwell and Thompson 2020: 265). Indeed, without active critical analysis, we often capitulate to such linguistic messages and allow them to code the media images we consume in a prescribed ideological framework that aligns with what Stuart Hall refers to as the hegemonic "dominant-code" preferred by the creators or sponsors of cinema, advertising, comics, etc. (Hall 1980: 136).

In the arena of comic books, a paradigmatic scholarly text that deals with subversive political meanings is Mattelart and Dorfman's *How to Read Donald Duck* (1971). They lucidly delineate how the political implications embedded in comics can be wholly subverted by especially children's fantasy in the benign format of anthropomorphised animals. The otherwise "alienating social politics", as Joshua D. Bellin (2005) would call them, are less-than-hidden within narratives which, otherwise, troublingly betray significant messages that champion a mentality of colonial normativity and subvert the contradictions of capitalist labour relations. However, Mattelart and Dorfman's text largely deals with the narrative components of such comics and only summarily addresses the impact of the visual images of those comics in relation to the infantilising and trivialising effect of the presentation of the otherwise lovable anthropomorphised animal characters mentioned above, but the text could readily have included a more penetrating examination of the visual content to support its thesis.

While the contributions herein do not address such historical Disney visual representations, they do work to demonstrate how the visual elements of comics and other media formats can perform the same ideological work as the narratives that Mattelart and Dorfman examine, and even create their own more deeply nuanced political meanings out of historically-informed and culturally-inflected expectations and stereotypes of beauty, character types, gender, patriarchal authority, etc. In the related content of this special section, therefore—through the analysis of relevant examples from the world of animated cinema and commercial products' packaging—two of the contributing scholars explore some key aspects of the composite relationship(s)

between visual representations and their narrative significance in examples of animated cartoons and advertising, on one side, and the inner, embedded cultural-political implications of those visualisations, on the other. Noting the discussions of cultural studies scholars who focus on the contexts of East Asian cultural production, Harumi Befu (2001), Nissim K. Otmazgin (2014), and Heung-Wah Wong (2021), among the key notions that inform the essays focusing on animation, we embrace the need to highlight the differences between cultural regionalisation and cultural globalisation, as well as that of a recentred globalisation (Iwabuchi 2002). The latter has, in turn, reframed the discourses of the relations between the cultural production from (and the consumption of it in) East Asia and its receptions and understandings, or misunderstandings, in Europe: not just in terms of cultural globalisation of the creative industries and pop culture's output, but also in terms of the political-cultural framing and acceptance of the narratives and visual codings that the local audiences are able to understand and ready to accept, both culturally and cognitively (Pellitteri 2021a and 2021b). The articles on politics of visual media in this special section discuss these and other related nuances both from a cultural sociology perspective and via visual-cultural analyses of the materials used as case studies or as a litmus of the theses put forward in the section overall from mutually complementary vantage points.

Overall, the essays in this collection take the assumption that images and imagery of popular media forms are pregnant with political meaning that mutually constitutes the cultures and historical moments from which they emerge. Indeed, these contentions hold equally true for a range of visual media forms & formats that are not necessarily strictly "narrative", including advertising, journalism, and social media content, all of which may embed and subsume a narrative scenario into the persuasive accent of their messages. As Bellin has argued about fantasy cinema, "far from being 'timeless' or 'pure' entertainment, [these narratives] play a vital role in circulating and validating pernicious cultural beliefs embedded within specific social settings" (2005: 2). This influence is also especially relevant in an age of free-flowing transnational media image distribution stemming from the affordances of the Internet and its global digital reach, as international audiences struggle to make meaning from culturally diverse visual encodings while factions of conservative ideology fuelled by the globalising effects on cultural, economic, ecological, and social fears resolve into increasingly violent "new forms of racialized poverty and oppression linked to economic liberalism and racist

legacy” (Amin 2010: 2). These, in turn, give rise to what Slavoj Žižek refers to as “new forms of subjective pathology (the ‘post-traumatic’ subject)” (2011: XII) and “new forms of apartheid” (x), but they also hold out the promise for the decolonising and decentring of hegemonic image stereotypes in the construction of new international sensibilities and cultural enclaves, as well as proffer increasingly revelatory new forms of media interactivity and participation. Ours is certainly a fraught postmodern historical moment replete with new fissures, traumas, technological and social phenomena, and pandemics, all clouded in versions of what Fredric Jameson (2006) has referred to as the “post-modern sublime”, an overwhelming nebula of capitalist-inflected meaning that might seem beyond our powers to interpret.

In partial response, this collection of essays compiles the analyses of a variety of global visual media from recent scholarly case studies intended to foreground the contemporary and very political meanings circulating in images and imagery from across media environments and from around the world, from the identity-based interpersonal through to a now globally competitive cultural and economic hegemony. These are selected primarily from two larger panels that the Editors ideated and chaired at the 2022 IAMCR pre-conference hosted by Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool University in Suzhou, China: Panel 3—“Politics of Visual Media”, conceptualised by David Christopher and chaired by Marco Pellitteri, and Panel 5—“Politics and Narratives in World Comics and Animation”, conceptualised by Pellitteri and chaired by Christopher (see iamcr.org/beijing2022/world-of-narratives). Through the analyses of relevant examples from the various realms of transnational mass media environments, the contributing scholars explore key aspects of the composite relationship(s) between visual representations and their narrative significance, and of the embedded cultural-political implications of those visualisations.

The collection is completed by an extended and thorough review of the book *Animating the Spirit: Journeys and Transformation* edited by Tze-yue G. Hu, Masao Yokota, and Gyongyi Horvath (2020) – published with the University Press of Mississippi (Jackson, MS) –, a book which, in investigating some main spiritual dimensions of authorship and content within the broad medium of animation, addresses, on a lateral view, the general element of a deliberate politics of poetics, a perspective that is rarely adopted in animation studies.

REFERENCES

- AMIN, ASH (2010), The Reminders of Race. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 27(1), pp. 1-23.
- BARTHES, ROLAND (2009), Myth Today [originally from *Mythologies*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1957, pp. 117-42, 154-7]. In: John Storey (ed), *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader – Fourth Edition*. Edinburgh Gate: Pearson Education Ltd., pp. 261-9.
- BEFU, HARUMI (2001), Introduction: Global Context of Japan Outside Japan. In: Harumi, Befu — Sylvie, Guichard-Anguis (eds), *Globalising Japan: Ethnography of the Japanese Presence in Asia, Europe, and America*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 3-22.
- BELLIN, JOSHUA DAVID (2005), *Framing Monsters: Fantasy Film and Social Alienation*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- BHABHA, HOMI (1994), *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.
- BISSON, COLE (2020), *The Utopian Code: Cyberspace as a democratization of Technology*. Toronto: Ryerson University.
- BORDWELL, DAVID — THOMPSON, KRISTIN (2010), *Film Art: An Introduction – Ninth Edition*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- (2020), *Film Art: An Introduction – Twelfth Edition*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- BRIENZA, CASEY (2016), *Manga in America*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- CHING, LEO (1994), Imaginings in the empire of the sun: Japanese mass culture in Asia. *Boundary 2*, 21 (1), pp. 198-219.
- CHRISTOPHER, DAVID (2015), The Capitalist and Cultural Work of Apocalypse and Dystopia Film. *CineAction 95: Global Nightmare: Horror and Apocalypse*, pp. 56-65.
- (2017), Patriarchal-Industrial Anxiety and the Eco-Critical Simian Monster. *ARTiculate 2:2*, pp. 7-57.
- COOPER-CHEN, ANNE (2012), Cartoon planet: The cross-cultural acceptance of Japanese animation. *Asian Journal of Communication*, vol. 22, n. 1, 2012, pp. 44-57.
- COVER, ROB (2004), New media theory: Electronic games, democracy and reconfiguring the author-audience relationship. *Social Semiotics*, 14(2), pp. 173-91.
- (2006), Gaming (ad)diction: Discourse, identity, time and play in the production of the gamer addiction myth. *Game Studies* 6.1.
- DALIOU-BUL, MICHAL — OTMAZGIN, NISSIM K. (2017), *The Anime Boom in the United States: Lessons for the Global Creative Industries*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press – Asia Center.
- DE CERTEAU, MICHEL (1984), *The practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- FOUCAULT, MICHEL (2001), From *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison—The Carceral*; from *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1: An Introduction—Part Two: The Repressive Hypothesis; From *Truth and Power*. In: Vincent, Leitch et al. (eds), *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., pp. 1615-70.
- GREENE, ERIC (1996), “Planet of the Apes” as American Myth: Race, Politics, and Popular Culture. Middletown: Wesleyan UP.
- HALL, STUART (1997), Media Education Foundation Transcript. *Representation and the Media*. Mediaed.org/transcripts/Stuart-Hall-Representation-and-the-Media-Transcript.pdf.
- HOOKS, BELL (1989), Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness. *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, no. 36, pp. 15-23.
- HU, TZE-YUE G. (2010), *Frames of Anime: Culture and Image-Building*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- IWABUCHI, KŌICHI (2002), *Recentering Globalization. Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

- JAMESON, FREDRIC (2006), Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism [1984]. In: Meenakshi, G. Durham — Douglas, Kellner (eds), *Media and Cultural Studies – KeyWorks*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 482-519.
- LAI, CHERRY SZE-LING — WONG, HEUNG-WAH DIXON (2001), Japanese Comics Coming to Hong Kong. In: Harumi, Befe — Sylvie, Guichard-Anguis (Eds), *Globalising Japan: Ethnography of the Japanese Presence in Asia, Europe, and America*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 111-20.
- LILA2727 (2018a, July 28), Representation and Media Stuart Hall 1997 (Definition of Culture) [video]. *Youtube*. Youtube.com/watch?v=pGh64E_XiVM.
- LILA2727 (2018b, July 28), Representation and Media Stuart Hall 1997 (Definition of Representation) [video]. *Youtube*. Youtube.com/watch?v=HXdqV6cjHqs.
- MATTELART, ARMAND — ARIEL DORFMAN (2019), *How to Read Donald Duck* [1971]. Trans. David Kunzle. Pluto Press.
- MITCHELL, W. J. T. (2005), *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- MURRAY, JANET (2017), *Hamlet on the holodeck: The future of narrative in Cyberspace*. Cambridge (Ma): The MitPress.
- OTMAZGIN, NISSIM KADOSH (2014), *Regionalising Culture: The Political Economy of Japanese Popular Culture in Asia*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- PELLITTERI, MARCO (2010), *The Dragon and the Dazzle: Models, Strategies, and Identities of Japanese Imagination—A European Perspective*. Latina: Tunué with the Japan Foundation.
- (2021a), The European Experience with Japanese Animation, and What It Can Reveal on the Transnational Appeal of Anime. *Asian Journal of Communication*, vol. 31, no. 1, pp. 21-42.
- (2021b), Chapter 1: History and media discourse. Key Notions to understand 'anime'. In: Marco, Pellitteri — Heung-Wah, Wong (Eds), *Japanese Animation in Asia: Transnational Industry, Audiences, and Success*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 19-56.
- PETTIT, PHILIP (2001), *A theory of freedom: From the psychology to the politics of Agency*. Hoboken: Wiley.
- SAID, EDWARD W. (1978), *Orientalism*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- SHIH, SHU-MEI (2013), Against diaspora: The Sinophone as places of cultural production. In: Shu-mei, Shih — Chien-hsin, Tsai — Brian, Bernards (eds), *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 25-42.
- SOJA, EDWARD (1996) *Thirdspace*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- (2000), *Postmetropolis*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- STOREY, JOHN (2018), *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction – Eighth Edition*. London and New York: Routledge.
- STREET, J. (2007), *Politics and Popular Culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- VIE, MICHEL (2018), *Histoire du Japon: Des origines à Meiji*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- WANG, DAVID DER-WEI (2013), Post-loyalism. In: Shu-mei, Shih — Chien-hsin, Tsai — Brian Bernards (eds), *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 93-116.
- WONG, HEUNG-WAH (2021), Introduction. In: Marco, Pellitteri — Heung-Wah, Wong (eds), *Japanese Animation in Asia: Transnational Industry, Audiences, and Success*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 1-16.
- WOOD, ROBIN (1985), An introduction to the American horror film. In: Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods*, Vol. 2. London: University of California Press, pp. 195-220.
- ŽIŽEK, SLAVOJ (2011), *Living in the End Times*. London: Verso.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

David CHRISTOPHER is a Lecturer in Popular Screen Cultures for the Department of Film Studies in the School of Arts, Media, and Communication at the University of Leicester. He received his Ph.D. in Critical Cultural Studies in Media and Cinema from the Department of Art History and Visual Studies at the University of Victoria in Canada. He has worked as an educator in his various fields of study in Canada, Mexico, Japan, China, and the UK. His research and publication dossier covers digital cinema, Canadian cinema, ideology and culture, anarchist philosophy and apocalypse cinema, media studies and political economy, horror cinema and horror video games, Shakespeare and gothic literature.

Marco PELLITTERI, a cultural and media sociologist, is associate professor of media and communication at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University. His teaching and research focus on advertising, graphic design, comics, animation, transnational distribution and broadcasting policies of television shows, and societal components and issues related to the production, distribution, and consumption of creative and narrative media formats, with a particular attention to the dynamics between Europe and East Asia. Among his books: *The Dragon and the Dazzle* (Tunué with the Japan Foundation 2010), *I manga* (Carocci 2021), *Japanese Animation in Asia* (editor, with H.-w. Wong, Routledge 2021), *The Palgrave Handbook of Music and Sound in Japanese Animation* (editor, Palgrave Macmillan 2024, upcoming), and *The Palgrave Handbook of Manga and Anime in Europe* (editor, with M. Hernández-Pérez, Palgrave Macmillan, in preparation, exp. 2025)