The bias on characters' visual traits in Japanese animation and the misconceived "transnationality" of anime

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ABSTRACT

In the dynamics centred on East Asian cultural output, a special place is occupied by Japan's production (namely, comics and animation, or manga and anime respectively) and the distribution and widespread consumption of this vast output around the world.

Despite the interpolations many anime series or films faced when exported, a specificity of the medium was/is usually recognised by foreign audiences. However, issues often unfold in the reception of anime's visual codes, which entail problematical aspects in the grasping of the narratives and an underlying dimension of what I shall here call "graphic politics". Today, the visual-narrative logics of anime characters' physiognomies, and therefore, the motivations and intentions of their creators, are still largely misinterpreted based on culturally-inflected interpretations; this gives us clues on what the audiences of anime are, what they expect and draw from anime's stories, and what this means for a global politics of anime as a medium of expression and a creative output. In this article, through the description of visual examples and established, or, at times controversial, scholarship in the field, I discuss the persistence of wide misunderstandings in the cultural politics of anime's design and its impact on the reception of anime's intentions globally.

Among the collateral effects of this misunderstanding, a technical and moral justification to call (or imply as) "anime" animations designed and produced outside of Japan by non-Japanese authors seems to be emerging in the global discourse, thus privileging a fabricated idea of anime as just a "form" over anime as also and mainly a Japanese cultural artefact, in a momentous process of progressive dilution of the Japan-embedded characteristics of the animations made in Japan.

1. Introduction

In Japanese comics and 2D cel-animated cartoons (henceforth, manga and anime respectively)[1] have been widely adapted by myriad foreign markets. At one time the

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[1] There are layers and aspects of anime that overlap, or are equivalent to, those of manga. However, they are two different media and expression forms, despite having much in common. This is why from here on I will mention manga only casually, and will rather focus on anime, as a form of moving images travelling through the media technologies of film and video.

dynamic of adaptation was a technical process and a translational necessity that was frequently the only condition via which anime series and films could be purchased for distribution in certain national contexts and accepted by policy-makers, the public opinion, and broad audiences. However, a variety of other culturally constructed reasons led to more troubling material consequences, such as frequent target shifts (anime meant for teenagers were repurposed to children), the biased premise of irreconcilable differences between the situations presented in the originals and the presumed ability to understand those situations by a given foreign audience of youths and a cultural environment at large (Pellitteri, 2010: 84–122, 387–413), or by virtue of peculiar, geopolitical or religious reasons, including war: see the case of how the adaptation in Arabic, made in Lebanon in 1978 during a situation of war and resistance, of a 1975-77 science fiction anime, *UFO Robo Grendizer*, repurposed the already deep original feats of that adventure story and turned it into an ethical-political manifesto (El Mufti, 2020).

Amidst the several setbacks that anime as a medium and narrative form had and has to face in terms of invasive adaptations, general objections about their presumed un-educational content, interpolations, etc., a fundamental issue has undermined and continues to threaten anime's autonomy and dignity as a popular art expression and a culturally specific and geographically located output. Since the 1960s (that is, since the successful exportation of anime to Asia, the United States, and western Europe, then other regions), the unique cultural origins of this constellation of animation styles have been subverted by the conditions of its material production and international distribution, and the result is that the specific cultural inflections of the original works are misunderstood through a lens of appropriation.

This has also contributed to put into being a process of naming and/or perceiving as "anime" animations that hold (unconsciously/spontaneously or, more often, deliberately and by design for commercial purpose) resemblances with Japanese animated series for television and theatrical films. Which is neither wrong nor illicit: James Clifford (2005), after all, reminded us that culture *travels*, and I myself have been studying since the 1990s the gradual fusion of European comics' logics with manga's arche- or stereotypical styles among the new cohorts of comic artists (Pellitteri, 2006). Yet the phenomenon unfolding here has various problematical aspects. A major one of them is a progressive erasure of anime's Japanese geocultural origin via the persistence

of misreadings in the way the visual representations of anime's characters are seen and perceived by many foreign producers, viewers, and, oftentimes, scholars as well.

These considerations find their place in this journal issue because I see a preponderance of "white" Anglophone understandings of anime; a dominance that has somewhat rerouted the interpretations of anime's meanings and visuality towards a prevalence of western culture-centric ideas, thus producing an overlooking or a neglect of the understandings of anime by Asian and the Global Souths' observers and consumers.

2. Europe's perceptual bias of East Asian visual pop culture, and the mirage of Asianisation vs the factual un-Asianising of Asian pop-cultural content

We know that, in the international circulation of East Asian pop-cultural expressions, a key role is played by Japan's output and the distribution and consumption of this vast production around the world; and namely, as far as this article is concerned, anime. In this sense, a crucial element of such processes, a cultural agency by local recipients, has been often overlooked, although studies have been pointing this out in reference to both the Asian (e.g. Ching, 1994; Lai and Wong, 2001) and European/American contexts (e.g. Pellitteri, 2010; Brienza, 2016; Daliot-Bul and Otmazgin, 2017).

To start with the discourse on anime's journeys into foreign markets, I shall resort to four concepts that highlight the distinctiveness of East Asian content, namely, here, Japanese animation, even when vigorously changed into local adaptations: connectivity, portability, disintermediation, and anime's peculiar properties.

Keith D. Wagner (2021) applies to anime Tomlinson's (1999) concept of connectivity: the porosity of national/cultural borders, which, Wagner argues, enables anime to hold an intrinsic cultural portability. Here I would add that connectivity, by extension, can be intended as something more than a porosity of cultural borders among neighbouring countries, especially given the current immateriality of animation as a medial product, and considering what has been labelled disintermediation: the superfluity or redundancy of intermediary distribution, and/or of physical transportation, after the advent of digital information's transfer standards (Foster and Ocejo, 2015: 411–5). This has increased, facilitated, and sped up the global journeys of anime, and thus multiplied the chances that international audiences became accustomed to its visual rhetoric, despite the frequently heavy adaptations.

What seems, in this sense, striking, is the relative lack of shifts in meaning and understanding of these animated series and films from the original context to foreign cultural environments. In spite of all the interpolations and renaming of places and heroes, anime, as a *form* of animation (Hu, 2010; Berndt, 2018) and a body of diverse works, is recognised as such.

Certainly, the strategies of editing or interpolation adopted for anime series had and have, in different countries, different degrees of invasiveness. For example, one could say that anime considered "classics" in certain countries, such as *Mazinger Z* in Spain, aforementioned *UFO Robo Grendizer* in Italy, France, and Lebanon, or *Bishōjo senshi Sailor Moon* in Europe and the United States, are not exactly the same in their foreign versions: those overseas viewers did not really experience the originals but some kind of "original + *x* and − *y*", given the different cultural coding of the local language used for the dubbing, changes in the meaning of various dialogues, and often the balances among characters and the erasure of a few nuances.[2]

In other words, anime works are recognised as such thanks to formal, dynamic, and rhetorical recurring features that have also been labelled "anime proper" (Suan, 2017: 64–5): specific qualities in terms of visual codes, design, and, I add, situations and messages neatly distinct from other forms of non-Japanese animation. The notion of "anime proper" is, more precisely, a loan from Japanese critic Fusanosuke Natsume's definition of "manga proper" (Natsume, 1995, Eng. trans. 2013) to describe certain prototypical features of comics made in Japan; "manga proper" predates Jaqueline Berndt's influential concept of "mangaesque" (2012), which José A. Santiago Iglesias has then repurposed into its anime-related version, "animesque" (2018), drawing on Eiji Ōtsuka's work. Berndt summarises this matter as follows, and the reader can imply that manga and mangaesque also encompass the notions of anime and animesque:

> the mangaesque draws attention to both the specificity of manga for different actors and the transference of manga-derived attributes to a much broader media culture. As such a broad category, manga could actually be replaced with anime.

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[2] *Mazinger Z* (94 eps, Tōei Dōga, 1972–3), in Spain in 1978 as *Id.*, in Italy in 1980 as *Mazinga Z*. *UFO Robo Grendizer* (74 eps, Tōei Dōga, 1975–7), in Italy as *Atlas UFO Robot* (*Id.*), in France as *Goldorak, le robot de l'espace* ('Space robot Goldorak'), and in Lebanon as *Moughamarat alfada'i: Yufu-Ghirndayzar* ('Space Adventures: UFO Grendizer'), for all three countries since spring, summer, and autumn 1978 respectively. *Bishōjo senshi Sailor Moon* ('Pretty fighter Sailor Moon', 200 eps, Tōei Dōga, 1992–7), in France from 1993 and in Italy and the United States from 1995 as *Sailor Moon*.

> Media specifically associated with "limited" animation and the television-series format, recent anime share many of the properties that are otherwise regarded as mangaesque: the label of Made in Japan; a character design that incites fan appropriation; a recognizable cuteness in illustration style; a shared set of visual and narrative conventions; a standardization of production that accommodates transculturation; and an antirepresentational inclination, which was initially dubbed *manga/anime-esque realism* [...] by Ōtsuka Eiji. (Berndt, 2020. Regarding the mention of Eiji Ōtsuka, cf. Ōtsuka, 1989)

It is true that in anime—intended as a narrative medium and a form of cinematic entertainment with its own logics—we can catalogue formulas and cliches. However, its recurrent features are not the only key element of anime's languages: they are, rather, an overrepresented aspect that emerges as an idiosyncratic preference in the discourses of many non-Asian scholars. A part of these scholars appears to quite enjoy finding where, how, and how much anime is supposedly a form of animation so different, so alien, and so out of the norm if compared to an alleged standard of "western" (read: mainly North-American) animated cartoons, in an unwittingly essentialist mindset that exoticises anime. Additionally, in several studies on anime that attempt to establish a catalogue of those tropes, it is hard to find in these analyses a comparative perspective with other styles and traditions of animation that are also, visibly, based on similar sets of conventions: Disney, Warner Bros, MGM, Hanna-Barbera, etc.; while this may seem to betray a lack of interest or knowledge about the broader fields of animation and animation studies among many anime scholars, it would be productive and revealing to see that many of those US studio's animations are probably more formulaic than the, by comparison, wider variety of anime's studio-based visual dialects and animator-specific visual idiolects and formal innovations, both in auteur animation and anime for the theatres and in industrial anime for televised weekly seriality.

3. Anime's historically stratified, not strategic, hybridisms

The hardships that made and continue to make anime's aesthetics and underlying purpose as a form of spectacle difficult to understand free of cultural bias by general audiences are multi-folded. Here, I highlight two major dimensions of them. I will start by commenting on a notion that involves franchises originating from manga and promptly transposed into anime. This notion has been circulated in the scholarship as well as within the Japanese government, and maintains that manga and anime's

popularity is mainly or solely due to their being "cool", whereas research shows that it is elsewhere that the audience's affection is to be identified and analysed: namely, in the emotional features of manga/anime's narratives rather than in their however attractive visual aspects (Pellitteri, 2010, 2014, 2016, 2018a; El Mufti, 2020).

In this framework, Japan-based manga publishers and anime production companies, despite having had for decades the ability to export many elements and sectors of Japan's modern and contemporary as well as ancient/traditional culture, have to deal with a contradiction in the face of the mixed perceptions of the country abroad. "Japanese culture", as a broad phenomenon, is appreciated overseas, especially in its allegedly classic aspects: its heritage is admired and accepted "as-is", with a charge of exoticism and otherness that is taken for granted by western and overall foreign observers; instead, its current, contemporary culture is often seen with a sense of smugness due to the perception, by foreign publics, of a mark of otherness seen as alien, dissonant, incomprehensible. In-between are fusions (or better, perceived fusions) among the elements of a culture understood as "pure" and "native".

Now, the fascination with anime and manga among foreign audiences operates on both universal and particular layers (see Pellitteri, 2021a: 27–8). On the one hand, many anime works displaying marked features of current and urban Japanese culture as-is do not reach many countries, even though those countries' audiences are reportedly well receptive of anime; or, at most, the Japanese culture recognisable as such from the "outside" is downgraded via a removal of the characteristics considered most connoting. On the other hand, a huge amount of anime are based—graphically and thematically—on a certain syncretism, and that is why those stories have for decades been assessed as of great potential and purchased by producers and television executives of foreign countries more easily (Van Staden, 2011; Santiago Iglesias, 2018); e.g., among others, polymedial IPs including long and successful anime television series originating from manga such as *One Piece* (1997–, by Ei'ichirō Ōda), *Naruto* (1999–2014, by Masashi Kishimoto), or *Slam Dunk* (1990–6, by Takehiko Inoue). In them, we find represented situations and narratologic styles often defined as "hybridised": eclectic mixes of aesthetic, thematic, and moral references, to the benefit of Japanese consumers but which, obviously, audiences of other countries do not disdain.

Such franchises may carry a form of stylistic eclecticism that some have called not only a "hybridism" but moreover, a "strategic hybridism" (Iwabuchi, 2002). But let us

not get dazzled by such optimistic generalisations: more realistically, this is due to a crystallisation of trends stratified in the professional and expressive habits of manga artists since the 1940s and then in those of animators since the 1960s; nonetheless, the syncretic traits of anime attracted overseas brokers and cultural policy makers since the 1970s (Pellitteri, 2019). Many examples seem to confirm this idea: the striking success of stories like the manga, then anime series and films *Versailles no bara* (1972, 1979–80 respectively) or *Lupin III* (1967–95, 1971–) and many others suggest that the more anime's creators and producers manage to bring features of perceived Japanese culture and society (verbal and visual languages, relationships among characters, values and sentiments promulgated) *together* with elements from other areas of the world (sceneries, costumes, props, characters' psychologies), the higher the probability that such work, with other conditions being satisfied, will attain a "universal" success.[3] (Similar conclusions are presented in Cooper-Chen, 2012: 52–5 and Aranda, 2020.)

This is not a causal law: clearly, there are numerous successful manga and anime that do not meet this condition fully. Yet, in the recent past and currently, the manga franchises and their anime versions whose creators have cogently blended Japanese and foreign elements have met with remarkable success abroad; let us think of *Meitantei Konan* ('Famous detective Conan', 1994–, by Gōshō Aoyama), a typically Japanese detective story by settings, situations, and characters, but based on the structures of the classic European scientific detection novellas (E.A. Poe, A.C. Doyle, Ellery Queen), which in turn were already in the 1930s emulated with talent by Japanese crime story writers such as Ranpō Edogawa. It seems, then, that multiculturalism and whichever "hybridism"—strategic or not—are confirmed and sublimate here.

Anime works are usually considered, by their domestic as well as foreign audiences, "100% Japanese" in spite of the fact that, in terms of production routines, they are often produced and technically made inter- and transnationally. This, in the eyes of some observers who prefer to see anime mainly as a form over anime as a cultural product,

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[3] *Versailles no bara* is a 1972 manga by Riyoko Ikeda set in pre-revolutionary Versailles and Paris, which in 1979 was turned into a TMS-produced 40-episode anime series directed by Tadao Nagahama and Osamu Dezaki. *Lupin III* is a celebrated manga created in 1967 by Monkey Punch and turned into a variety of anime series and special feature films. The "others conditions" I imply are mainly related to a mode of mass distribution through nationwide broadcastings and theatre releases.

complicates their operational definition as a Japanese-only and/or deeply-Japanese cultural expression. It is true that anime, as an industry, relies, in most instances, on internationalism of production. This means that hundreds of non-Japanese artists and technicians work on multiple stages of outsourced technical realisation on anime TV series and films that were originally designed by Japanese scriptwriters and directors, key-frame animators, background artists, and character designers. These Japanese creatives all share a *milieu* and sets of skills that they acquired in their homeland, as well as an overall culturally situated approach to animation and the minimal movements of characters, their expressions and nuanced, coded positions of body parts such as fingers, neck and head, eyes, smiles, etc. A most evident outcome of outsourced productions, from the standpoint of a thorough analysis of the details of these animations, movements, colouring, and characters' features, is a fluctuating quality in technical results and expressive feats. This translates into an aesthetical, motion-related, and linguistic dilution of the "anime proper", as happens since the 1970s with outsourced servicing from other Asian countries. It is easy to observe in many anime—especially from the 1980s and 1990s—a lack of homogeneity in the quality of drawings and animations.

Nonetheless, while many details of the outsourced stages of production can be considered involute, unintentional, and clumsy, what remains as an alleged "anime proper" is in the instructions of the storyboards and the guidance prepared by the Japanese directors and animators. We will then have an anime product that may be imperfect in several technical aspects (which are well spotted by hardcore fans and professional experts in the field) but still keeps the main and key properties of anime productions: it is *this* that is recognised by audiences and fans all over the world as "anime proper" and as what Lamarre (2009) called "animetic" movement and design, despite the often faulty nature of these mixed productions. Reception of anime by non-Japanese viewers, in Asia and beyond, may at times, in fact, produce vaguely or ostensibly "animesque" styles where Asian animated productions see the light. For example, a recent study on Malaysian animation (Nasir 2021) shows that local creators *do* want their cartoons to resemble Japan's anime but, in the end, they carry out their work within an inevitably local mindset; in animating their characters, their cartoons are informed by a culturally situated understanding of design, timing, postures, and

gesticulation. (Which, per se, brings in something virtuous, enjoyable, in these perceived differentiations).

The issue of intending non-Japanese animations as "anime" will be back in section 5.

4. The pitfalls of *mukokuseki* vs anime's actual internationalist aesthetics

On a virtually opposite side of the discourse conducted thus far, the specificity of anime as a medium and its aesthetics converge into what I feel forced to call an absurdity. Several scholars as well as fans appear to frame anime as a "purely Japanese" expression of popular culture; but, at the same time, they also seem to see, in anime, a de-nationalised form of entertainment which is, allegedly, hardly recognisable as "Japanese". This logical short-circuit mainly lies upon, and is informed by, a notion labelled *mukokuseki* (roughly, 'nationless'). This concept was used, among others, by Kōichi Iwabuchi in his aforementioned book *Recentering Globalization*, an otherwise brilliant piece of scholarship. There, the author used the concept also in reference to manga and anime. The assumption of this application of *mukokuseki* was that anime, by virtue of certain visual features of its characters identified mainly via their various hair colours and their eyes' shape and size (relative to the face's dimension), would allegedly look "Caucasian". Iwabuchi wrote, about manga and anime's characters, that their "bodily, racial, and ethnic characteristic(s) have been erased or softened" (2002: 58).[4]

Similar claims or even just implicit assumptions by many scholars are highly problematical. An essay by Lars-Martin Sørensen is a typical example. This author wrote that anime characters "are generally fair skinned and have only slight, if any, racial features. This facilitates their transmission among the peoples of the western world. Not just because it deals a pre-emptive strike to racial prejudice, it also makes the characters easier to keep track of for non-Asian viewers than is the case with for example seven distinctly 'Japanese looking' samurai" (Sørensen, 2009: 22); this betrays, in my opinion, a deep-rooted visual racism all while officially trying to deny it.[5] Cooper-

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[4] As also media sociologist Casey Brienza noticed (Brienza, 2016: 3), Iwabuchi subsequently revised his ideas about manga and anime's *mukokuseki*-ness, acknowledging a cultural recognisability of these media's output as Japanese by international audiences. Nonetheless, the broad adaptability and employability of the notion made it highly popular among anime scholars, many of whom basically took it for granted, revealing the bias (or scholarly naivety) that I am annotating here.

[5] Here I use the word "racism" because it is Sørensen himself who points out the notion twice via the adjective "racial", but also because the author appears to be suggesting, and this is perhaps the most

Chen, already in the abstract of her aforementioned article, seems to posit her claim that anime characters would have a "Caucasian look" (2012: 44) as an apodictic truth, and then, in the paper's body, she adds that "from the mid-1960s, anime artists had started drawing non-Japanese faces" (*ibid*.: 48); whereas those faces are precisely, in most instances, *stylised* Japanese faces. More on this later.

Amy S. Lu, in a mid-sized survey on US-American college students (2009), reveals that her respondents assumed that the faces of anime's characters looked "Caucasian". Lu's article is a good study that shows how a non-Japanese audience's understanding may be deceived by a visual design that was originally *not* intended as signalling "Caucasian" characters, but for which the process of projection and identification into idealised and stylised figures did the trick; this is not a specificity of US viewers and it has occurred in many other countries in Europe and the Americas. Thus, what can be "contested" here (certainly not to Lu) is not that viewers around the world make assumptions on what they believe the ethnic origin of a certain character and therefore the original intention of the Japanese designers must be, but the fact that the cognitive apperception of many anime researchers is as biased as the average viewer's. There are scholars, however, like Marc Hairston (1999), Terry Kawashima (2002), and Michael Arnold (2004), who challenged this bias that entails ethnic erasure. Hence, I am glad that this *cahier de doléances* is not isolated. Here I offer my arguments, keeping in mind the variety of perceptions of anime's characters and meanings as perceived in Asia.

To understand the problem of stemming from Iwabuchi's peculiar use of *mukokuseki* on anime, one has to also consider weigh in another concept he brought forward: "cultural odour". The reticularity between the two notions is triggered when one has to decide whether an allegedly de-nationalised cultural product, in the way it is

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striking claim in the whole quote, that it is supposedly hard for westerners to recognise and distinguish the faces of different Asian persons or characters. Whether the reference to the "seven samurai" is to the anime production *Samurai 7* (dir. Yoshifumi Takizawa, 26 eps, Gonzo, 2004-5) or the main characters of Akira Kurosawa's classic live action film *Shichinin no samurai* (*Seven Samurai*, 207', Japan 1954, where, of course, all actors are Japanese: does this create any discomfort among westerners?), can be argued by readers in autonomy. Yet, by reading Sørensen's description, I would benevolently lean towards the option of the anime series, in which the titular warriors are an eclectic, postmodernist update of the seven samurai, with a wide range of skin tones and hair colours, and women and a cyborg in the group. But the reason of this overflowing fantasy syncretism is not that of exporting anime to western countries, as a huge body of evidence has proven: anime is, per se, a self-sustaining industry within Japan, and exports are, although sought-after, a variably (and truth to be told, increasingly) lucrative addition to the internal market's revenues.

presented on the market, is also "culturally odourless" or can display a certain cultural (i.e. "national") recognisability. The problem in the concept is that Iwabuchi placed on the same level non-animated objects such as Sony's *Walkman* (which he posited as odourless) and the Harley-Davidson bikes (for him, bearing not an odour but a fragrance) on the one hand, and the features of anime's characters on the other hand.

However, while a music tape player and a motorcycle are lifeless objects without a face or human(oid) looks, cartoon characters do have heads and bodies, and therefore we tend to establish correspondences between those faces and whom we think those faces are supposed to resemble: me?, or other ethnicities?, and to what degree? Not to mention the fact that those characters talk, move, behave, feel, and act according to their creators' artistic decisions and/or cultural automatisms; therefore, a cultural aroma is simply inevitable in any animated production, whichever attention their creators *might* have put into making that product, in their view, scentless. Iwabuchi claimed that making *mukokuseki* anime or manga was a preoccupation of Japanese creative industries, backing the claim with *one* interview with director Mamoru Oshii.[6] More variously sourced reviews show instead that most design strategies in the manga and anime industries are based on long-established habits that are not so much reasoned but come from a tradition or long-running trends (cf. again Aranda, 2020).

If we look closely, most anime works, even those for which the producers may want to boast an albeit vague "neutrality" in the drawings or in the story, are at best informed by an *internationalist* attitude: characters from different ethnic and national provenances (Kim, 2013) and, as a consequence, by-design diversified on a stylistic level; yet, elements of a loosely definable "Japaneseness"—elements that are, from the outside, qualified as pertaining to an ostensibly typical Japanese culture—are

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[6] The point of contention here comes from a big misunderstanding. It is about the main character of Oshii's animated feature film *Kōkaku kidōtai* ('Anti-riot armoured police squad', internationally known as *Ghost in the Shell*, 1995), which generated the false idea that *all* anime characters are designed to look Caucasian or with undefined ethnic traits. In reality, Motoko Kusanagi, the main character of the film, is a borderline individual whose entire body, including the head and face, is a sophisticated robotic technology, and was designed (both in the fiction and by the film's creators, under Oshii's explicit wish) to look like a mixture of East Asian and European ethnic traits: a *hāfu*, or 'half', in the derogatory term used in Japan for individuals born of inter-ethnic couples—which, by the way, in the end makes the choice of Scarlett Johansson (+ strategic makeup) as the lead role in the 2017 live action version of the franchise quite spot-on, against the misled criticisms from fans lamenting that a Japanese actress should have been cast). This is not the case for the majority of anime characters, as we see later.

perceived as such by foreign observers, in good faith. A famous instance of this tension is highlighted by a diplomatic near-accident between Australian writer Peter Carey and famous animation director-author Yoshiyuki Tomino (the creator, in 1979, of the long-running *Kidō senshi Gundam* anime- and model-kit franchise).

Gundam is set on space colonies in the Solar System, made by terrestrial human beings where there are various nationalities that are not precisely specified. As I wrote above, a Japanese-ish filtering is perceived by westerners, rightly or wrongly. Carey, in *Wrong about Japan* (2003), when conversing with Tomino during his trip to the country prior to composing the book, insisted that in his opinion Gundam, in the design and weapons (namely, the laser-beam baton drawn from its back), was a very explicit quote from samurai's swords; Tomino flatly denied it and said that he had wanted to create a science fiction armour, almost abstract or at least culturally neutral—if that is even possible. Who was right: the observer from outside Japan or the Japanese creator? In other words: is it legitimate for an external observer to "see" Japanese things even where the Japanese creator declares that no, he did not put those things there and does not see them? In the global media society, which was already highly developed in the 1970s, the walls of national cultures were and are anything but impermeable, and aesthetic and narrative references have been bouncing from a place to the other. In 1977, *Star Wars* had achieved international success, including in Japan, also thanks to the postmodernist quotationist obsession of its creator, George Lucas: a naive and dreamy as well as intelligent and cultivated young man from California. Lucas, in writing about his Jedi order, the mask of Darth Vader, and the "light sabers", was inspired precisely by the samurai, a stereotypical idea of their code of honour, the shape of their helmets, and the *katana*; in a cyclical recurrence, it seems relatively well arguable that the interculturally floating idea of the energy-beam sabre or (kendō-like?) rod in *Gundam* was taken from the Jedi's light saber, which was inspired by the samurai's sword. Was Tomino or Carey right? I wish to leave this call to the reader.[7]

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[7] Having established that anime and manga, as media and expressive forms, are simultaneously *ur*-Japanese by cultural origin and globalised by aesthetic syncretism and commercial exportation, a composite category of their either spotted or overlooked, but objectively inescapable, tokens of "Japaneseness" can be expressed narratively in many ways. Japan can be presented for example in its folklore, its myths and legends, or in its everyday life or ancient history. Japan in anime can only be a scenography or a real main theme: let us think of a beautiful and delicate work like the long television animated series *Maison Ikkoku* (approx. 'The *maison* of the eternal moment', 96 eps, Deen, 1986-8,

The followers of the *mukokuseki* myth still today say or imply that *mukokuseki* is an attribute that defines anime's Japaneseness, although *mukokuseki*, in relation to manga and anime, is an assumption, not a proven theory. Some recurrent visual features of many (not all) anime, such as big eyes or blond hair, are the historical result of a fascination with European fashion and beauty that, originally, was solely addressed to the local, Japanese, audience. There is ample evidence on this (Zank, 2008; McCarthy, 2010 and 2011; Pellitteri, 2010 and 2018b; Kim, 2013; Masuda, 2015). The problem of viewers not perceiving Japanese faces in anime is in the end based on an Orientalist view that those characters, as such, *should* look naturalistically Japanese because the producers are… Japanese. To explain the nonsensicality of this thinking, let us quickly consider two celebrated comic-strip characters, US-American E.C. Segar's *Popeye* and Belgian Hergé's *Tintin*, both created in 1929. Not unlike manga or anime, Popeye and Tintin are not drawn in a naturalistic style but according to their authors' idiolects. They do not look "American" or "Belgian", because they are highly stylised: are they therefore *mukokuseki*? We should conclude that they must be, assuming that we are not using a double standard for the claims about anime. But I bet US readers clearly see an American sailor in Popeye, as well as they see a WASP man from Kansas in Superman, even though Kal-El is an alien from far-away planet Krypton. In fact, a caricatural Americanness of Popeye is communicated through the sailor's behaviour, attitude, and subtle design markers such as his big jaws and the dimple in the chin. Tintin's colonialist Belgianness proceeds by subtraction: Tintin, visually, is a "neutral" persona, whereas all non-Belgian characters around him (Chinese, Africans, Italians, etc., whom he meets during his journeys) are racially and behaviourally marked—and for some, in a racist way, from a 2020s perspective.[8] Are then the patterns of anime's alleged *mukokuseki* a deliberate strategy, or are they, rather, an acquired *habitus*? Even more importantly: the idea of neutrality takes us precisely towards the notion according to

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from Rumiko Takahashi's acclaimed 1980-7 rom-com manga series), where the story and all situations happen in suburban Japan, on the outskirts of Tōkyō. "Japan" can be seen in the ways in which the characters speak, behave, eat and drink, and love each other.

[8] As further proof, readers can check out that Segar's inspiration for Popeye was a real man from his hometown in Illinois, Frank "Rocky" Fliegel; and Hergé's for Tintin was Palle Huld, a Danish 15-year-old boy he read about in the news.

which the visual traits of anime's characters correspond, in fact, to an idealised version of *Japanese* faces and physiognomies rather than any European face- or body type.

Indeed, anime's "Japaneseness" corresponds to the "Europeanness" of *Astérix*'s French BD albums or to the "Americanness" of *Spider-Man*'s US-made comic books. It is not just anime works that carry features of their creators' culture: this is embedded in virtually any cultural product made by creators who are raised and work in a certain cultural/national environment. In fact, ethnic markers drawn by animators and character designers give us clues, in the visual world of this or that anime, to the supposed ethnic origin of a given character. In Yōichi Takahashi's football-centred manga and anime *Captain Tsubasa* (1981-), the ethnic markers of the European or South American ones, if compared to the Japanese characters, are expressed through minute indicators, such as a slightly different nose, various hair and skin colours, longer eyelashes for some, an oblique trait of ink along the European characters' nose to show a deeper and longer nasal sect's line if compared to the design of the Japanese players' noses; etc. That is, for the Japanese audience and for the foreign ones, who is from where is inferable, thanks to these minimalist marking traits, which display a set of differences while ensuring the design's homogeneity, in order to avoid graphical confusion and, even more dangerously, caricatural offence in "monstering" (Miyake, 2010) foreigners.

In Hayao Miyazaki's *Kurenai no buta* (*Porco Rosso*, 1992), set in Europe (Italy, Spain, Istria, Slovenia, Dalmatia), the design of the characters is pretty much that which we find in the same director's *Tonari no Totoro* (*My Neighbour Totoro*, 1988), a movie declaredly set in Japan. We can observe that the only elements of graphical difference between the European women or men in *Kurenai* and the Japanese characters in *Totoro* are a few, very subtle markers, such as the eyelashes of women and the jaws of certain men—the main differences being in the behaviours and gestures: *this* is what makes them really "alien" to a Japanese viewer. If you watch Miyazaki's *Kaze tachinu* (*The Wind Rises*, 2013) closely, you will see how different the German character Castorp is, compared to the "standard" (in the typical visual ecology of Japanese animated cartoons) design of the Japanese characters: Castorp has a huge nose, scary wide-open blue eyes, long eyelashes, prominent chin, and fat body. He reminds us of the illustrations from *The Japan Punch* or *Tōkyō Puck* from the Meiji era in the late 19th century. This means that in the visual environment of Miyazaki's works (and of many

other Japanese animators) all characters usually have designs that correspond to an idealised Japaneseness, *not* to an impossible "ethnic neutrality" or a vague "Europeanness"; and this goes at times even beyond the awareness of the artists. When design deviates from these customs, it is because animators, like Miyazaki, want to create a sense of otherness.[9]

In the aforementioned *Versailles no bara* or in *3D anime~Ie naki ko* ('3D animation: Homeless child', 1978, 52 eps, TMS, by Osamu Dezaki), characters can be said to "look Japanese" even though they are narratively European and often with blond/brown hair. By "characters look Japanese", I mean that even though these series are entirely set in Europe (in these two specific cases, France), their characters' facial design falls within the visual strategy of how most Japanese characters are drawn in anime/manga set in Japan: this way, the Japanese audience can easily identify and project into those "exotic" characters, who are foreign because of the setting, but very familiar in terms of visual design. The visual traits of Oscar and Marie Antoinette in *Versailles no bara*, or of Remy and Mattia in *Ie naki ko*, may seem "Caucasian" (whatever this means today) to average European/American viewers who think that big eyes and blond/brown hair must refer to European faces. On the contrary, everything in these characters' design—faces, body types, *ratio* between head and shoulders, and the style of the "wide" eyes—is historically embedded in the codes of representation of *Japanese* characters in Japanese anime *set in Japan* (Pellitteri, 2010: 83-122, 389-413).[10]

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[9] On a related note, I see a connection between anime's non-written norm of providing minimalist markers informing viewers through these small clues and the oftentimes stressed discourse of Japan and other East Asian cultures being based on so-called "high context communication", that is, keeping things a bit vague, counting, normatively, on the expected degree of correct, discrete interpretation by the other party. Notwithstanding the simplistic over-representations or misreadings of the alleged differences between what have been defined as high-context cultures and low-context cultures, this framing was proposed by western scholars to attempt providing a practical key to unlock communications between US or European traders and East Asian interlocutors; an entire self-proclaimed discipline, "intercultural communication", thrives in the United States as a magic formula to smoothly run effective meetings and meals among managers and then cut deals with the foreign counterparts. Still it does not seem to be working when more subtle cultural nuances are at stake.

[10] For the sake of completeness, the designers of these two series (and of most anime with non-Japanese characters) were able to build a range of facial types, where the main characters display a design that typically subsumes "Japanese" traits, while the deuteragonists and some antagonists display physiognomic markers, especially diverse nose types and hairstyles, that clearly refer to European figures, blended with more nuanced features. From *Versailles no bara* (character designers: Shingo Araki, Michi Himeno, Akio Sugino), see Louis XV, Louis XVI, the Duke of Orléans, or Parisian soldiers such as Alain de Soissons; from *Ie naki ko* (character designer: Akio Sugino), see the Italian itinerant musician Mr Vitali, or Mr Barberin.

I would hence conclude that the *mukokuseki* "strategy" in anime is an ungrounded myth mostly based on perceptual and cultural biases and/or lack of actual investigation, cherished as a truth among a large cross-section of scholars whose observation point is that of an ethnocentric mindset that makes it very difficult for them to assess these phenomena through accurate formal analysis, especially for those who tend to establish "white" apperception as *the* normative standard.

5. The case of Global North scholarship's shadow on anime

In this section, I propose something that is somewhat old-fashioned—hopefully, not totally obsolete—as a format of scholarly discourse: the critique of a constellation of intellectual biases on the topic here at stake, using an exemplary book as a litmus.

The book is Stevie Suan's *Anime's Identity* (2021). While appreciating the expertise its author displayed in it—the work also won, with merit, an academic prize[11]—I do not see as well grounded the way *Anime's Identity*—as a token of North American and European scholarship coming from the liberal arts and critical studies, but improvable when it comes to social theory and dirty-hands fieldwork—frames Japanese animation, and namely, anime, in relation to both the local and global contexts in which anime works are envisioned, designed, and produced.[12]

The book is a discussion on that enormous subset of animation created in Japan called anime: some of its formal feats—in Suan's own analysis and interpretation, where he highlights a selected few of them—and the way the author frames these animations as what we should at this point define, judging from Suan's vision of them, as an iridescent, versicoloured, almost Schrödingereian object that apparently may be variably seen as either Japanese or not Japanese, depending on the point of observation and the features of the medium that are stressed. My core points of contention of what I call a Global North's anime scholarship, exemplified in Suan's book, are: (1) the definition of Japanese animation, which, contrary to what not a few northern authors seem to repeatedly state, is indeed animations created in Japan by Japanese creators and studios in a Japanese cultural situatedness; (2) the theoretical as well as operational definitions of "anime" in

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[11] The 2023 Japan Society for Animation Studies Award. I reviewed the book in early 2023, before I knew it would win a prize, already with a positive assessment amidst arguing my disagreement on its thesis (Pellitteri 2023).
[12] I provide a concise semantic and operational clarification on this definitional aspect (what anime is) later.

relation to "Japanese animation"; (3) a contended Japaneseness of anime, which is often, and quite ostensibly, framed based on an incorrect conceptualisation of "transnationality" via positing that anime has always been transnational.

Suan's ideas of anime are representative of a vast (mainly North American) scholarship that sees anime in an ecumenic fashion as a cultural artefact and a media form or genre. Ecumenic, because it seems to give the same weight to a (however limited) variety of ideas often in mutual disalignment, but also because it does not assert a clear stance of what anime is/are supposed to be framed as, under the inclusive assumption that a composite object like anime can't and shouldn't be defined in one way; which in principle I agree with, if it were not for the fact that this should not take us to theoretical fallacies and factually contradictory statements. Said liberal art scholarship on anime often aims to deconstruct the differences between what Suan, in his book, calls transnational networks, and the implied notion that nation-states are perceived as (and, technically, are) with closed borders. Here I see a confusion in the intellectual and factual understanding of the difference between "inter"-national and "trans"-national: the two prefixes mean and imply different things (in relation to anime, I illustrated the two different processes at stake in Pellitteri, 2021b: 28–31). Entangled with that, is the discourse on the problematical attempts at defining anime (Suan, pp. 69–75).

While Suan wants to map what he calls the transnational nature of the anime industry's history, the foci of his vision are selective: i.e. little is said about Europe as a major market, or Latin America, or Central Asia and the Middle East (the latter three are never mentioned); when hinting at the relationship of Europe with anime (e.g. pp. 63, 72), the sources provided are few and not particularly cogent with the topic, although there is no scarcity of theoretical and empirical scholarship on the media- and cultural history of anime in Europe, and in a variety of languages other than English. It is good, though, that detailed reconstructions and analyses are devoted to North America (which is justified not only because of those markets' importance but also because the author is a US citizen) and, what is more important, the (East) Asian region, which until 2021 had been relatively overlooked in the scholarship in English. That year, in fact, an edited volume came out, contributing to at least in part fill this research gap as well as taking a conceptual stance on the otherwise fuzzy concepts of global and transnational *vis-à-vis* anime (Pellitteri and Wong, Editors, *Japanese Animation in Asia*).

A major discourse conducted in much of said northern scholarship is the framing of the animations created outside of Japan by non-Japanese studios: ones that use/perform creative and visual styles which, more or less blatantly, draw upon the typical, recognisable features of anime. In contrast, for this study, I posit anime as *those 2D cel- or cel-shading animations designed in Japan by Japanese creators in Japanese animation studios and addressed to a Japanese audience and media system*. A key concept in Suan's discussion here is that of a "generative [...] capacity of repetition" (p. 55), which, coincidentally, was also well analysed in the aforementioned book *Japanese Animation in Asia* in a revealing case-study chapter on Malaysian animation studios drawing upon anime's styles and logics, written by a Malaysian scholar, Suraya Md Nasir (the already cited Nasir, 2021) as well as in two more contributions relating to the emergence of local creative/imitative output stemming in Asia from the habit of Japanese studios to outsource stages of anime's technical production to companies located in other Asian countries (Kimura 2021, Wagner 2021). But when commenting on the purpose or attempt of systematic imitating the design and styles of anime (rather than borrowing them selectively) by studios around the world, Suan is again ecumenic, praising these imitative animations in the spirit of intertwined international circulation of designs.

The point of contention regarding the ways in which "anime" has emerged in the last 20 years in US and northern European scholarship is to assess, culturally, politically, industrially, and technically-expressively, what it means when parts of a narrative/aesthetic product are materially made in a country other than that which the creators, ideas, and design come from. The reason I am wary of this inclusive stance is not because animations made outside of Japan, when partly or strongly imitating anime, should not be made. Every creative approach to popular arts is to be respected as such, but then any personal judgment is equally free. My point of preoccupation here is in the unaware ideological background of that ecumenism: in my view, it is some kind of justification that if anything can be said to be "anime", then anime, as a media form and a culturally situated set of styles, logics, tropes, postures, etc., can be reproduced anywhere, diluted to infinite degrees; this justification has, in turn, the convenient effect of making the marketing and labelling as "anime" of anything vaguely resembling to anime legit and automatic; as, in fact, is happening with animations and comics made in the United States and Europe at least since the early 1990s: in the US and Canada, these comics are called "OEL manga" (original English-language manga), and in

Europe, "Euromanga" (in Italy the variant label was "spaghetti manga"); recently, a new generation of European comics artists, especially fond of manga, openly call their work "manga". As for animation, fans have started to refer to certain animated series made in the US or France as "anime", as we see a bit better towards the end of this section.

What seems to justify morally this quite inclusive stance is the fact that stages of anime's material making more often than not, currently, occurs in places other than Japan, that is, in foreign animation studios that serve Japanese companies and make parts of the technical work: from in-betweens to colouring, etc. But this is different from animations—rightly or not, informally labelled as "anime"—entirely designed and produced outside of Japan, imitating features of anime's production routines and/or of their expressive characteristics.

In the ambit of what Suan sees as a local/global tension, and—he posits—because of it, anime as a media form is claimed as a venue where one can spot those contradictions and tensions. Here, among the key conceptualisations Suan proposes, one pops up strongly: the author unquestioningly attaches to anime as a media form the notion of "transnationality", stressing it frequently, leaning on phenomena such as outsourcing or a variety of multi-national contributing budgets. But Suan's conceptualising of transnationality does not seem too preoccupied with the sociological and practical differences between multinationality, internationality, and transnationality, and does not consider the cross-conceptualisations between the prefixes multi-, inter-, and trans- not only with the concept of "nationality" but also with those of "regionality" (used repeatedly in the book) and "culturality", which all charge the phenomena giving life to Japanese animated productions with different meanings, because they are linked to various dimensions and procedures of how anime works are made and circulated. A common issue I noticed in this regard in western scholarship on anime is a lack of actual consideration for the empirical components of anime's creation and production, which poses an important problem in explaining what anime (as a media form) is and how anime (as a body of productions) are produced, even in a multiplicity of physical sites, in ways that *still grant it/them* to be legitimately called all-Japanese. The confusion can be summarised in this sentence in a conversation between Suan and Wendy Goldberg:

> Because of this consistent tying of anime to Japan, the transnationality of anime becomes a point of contention. Works that are openly transnational (for instance, with

productions that advertise as partially done in China, or by a Chinese studio) get scrutinized as "not really anime," or "not anime enough." This is despite the fact that most anime, unbeknownst to most viewers, are actually transnationally produced. (In Goldberg, 2023)

I see different concepts mixed up here that are alternatively related with each other in some cases, or unrelated in some others, and forced into an imagined direct relationship to the (1) cultural creation, (2) aesthetic design, (3) cinematic styles, (4) material making, and (5) financial production of Japanese animation. In that interview, Suan claims: "in the book I try to foreground the transnational as the point of departure—that anime is always already transnational". This definition of "transnational" is formally incorrect because, for Suan, outsourcing phases of the material production embodies one main aspect of transnationality, but (A) he does not concede that a multi-sited production does not mean that the ensuing output is to be transnational or transcultural; it could just be, and often is, strictly national and mono-cultural, no matter in how many foreign outsourcing studios parts of the production have been made; and (B) the book observes a double standard: anime are transnational to Suan because of that, yet he does not apply the same criterion to all those US-issued movies where material making (point 4) partly or entirely happens elsewhere, and financial support (point 5) may partly stem from companies based in other countries.

When a Hollywood film is shot outside of US territory and/or to some extent financed by non-US capital, I do not think anybody would deny its "Americanness", but Suan contends anime's Japaneseness as soon as part of its material production or capital is not Japan-based. If this is the trend in thinking, it is only natural that Japanese companies and government actors *do* want to stress the Japanese origin of anime. It is not necessarily a craving for "soft power"; it is a matter of what the Japanese stakeholders want to publicly claim as what they see as correct representation. So, knowing about companies from China that establish studios in Tōkyō so as to be able to formally, legitimately say that their animations are "made in Japan" (therefore, they are "anime"), this reveals further contradictory visions on anime.

"So, for anime, although this is probably an unpopular position, I see the broader nation branding of anime as effectively claiming anime as Japanese culture despite anime's decades long global visibility and transnational production" (*ibid.*) Suan here is seemingly saying that anime studios, with a century-spanning history based on

Japan-created franchises, properties, capital, and managerial staffs active on Japanese soil and composed of entirely Japanese budgets, personnel, and artistic crews, should better avoid making the claim of being Japanese because their production is multi-nationally sited and popular, here blending the context and concept of creation/making, and the cultural *milieu* which those stem from, with the *multi*national production and *inter*national (*not* transnational) distribution of their output.

A few scholars on anime also betray issues in understanding soft power as a theoretical concept with specific practical dimensions that are measurable empirically. When they mention it, they often take it for granted, without defining it operationally, as if the concept were self-evident, and as implicitly seconding the self-servicing idea that Japanese state-run agencies hold of what it is supposed to be (for critical stances on soft power and animation in Japan and China, cf. Pellitteri, 2018 and 2024). Suan states that Japan's alleged soft power via anime is in that anime is considered and advertised as Japanese, for example through events such as *AnimeJapan* (pp. 62, 79-82), whose motto is "everything [that is] anime is here", thus rhetorically neglecting that it is an initiative created in Japan by Japanese companies to promote a huge body of series, films, and franchises created by Japanese animators, manga artists, publishing houses, marketing firms, think tanks, almost entirely composed of Japanese personnel and working with entirely or almost entirely Japanese budgets.

The basic point of Suan's book in this regard seems to me twofolded. First, the claim that anime is a media form that has never been entirely Japanese and therefore, by extension, can be used, adopted, by any other production anywhere in the world, because of its ostensible, perennial, *ab origine* transnationality; so much so that if an animated production today is made with Chinese capital, by a Chinese studio composed of Chinese staff, in an imitation of, or even innovating, the most typical and recurring elements of anime and is marketed as "anime", *then* that is an anime. Second, Suan's discourse may elicit in the reader the notion that there can be gradients of what I could call "anime-ity" or "anime-ness". This seems to bring about the idea that anything can be taken (borrowed or appropriated, you pick the term) and turned into a new thing with new properties but with the same name that before belonged to something *other*; and therefore, anime, as a form with its own (although ever-evolving) history located in Japan, becomes a disposable element that is expropriated from its cultural owners/creators, and turned into a repurposed, purported label and object.

This reasoning stems from a strand of scholarship that assumes anime as transnational as a self-obvious datum. Jaqueline Berndt, a widely cited scholar in manga studies within the fields of literature, aesthetics, and art history, seems to confirm this, when she states, *inter alia* committing, in my opinion, a minor *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* fallacy, at least seen from my perspective as a media sociologist: "*Due to* anime's turn into an easily recognizable transnational media form, its national specification […] *has lost* relevance" (2021: 3, my italics), which seems to me, moreover, to contradict the masterful side of her essay, in which she reflects on a few representative definitions of anime as a medium and on whether it is supposed to be Japanese or transnational[13] (*ibid.*: 6-7): she opportunely cites Lamarre's (2009) theory of anime as a media technology, and this seems to me a solid corroboration of the thesis of anime's multi-layered linguistic and technical feats as a composite device— opportunely, in Lamarre's definition, an *apparatus*—that, as I am pointing out here, cannot be reverse-engineered as a whole that easily. That is why, I will add, foreign productions trying to cherry-pick aspects of anime result, visually and narratively, in animations whose general visual and plastic effect is often, to many international fans and perhaps some scholars alike, that of something merely counterfeiting anime. Berndt then, correctly, points out that:

> the fact that the discursive 'nationalizing' of anime (i.e., its ascription to Japan) paradoxically increases in proportion to transnational distribution (Zahlten 2019: 313) may be taken up as a challenge to revisit the media-cultural identity of anime under transmedial and transcultural conditions. The anime-typical assemblage of polarized tendencies could also be discovered in the relation between dissolution and reinforcement of media specificity. (Berndt, 2021: 10)[14]

This last point above brings me to further discuss the struggle that Japanese companies and other stakeholders based in Japan are facing in reclaiming anime as a

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[13] The implied notion and the limitation in vision among many scholars is that one option would (inexplicably) exclude any others, whereas I would say: can't anime be at the same time Japanese in terms of *genius loci* and cultural coding, multi-national in the technical making, and, in specific cases, transnational in capital? The question is, of course, rhetorical.

[14] The reference to Zahlten, 2019 was already in Berndt's text. I have added the complete reference in the Bibliography.

specifically Japanese creative industry and output, for the reasons that I am trying to bring forward in this short study.

Far from suggesting an illegality of any animesque animations, the problem with *authenticity* is not about forbidding anybody the freedom to name their endeavour the way they want, even if technically misleading, but about acknowledging the *actual* originality of an artistic output, and of a production system, and of specific aesthetics, to their rightful and historically indubitable creators. The fact that a Japanese industrial consortium created the initiative *AnimeJapan* claiming that "everything anime is here" should be neither censored nor indicated as a hyperbolic claim, because it is a factually true statement. The situation is in fact the opposite: productions like *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (or ATLA, Nickelodeon *et al.*, 2005-8) or *Voltron: Legendary Defender* (or VLD, the 2016-8 Dreamworks/World Events remake, not the 1980s US mashup based on the 1981 Tōei Dōga anime *Hyaku Jūō Golion*) were perceived as "anime" by many stakeholders and audiences, but they are just *not* anime: they are US cartoon productions that may be entertaining and of interesting value per se, but want to be so in a mimicry of some peripheral, cosmetic aspects of average anime (Japanese, that is) productions. The mimicry of visual styles from anime amidst pronounced differences in all the rest (animation techniques and characters' motions, diegetic structure, acting timing, etc.) produces the effect of misleading audiences to think that an anime may be like *Avatar* or *Voltron*, both in terms of Americanisation of postures, gestures, narrative rhythms, character design (physical and psychological characterisation), and settings, as well as in terms of national composition of capital and crews. Nothing forbidden here: I am describing a process. A process that is ongoing, and where, luckily, observers outside of the scholarly world as well as cultivated fans and the creators themselves are contributing with basic common sense.[15]

The process, in a legitimate fashion of it, is not impossible, but it passes through certain conditions. Italian director Gabriele Muccino made *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006) and still this film is purely Hollywoodian in capital, aesthetic, and public

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[15] On ATLA: Dububoi 2019, Serrao 2021, Peterson 2022, Shayo 2023. On VLD: Baker-Whitelaw 2016 and threads on *Quora* ("Is Voltron considered an anime?", Quora.com/Is-Voltron-considered-an-anime) and *Reddit* ("Is Voltron Legendary Defender an Anime", Reddit.com/r/Voltron/comments/9zyvm8/is_voltron_legendary_defender_an_anime/?rdt=54327).

perception; Michael Arias, a Tōkyō-based US-American director, makes anime: the works he directs can operationally and aesthetically be called so because they inherently keep a Japanese origin, *mise-en-scène*, and techniques. Both Muccino for his intense, Will Smith-starring film, and Arias with the acclaimed *Tekkonkinkreet* (Studio 4°C, 2006, not accidentally based on a manga, by Taiyō Matsumoto), to make those movies had and were very willing and even eager, to absorb the rules, norms, and production routines that are so deeply rooted in Hollywood cinema and in Tōkyō studios' animation respectively; the two filmmakers did not reinvent the two systems and did not inject much of, say, Neorealist cinema or US animation's gesticulations in their films—on the contrary, Muccino was hired for his talent behind the camera and his style so faithfully reperforming the Hollywood logic, and Arias was/is a director deeply in love with "everything anime", so much so that he knew that, if he wanted to do *anime*, he *had to go to Japan* and work in a Tōkyō animation production studio. It is as simple as that.

Suan nowhere in *Anime's Identity* proposes a comparison between what he claims to be anime's transnationality and any of the other experiences happening in the world today or in the past that can be compared and superimposed to the situation of anime's multi-located production sites. He suggests (pp. 120, 133, and elsewhere in the book) that anime might end up being equalled to a broader "East Asian" aesthetic rather than Japan keeping a recognised sovereignty of the label, or, instead, anime might be fully absorbed into the idea of a total globalism and transculturality. What in fact Suan is stating is not entirely clear: not only does he suggest throughout the volume that anime is already quite transnational/transcultural, but the entire book appears to speak as an explicit plea and sophisticated justification of the technical right for any animation producers to claim their productions as "anime" if they see it fit with their marketing strategy. This looks like a double standard: Suan never involves US pop culture and creative industries in the discourse, and never suggests that, say, a franchise like the internationally hugely popular *Fast & Furious* series (ten movies to date) or others such as the *Mission: Impossible* 7-instalment series should be intended as transnational or a-national (and nonchalantly reproducible in their logic and output), even though the casting is often international, the shooting locations are picked and exploited here and there across the globe like empty postcards, and the money itself to produce those

movies comes from capital originally located in various other countries, such as in China, or India, Russia… or Japan.

6. Concluding note

Currently, anime is the most successful media content from Japan in Europe and the Mediterranean subregion, as well as in several parts of the Americas and central Asia. Anime works are attractive to diverse international audiences for numerous reasons. Many among them lie upon their being "alternative" to European and American cartoons in the senses of a different possible choice and of a deep otherness. Despite the interpolations many anime series or films faced when re-voiced and heavily re-edited (through scene cuts or the omission of episodes from broadcasting), a specificity of the medium was/is usually recognised by foreign audiences, regardless of age and nationality. However, systemic issues unfold in the reception of anime's visual codes in foreign countries, which entail and embed problematical aspects in the grasping of the narratives and an underlying dimension of what I would call "graphic politics". These difficulties have made the aesthetics of anime's ethnic implications difficult to understand. Today, the visual-narrative logics of anime characters' physiognomies, and therefore, the motivations and intentions of their creators, are still largely misinterpreted based on Orientalist (Said, 1978) or, alas, "white" ethnocentric assumptions.

Such culturally-inflected interpretations give us strong clues on what the audiences of anime are, what they expect and draw from anime's stories, and what this means for a global politics of anime as a medium of expression and a creative output. In this article, through reference to many visual examples and established, or, at times controversial, scholarship in the field, I have discussed (in Sections 2 through 4) the persistence of these wide misunderstandings in the cultural politics of anime's design and its impact on the reception of anime's "intentions" globally. I have shown and argued that the persistent, insistent misreadings among foreign audiences of the actual cultural-political intention and aesthetic meaning of anime characters' ethnic and national markers has produced widespread misconceptions on "what anime want" (to paraphrase W. J. T. Mitchell's famous essay on what pictures, supposedly, want).

Among the collateral effects of this misunderstanding (discussed in Section 5), US- and European scholars, producers, and marketers may have found technical/moral

justification to call "anime" animations designed and produced outside of Japan by non-Japanese creators, thus privileging an idea of anime as just a "form" over anime as a Japanese cultural artefact, in a momentous process of dilution of the Japan-embedded characteristics of the animations made in Japan.

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