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ON POLITICS OF VISUAL MEDIA

EDITED BY

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Editorial

Continuing research in a time full of sound and fury

Maxime DANESIN | Lorraine University, France

Manuel HERNÁNDEZ-PÉREZ | University of Salford, UK

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

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Dear readers, students, fellow scholars,
welcome to this eleventh instalment of *Mutual Images* Journal, titled “On politics of visual media” after the main section of this present piece.

If only we had known...

We left our previous instalment, in December 2021, with hope, a renewed energy, and a pinch of naivety toward preparing the return to the “true normal”;¹ that is, doing our best to come back to a more direct, human-way of connecting with each other, and not let grow further the insidious notion that online research – and teaching – activities were to become the “new normal.” As exemplified by our workshops over the years, we had, and still believe that the human component is, above all, primordial in what we do.

However, after the *annus horribilis* of 2020, and the confusion and uncertainty of 2021, 2022 seems to have been determined to prove the old French proverb “Jamais deux sans trois” (lit. “never two without three”, meaning that things always come in threes). Two months after our publication, on the 20th of February, Russia started its illegal invasion of Ukraine, and war and fear erupted in Europe in a way not seen since World War II. Witnessing the harrowing weeks, soon turned into months and now years of destruction, mayhem, and human rights violations, pushed by a fascist rewriting of History, has left a sickening taste of ash in our mouths, as both individuals and researchers in *Humanities*. And as often, students and professors have been paying a heavy price: for resisting, in Ukraine, for protesting, in Russia.

¹ See our Editorial in *Mutual Images*, Issue 10, December 2021.

It could have been you; it could have been us.

It can still be you; it can still be us. Almost two years later, the extreme isolationist and nationalist spin keeps going, from Hungary and Slovakia to the USA, where the banning of books and manuals in schools is ramping up to such a point that it feels that, even in our democracies, we are not that far away from hearing a match being struck – Ray Bradbury must be turning over in his grave.

There is something Macbethian in watching unfold such a violent and absurd echoing of the worst hours of our civilisation, like a whisper in those winds of change: “Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing”. And yet. And yet, what is happening must be a reminder of the importance of what we, as readers, students, scholars in the Humanities, are doing. Of the importance of dedicating our time, our energy, our lives to decrypt societies and cultures, in order to record, to learn, to understand, and when the needs arise, to do better, to be better. It serves as a reminder of why we, at *Mutual Images*, even started our adventure to explore mutual representations. This is why we must not succumb to despair, nor fall prey to the voices of those who consider useless, unwelcomed, or even dangerous in some specific cases, such research.

2022, a partial yet necessary gap year

In parallel, the 2022-2023 period has been an odd one for MIRA as a group. On the one hand, we moved from our 9th International Workshop which took place in Salford, Manchester (UK), in December 2021, to our 10th, in Cluj-Napoca (Romania).

The first, titled “Medievalism in East Asia – I: From Printed Story-Worlds to Digital Role-Playing Games”, gathered international researchers with interest in representations of Medievalism in Popular Culture from a cross-cultural perspective. Due to the existing restrictions, this workshop was organised as an online event by Manuel Hernández-Pérez (University of Salford, UK), Maxime Danesin (Lorraine University, France) and the support of the Digital Curation Lab at the University of Salford (UK).

Unfortunately online as well, the event in Cluj-Napoca was organised on the 5th of November 2022 in collaboration with the Sembazuru Japanese Centre for Japanese Studies (Faculty of Letters, Babeş-Bolyai University, Romania), and dedicated to the omnipresent seasonal imagery in Japanese Language, Culture and Literature.

While the proceedings of the latter are expected to be published for our twelfth issue, the present instalment presents two of the most interesting materials collected from our 9th workshop: an article by Stacey Jocoy (Texas Tech University, USA) and Heike Hoffer (the Ohio State University, USA) on the neo-medieval sounds of the *en vogue* composer Kajiura Yuki – an indirect link of the upcoming *The Palgrave Handbook of Music and Sound in Japanese Animation* (in production, to be released in May 2024) edited by Marco Pellitteri, and in which both Jocoy and Hoffer themselves contribute a chapter each –; and a welcomed contribution by the early-career scholar Andrea Mariucci on the cultural transition from *Dungeons & Dragons* to *Dragon Quest*. Those are followed by the main section of this issue on politics of visual media, curated by Marco Pellitteri (Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, China) and, as our guest editor, David Christopher (University of Leicester, UK) – presented in the section's editorial.

If we have been pleased with our online collaborations, meeting wonderful new colleagues each time, a certain tiredness toward that system and the lack of direct, human contact, has made us consider taking one year-gap for our workshop activities – which we will be resuming, thus, in 2024.

On the other hand, after moving from a semi-annual to an annual publication, our Journal keeps evolving, this time with the appointment of Manuel Hernández-Pérez (University of Salford, UK) as Vice-Editor and Strategic Supervisor. As a scholar, he has been involved in the activity of this journal and this association since June 2015, when he participated in our second Mutual Images Workshop, held in Kobe, Japan. Since then, Manuel has become a close friend and collaborator of this community, being involved in many other activities organised by MIRA. He has contributed with original research to the journal and the workshops, has been serving as a member of the Editorial Board (2017-2023), and has helped in the organization of our Summer Schools. He has also contributed as co-organiser of the editions VIII (Kyoto, 2020) and IX (Salford, 2021) of the Mutual Images International Research Workshop.

Together with this incorporation, we are also presenting some structural changes: while Marco Pellitteri (Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University) will carry on with his functions of Main Editor and Scientific Supervisor, Maxime Danesin (Lorraine University, France) is now Vice-Editor and Editorial Supervisor, and Aurore Yamagata-Montoya (MIRA) has stepped down from Editorial Manager. As friends and colleagues,

the editorial team wishes to express their warmest thoughts for Aurore's dedication all these years. Dr Yamagata-Montoya has contributed to the development of this project since its inception and has been adopting different roles in the association but most significantly, the Presidency (2015-2023). Aurore is leaving the journal's management having in front of her new professional endeavours, but will still be part of this project in one way or another by staying at the head of MIRA.

These changes are our way to adapt to the new challenges we face, and to support them, we had decided to take a necessary gap-year, thus publishing this issue now. Since 2016, *Mutual Images* Journal has been pioneering research on East Asia and the transnational consumption of popular culture; under the new editorial team, the Journal will carry on with its mission by providing high-quality, peer-reviewed articles and disseminating information about the activities of MIRA. And in order to do so, a few more changes are predicated to be done next year; we certainly hope that you will find them satisfactory. Stay tuned.

ARTICLES

Composer Kajiura Yuki and neo-medieval anime soundtracks

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ABSTRACT

This study semiotically interrogates the historical imaginary evinced in the neo-medievalist musical topoi found in Kajiura Yuki's distinctive music for anime, which is easily recognised by its eclectic mix of sounds and styles gathered from across the globe. Her early scores employed a compositional method practised in Japanese popular music since the 1990s, which treated the creative act as a process of musical curation. This technique is evident in Kajiura's handling of medieval Gregorian chant, which - as she has explained in interviews - she did not learn from studies in music history but rather from the German band Enigma and their hit album MCMXC a.D. from 1990, where samples of chant were mixed with Euro dance pop and French rap. The anime Noir from 2001 contains an excellent example of her approach, combining chant-based vocal tracks with energetic dance rhythms. Enigma used chant to call on modern neo-medieval tropes that highlight the pleasures of mysticism, religious devotion, and sexuality freed from morality, and Kajiura has replicated this imagery in Noir, making chant the symbol of an ancient criminal order that both worships and overtly sexualises femininity as embodied by the main female characters. Kajiura's later style expands the technique of the Gregorian chant-influenced sound she developed in her earlier works: shifting away from Latin lyrics to her invented nonsense language of "Kajiurago" (literally "the language of Kajiura" in Japanese), with her ethereal chant delivered primarily by female voices. This shift is partially due to her collaboration with FictionJunction and Kalafina and is also a reflection of the strong female anime protagonists. Her signature sound enlivens the soundscapes of both Fate/Zero (2011) and the blockbuster anime, Demon Slayer (2019). The track "Brace up and run!" opens each episode of the latter, highlighting female voices chanting Kajiurago as a musically haunting reminder of the otherness of the past.

KEYWORDS

Kajiura Yuki; Neo-medievalism; Anime; Music; Japan.

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1. Introduction

Born in 1965 in Tokyo, Japan, Kajiura Yuki is a celebrated performer, composer, and record producer who has established herself as one of the most sought-after musicians in modern anime soundtracks. She has composed both background music (BGM) and theme songs for a wide variety of works including some of the best-known titles in anime since the early 2000s such as *.hack//Sign* (2002), *My-HiME* (2004-2005), *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* (2011), *Fate/Zero* (2011-2012), *Sword Art Online* (2012), and

Tsubasa: Reservoir Chronicle (2005-2006), to name only a few. She recently made headlines for her collaboration with another respected anime composer, Masaru Shiina (professionally known as Go Shiina, born in 1974 in Yokohama, Japan), on the soundtrack for the first and second seasons of the world-famous *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba* anime (2019/2021-2022) and the spin-off film *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba – The Movie: Mugen Train* (2020).

Kajiura's music is identified by a famously eclectic sound that is unique among anime scores, making use of specific musical features that have become the hallmarks of her musical style. These include the prominent use of modal scales, high female voices heard in pairs, high instrumental timbres, folk-song-like elements, and propulsive background percussion, all of which render her works instantly recognisable to even the most casual listener. The remarkable consistency of her music has resulted in some critical comments on fan blogs and social media platforms that she is writing the same pieces over and over in slightly different guises without creating anything new, but these detractors overlook some of the most interesting aspects of Kajiura's professional strategy. The continued success that she has enjoyed for over two decades is greatly due to her keen ability to pick projects that allow her to position her music strategically in anime with very specific contexts, encompassing narratives based on certain themes and particular types of characters rather than selecting based on the anime's popularity or fame. In this way, Kajiura opts to score anime with modes of visual presentation and narrative content that serve as the best complement to her idiosyncratic music, making for a memorable blend of music and image. Anime with strong female characters and stories about time distortion are among her favourite topics, resulting in her music being strongly associated with the *isekai* (parallel world or fantasy world) genre, which often have a distinctly European neo-medieval flair featuring knights, dragons, and magic. These *isekai* productions allow Kajiura to employ musical traits that will lend a sense of exoticism to the anime, such as her attraction to, and particularly unique usage of, medieval Gregorian chant. This paper traces how Kajiura's distinctive musical style developed and how it connects to the soundscape of European neo-medievalism in modern Japan. The first section looks at Kajiura's early years when she was building her career as a composer and trying to formalise the musical techniques that would become her signature sound, including aspects derived from Gregorian chant. The second section covers Kajiura's

later years to the present day, where she is able to be more selective about her projects and has demonstrated a clear preference for specific themes in anime that complement her neo-medieval musical traits.

2. Kajiura's early years as a professional musician, discovering Gregorian chant, and *Noir*

Kajiura formally launched her professional career as a musician in 1992 at the age of twenty-seven when she left her job as systems engineer for the Japanese giant Nippon Telegraph and Telephone Telecommunications Company (NTT) and debuted as a singer in the pop duo See-Saw. Much of her motivation to succeed in the music industry came from the memory of her late father who had passed away when she was a teenager, an avid music lover whose diverse musical tastes had a profound impact on Kajiura's musical style (Eplus "Spice" Entertainment Media, 2016). Up until 1992, the extent of Kajiura's professional experience amounted to a few live concerts that a talent agency arranged for her each year, so by the time of her debut she was already old compared to the teenage idols that remain the norm in Japanese popular music, adding extra uncertainty to what was already a risky profession (Mainichi Broadcasting System TV, 2003). In addition, Kajiura's timing for a career shift could not have been worse, coinciding with the aftermath of the late 1980s "bubble economy" collapse that plunged Japan into a long period of economic stagnation. Luckily, she was able to live in her family home with her mother—another music lover who had met Kajiura's father in their university choir club—making it possible for her to devote her full attention to musical pursuits (Nikkei xwoman online, 2020).

Upon leaving NTT, Kajiura threw herself into the musical world of Tokyo, where she was exposed to ways of thinking that had a major impact on the development of her mature compositional style. Like many musicians of the time, she was influenced by musical ideas originating both inside and outside of Japan, an exchange supported by greatly improved forms of audio storage and sharing technologies such as compact discs and sampling (Oricon News, 2018). Joining Tokyo's music scene in the 1990s meant that Kajiura found herself in the middle of a musical movement known as *Shibuya-kei*, a niche yet highly influential form of Japanese popular music that originated in the youth-oriented area of Shibuya in Tokyo and held close ties to the fashion industry. Shibuya-kei music was based on a highly personalised pastiche of sound materials drawn from sources worldwide, which music scholar Mori Yoshitaka described as:

...eclectically fashionable hybrid music influenced by different musical resources from around the world...Shibuya-kei musicians gathered together all kinds of music, and thanks to the prosperity of the late 1980s “bubble economy” that helped make Shibuya area CD/record shops some of the most eclectic in the world in musical genre, they were able to listen to, quote, sample, mix, and dub this music, and eventually create a new hybrid music. (Yoshitaka, 2009: 225)

Shibuya-kei members were not interested in creating faithful or accurate representations of the various musical genres from which they borrowed, nor did they seek to be recognised as possessing any sort of distinctive artistic originality, and instead were only concerned with how their curated music collections could function as tools for personal expression and embody their individual musical tastes. Shibuya-kei musicians made no effort to hide the fictitiousness of their musical world, meaning that, even if the reference point of a certain piece of music seemed obvious to the listener, its usage and context might be entirely different from its original purpose. Pieces that shared no musical, cultural, or historical relationship could be combined in a single-track, a process that allowed each Shibuya-kei member to reveal their own “personal imaginary musical geography” (Seibt, 2018: 166). Though not a Shibuya-kei member herself, Kajiura frequently interacted with musicians who were, leading her to adopt some Shibuya-kei traits, most importantly the process of making music from a curated collection of eclectic sources without concern for context, a way of thinking she would apply to Gregorian chant.

Just as Shibuya-kei members were seeking new sounds and modes of self-expression, musicians globally were experiencing similar changes in their artistic worldviews with the influx of “world music”—music from sources outside the European Western musical tradition—that burst onto the popular music scene of the late 1980s and early 1990s in albums such as Paul Simon’s *Graceland* from 1986, to give one example. The production of so-called worldbeat recordings was soon at an all-time high, making it possible to engage with music from any culture or country and leading musicians to seek out new and intriguing sounds wherever they could. It was not uncommon for a worldbeat lover to spend hours in record stores combing through the wealth of existing titles or mining field recordings and other academic research artefacts for unique sounds to use as samples (a practice that would result in a few major copyright lawsuits later on; see Tan, 2008: 222).

At the same time, musicians were also looking within their own musical traditions for new insights. Folk and traditional music enjoyed a substantial revival and, even more surprising, Europe and America saw a growing popular interest in music from the Medieval and Renaissance periods of Western music history, which had previously been unknown outside a handful of specialised academic ensembles. These dedicated groups strove for a return to musical practices that reflected the artistic attitudes and behaviours of musicians from long-ago eras and, to paraphrase Upton, sought to make an objective discovery of the musical past authenticated by musicological research (Upton, 2012). As a result, early music sounded quite different from what most listeners thought of as conventional classical music. The sound of early music was so unexpected that it was easy for listeners to treat it as a kind of exotic world music rather than part of the timeline of classical music, fuelling a boom in neo-medieval recordings that appealed to an entirely new market of consumers (ibid.).

One of the run-away neo-medieval hits of the 1990s was the CD *Chant* from 1994, which featured the Benedictine monks of Santo Domingo de Silos monastery singing thousand-year-old Gregorian chants (EMI Angel, 1994). Performed in the traditional manner by an unaccompanied male chorus singing with no vibrato, the chants sounded ethereal, pure, and uplifting, leading the CD to be marketed as a stress reliever or meditation aid, not as an academic exploration of a supposedly authentic medieval musical practice. This marketing strategy paid off and the album went double platinum in the United States, hitting #3 on the *Billboard* magazine popularity charts and earning it global recognition, making it likely that Kajiura was aware of this recording given the eclectic proclivities of both herself and her Shibuya-kei colleagues.

Another access point for medieval music in the 1990s was through sampling, most famously heard in the album *MCMXC a.D.* produced by the German group Enigma in 1990 (Virgin, 1990). This genre-changing CD skyrocketed into the top-ten record charts of ten different countries and peaked at #6 in the United States, ultimately occupying a position on the American *Billboard 200* chart for an impressive 282 weeks as well as going quadruple platinum. *MCMXC a.D.* comprised a diverse mix of influences that combined the sacred sounds of Gregorian chant with secular examples drawn from Euro dance pop, French rap, synthesised Native American flute, spoken text, and many other styles and genres. Sexually suggestive materials, such as erotically charged heavy breathing, were also a prominent part of the aural mix. Enigma described the album as

part of their musical search for mysticism and exoticism, using chant to invoke exotic images of secretive monks and their mysterious monastic life in a way that acknowledged the original context of the music while simultaneously recontextualising it as an object of worldbeat styling. As Yri explained in her doctoral dissertation on medieval music in the late twentieth century:

[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... (Yri, 2004: 106)

By drawing on medieval music in this way, Enigma created “one monolithic, essentialist presentation” of medieval tradition, to borrow Yri’s term (Yri, 2008: 67). The combination of sacred chant with sensual and erotic elements was controversial in Christian countries familiar with the religious purpose of Gregorian chant and its strong connection to the Catholic Church, but its provocative nature also drove the album’s success worldwide and eventually brought it to Kajiura’s attention in Japan, where the historical images of monks and esoteric Christian rituals that Enigma called upon, as well as the musical codes associated with those images, were unfamiliar and allowed for chant to be repurposed in entirely new ways.

Kajiura appears to have learned a great deal from Enigma, particularly in the group’s eclectic use of sound sources that appear somewhat similar, at least on the surface, to the curatorial methods of the Shibuya-kei. The major difference was primarily intent. The European members of Enigma did not ignore the context of Gregorian chant so much as make it a historical and cultural signifier of a long-past time and place meant to draw on their audience’s existing knowledge of the medieval era. Having established a musical context, Enigma promptly violated it by adding sounds from unrelated cultures or sexually charged lyrics that conflicted with the historical purpose of the Gregorian chants and complicated their meaning, making their disregard for chant’s context provocative by design. In contrast, for Shibuya-kei artists, context was irrelevant in the first place, especially when it came to music that had no origin in the

Japanese experience, so Gregorian chant became another way to create a general sense of exoticism that was not connected to any particular historical context.

The composer herself has not spoken formally about her interest in Gregorian chant or Enigma but did address the idea briefly at the 6th FictionJunction Fan Club event held Nissho Hall in Tokyo on 13 October 2013, during which she and members of her performing group FictionJunction answered questions from the audience covering both personal and professional topics. A member of the club calling herself “Tou” made an audio recording of the event and transcribed it, putting the transcription on her personal blog. As with many of Tou’s blog entries concerning Kajiura, Tou has shown particular dedication to sharing the contents of the fan event as quickly as possible, posting her blog entry only one day after the session with a comment that she “didn’t finish typing this until one in the morning” (Tou, 2013). Tou’s transcription included this query to Kajiura from an unidentified audience member:

Fan question: “Miss Kajiura, since you’ve lived in Germany for elementary and junior high school, are you influenced by Gregorian chant stuff like Enigma?”

Kajiura’s response: “In those days, there was a boom in innovative loops using Gregorian chant...they’re trippy. Hypnotic effect. Enigma was kind of the spark that ignited it, and I was influenced by it. So I made a lot of loops.” (Tou, 2013. Transl. by Nakayama Reona)

The questioner refers to the years Kajiura spent living in West Germany after her father was transferred there when she was in elementary school, making the assumption that this early childhood experience living abroad correlated to Kajiura’s later interest in Enigma and Gregorian chant due to their European origins. Kajiura’s response glosses over the topic of her childhood, focusing instead on the Japanese musical culture of the 1990s and her reactions to hearing Enigma. She describes how she was influenced by Enigma’s technique of looping (repeating short sections) of musical tracks to create a “trippy” and “hypnotic” effect, especially the process of making loops from Gregorian chant. In other words, Kajiura followed Enigma in treating Gregorian chant as a kind of building block for constructing music, not as an example of Christian religious music. Since Kajiura never studied music formally at a university or conservatory, she derived chant’s basic tropes from Enigma, working from this musical model as a starting point rather than from a position of historical authenticity.

The idea of historical authenticity and its relationship to the Japanese understanding of the medieval is eloquently described by Jennifer deWinter in her work on neo-Bushido tropes in anime. As she explains, medieval media genres try to sort out ideas about an authentic reality, while neo-medieval genres have no reference to the historical past and “only re-present or re-signify the medieval as understood through other texts about the medieval...one method in which the neomedieval in anime is produced is through referencing previous forms of new media—anime, comics, manga, novels, film, television, and so on—thereby becoming further removed from the referent because of media genre practices.” (deWinter, 2021: 73,75) For Europeans and Americans, ideas of the medieval are exotic but also have cultural and historical meaning, which is what Enigma relies on to give context to the use of Gregorian chant in their music. In contrast, the Japanese see the European medieval as a location of exoticism without any immediate cultural or historical reference point. Since the European medieval never existed in Japan and has been derived from other forms of media, it offers numerous tropes that can easily be manipulated to fit the needs of the anime narrative. deWinter continues, “As such, the medieval as representation and commodity was always open to the play of neomedievalism. If the real never existed, then anime never needed to stay as true as possible to the real.” (ibid, 77) When dealing with neo-medieval ideas that never had an authentic point of reference, the point of reference often becomes whatever representation of the medieval introduced these tropes to the creator in the first place. In this case, Kajiura learned about the medieval from Enigma’s example of Gregorian chant representing secret societies of medieval monks, mysticism, and religious devotion. She has imitated Enigma’s example while also adopting aspects of Gregorian chant as a foundation of her overall musical style, evolving far beyond Enigma’s sampled loops and affecting her thinking in the realms of timbre, phrase, melody, line, and atmosphere. Since the neo-medieval is a mediated version of an inauthentic reality, Kajiura could impose a wide variety of new meanings on chant as she sought out musical styles that evoked a sense of age or the passage of time but could also be manipulated to fit her modern musical vision evoking past and present at the same time.

Kajiura is known for picking and choosing her anime projects carefully, favouring series that will be a good match to her particular musical style, but she did not have that privilege in her early career and initially produced some unremarkable scores for

anime, stage musicals, and video games. This work in video games garnered her enough attention to be asked to compose the BGM for the TV anime series *Noir*, which aired between April and September of 2001 on TV Tokyo. *Noir* would be a landmark in Kajiura's musical development as the first score in which she displays the musical traits that now characterise her mature style including propulsive background percussion, high instrumental and vocal timbres, and folk-song like elements, with aspects associated with Gregorian chant such as Latin or Latin-esque lyrics, modal scales, and voices heard moving in pairs at close intervals (technically a trait of medieval organum, a later development of chant with an added accompaniment voice).

Given Kajiura's preference for anime with strong female characters and stories that feature time distortion, it is no surprise that she agreed to provide the music for *Noir*. The basic plot concerns two women, the French-Corsican Mireille Bouquet and Japanese Yūmura Kirika, who agree to work together as killers-for-hire while they seek answers about complex mysteries in their past. During the course of the series, Mireille and Kirika encounter a secret organisation, named Les Soldats, which is looking for girls destined to become the legendary "Noir," a pair of divine maidens that serve the whims of the organisation as expert assassins. The senior members of Les Soldats have identified Mireille, Kirika, and a third girl named Chloe as candidates to become part of the Noir duo, resulting in the characters being forced into various deadly tests of skill by Les Soldats.

Kajiura fashioned two types of chant-inspired music for *Noir*. First, a more conventional example can be found in a short introductory scene that appears in every episode after the opening credits, in which a cryptic poem describing the Noir duo is read by a narrator. An image of two stone statues appears on the screen depicting young women holding large European-style swords and dressed in flowing robes that leave little to the imagination. Behind them is a swirling array of brightly coloured line drawings showing human figures that appear to be dressed in medieval garb, somewhat resembling the stained-glass window of a church being twisted in a kaleidoscope. These images are accompanied by the short track "Les Soldats," which is meant to be ominous and brooding with slow-moving notes sung in the low range of a mixed chorus using the Latin text "Alleluia." It is a clear imitation of Gregorian chant meant to invoke the images of secretive monks and esoteric rituals that Kajiura learned

from Enigma, increasing the feelings of exoticism surrounding the mysterious Noir duo, their origins, and their purpose.

The composer takes a different approach for the insert songs “Canta per me” and “Salva nos,” which appear throughout the series at moments that highlight Mireille’s and Kirika’s relationship and interconnected history, such as during their first meeting and subsequent gun fight with henchmen of Les Soldats in the first episode of the series. These songs go beyond Enigma’s model to embed chant in Kajiura’s own musical style as the basis of one of her most recognisable musical hallmarks, a pair of female singers performing a slow-moving, chant-like melody in tightly interconnected harmonies over a propulsive electronic accompaniment. Parts of this sound are reminiscent of Enigma, such as the fast-paced percussive background and preference for high timbres in the voice parts and accompanying instruments, but from chant, Kajiura has borrowed modal scales, extended phrases delivered through longer note durations, tight vocal intervals, and stepwise melodic motion. One theory for why medieval Christians performed chants were to make their prayers more pleasant to God’s ears while rendering listeners more responsive to the spiritual messages, and Kajiura maintains the beauty of chant in her female voice parts, drawing in listeners with the sweetness of her atmospheric, floating melodies.

Kajiura’s use of language reflects chant influence as well, setting “Canta per me” in Italian and “Salva nos” in traditional church Latin. The composer gravitated to these languages as another type of musical building block, selecting them because she thought they sounded good when sung, not because of their specific linguistic content. Kajiura was familiar with the musical function of Romance languages due to participating in what she termed “annoying karaoke” with her younger sister and father as a child, during which they would sing along with recordings of operas by mimicking the libretto using improvised, nonsensical Italian-sounding text. Kajiura would later claim this practice as the origin point of her made-up singing language “Kajiurago” (literally “the language of Kajiura” in Japanese), a set of meaningless vocal syllables based on the sounds of Romance languages heard in many of her later anime scores (Kajiura, 2017).

While working on *Noir*, Kajiura had something of a revelation about her music with her discovery of styles and sounds that were most effective for her compositionally. In

her short essay “More Melody!” found in the liner notes of the first original soundtrack for *Noir*, she describes her experiences writing the score:

About NOIR. When I got the script for the first few episodes, the story was so fascinating (I wanted more!!!) that I almost forgot to think about the creation of the music.

The first song I wrote was called "Canta per me," which is also the theme of Kirika, and I wanted to make this sound image the center point of the whole score. This theme music was personally very important to me, so I was surprised and delighted when the director approved this song instantly, allowing me to create the score smoothly from that point forward.

Composing this music was fun because, although I had been asked to write BGM, I was allowed to create pieces that included singing. Even in certain kinds of scenes where melodic musical settings were not appreciated, the director urged me strongly to include “more melody!” (Hooray!)

I created the music so that it would tune-in to the internal image that I had for the score, rather than write straightforward BGM. I do not remember that I struggled with the creation of the music of NOIR. It was more like I simply focused on the image that came to mind, represented it with a melody, and handed it off, saying, "Here you go." It was a very enjoyable and efficient process. Also, the instructions that I received from the director about his concept of the score matched my own intuition so perfectly that I could easily expand the musical world of NOIR just by working from the musical descriptions and piece titles that the director had in his own mind. So, I was very excited from the beginning stages of the project, even during the initial meetings. There are many attractive characters in NOIR but, at the moment, I'm in the Chloe camp. Even I don't know where the story is going yet, but Chloe, don't die... Please hear my request, Director Mashimo and Script-Writer Tsukimura! (Kajiura, 2001. Transl. by Nakayama Reona.)

By this account, Kajiura found “Canta per me” surprisingly easy to write and used the piece as her model for the entire score because it felt exceptionally personal, having been created organically based on her own musical preferences rather than constructed as intentionally unobtrusive BGM. When she played the piece for *Noir*'s director Mashimo Kōichi, she expected him to reject the music due to it containing voice parts and for its overtly melodic character, traits that Kajiura believed were inappropriate for certain types of anime scenes. Instead, Mashimo accepted the piece right away and insisted that Kajiura emphasise the melodic writing even more, making it easy for her to complete the score without extra effort since the director's vision for the anime so closely matched her own.

The ease with which Kajiura composed the score for *Noir* solidified a kind of musical thinking that has stayed with her until the present day. Her description of the

compositional process as comfortable, natural, and highly personal indicates that she had stumbled upon a combination of musical techniques that were perfectly suited to her artistic thinking. Both “Canta per me” and its musically similar counterpart “Salva nos” contain all of Kajiura’s hallmark traits including modal scales, high female voices heard in pairs, high instrumental timbres, folk-song like elements, and propulsive background percussion. Gregorian chant influences the first two of these traits, with both songs containing examples of modality as well as long, soaring melodic lines in the high female voices. These holdovers from the medieval were completely repurposed within Kajiura’s own compositional style as part of a lively and upbeat pop soundtrack rather than a meditative prayer, helping Kajiura highlight the exoticism of the story by bringing the past into the present aurally to match a narrative where both long-ago events and those from the recent past are a key part of unravelling the mystery of Mireille’s and Kirika’s relationship. *Noir* opened the door for Kajiura to write many more anime soundtracks, each of which increased her devotion to and expertise using the particular musical tools she developed and essentially perfected in “Canta per me” and “Salva nos.” Her scores for the 2004 anime *Le Portrait de Petite Cossette* and *My-HiME* combined her made-up language of Kajiurago with the high timbres, long-lined female voice pairs, modal scales, and folk-like elements she preferred, continually evolving her chant-invoking sound into something increasingly flexible for her musical needs.

3. Kajiura’s mature work, her evolution of Gregorian chant, *Fate/Zero*, and *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba*

Kajiura continued a steady stream of projects from 2004 to 2009, embracing and expanding these compositional traits and her passion for melody. These include anime series soundtracks such as *My-Otome Zwei* (2006) and *El Cazador de la Bruja* (2007), work on the *Tsubasa* franchise (2005-2006, 2007-2008, 2009), movie soundtracks including the *Kara no Kyoukai* series (2007-2009, 2013), *Achilles and the Tortoise* (2008), and video game soundtracks like the *Xenosaga*, episodes II (2004) and III (2006). At the same time, she maintained a steady output of albums with her groups FictionJunction and Kalafina: *Destination* (2004), *Circus* (2007), *Re/oblivious* (2008), and *Everlasting Songs* (2009). 2009, however, appears to have been a watershed moment for Kajiura as Kalafina seems to have eclipsed FictionJunction and her projects

moving forward became increasingly popular, up to her most recent work on the internationally acclaimed series *Demon Slayer* (2019-21) and *Fena: Pirate Princess* (2021), part of the ongoing world of *One Piece*. 2009 also coincides with her evolving work on the *Kara no Kyoukai* (known as “The Garden of Sinners”, but literally translated as “Boundary/-ies of Emptiness”) movie series; a set of soundtracks that a number of her fans consider to be a defining moment in her stylistic development. At this same time, in the soundtrack to *Pandora Hearts* (2009) it is possible to hear the same musical elements from *Noir* and *My HiME*, developed in her earlier career in a confident and polished combination in the piece “Preparation.” Layered musical effects introduce and recur throughout the piece while gong-like bells function as percussion for female voices in tight harmony. In “Salva nos,” Kajiura continued to use Latin as a nod to her inspiration, despite the limitations of its potential recognisability. By 2009 she had developed and switched to the use of her own fictitious language, “Kajiura-go,” which, when paired with chant-like musical elements such as closely-paired voices and conjunct melodic lines with longer-held note values, creates a medieval-sounding effect (Yri, 2004: 116). Add the melodic and ornamented use of the violin between vocal verses and almost all of Kajiura’s elements are present. Her creativity as a composer arguably lies in the many ways that she combines and recombines these elements with different percussions and sound effects to reflect the soundscapes of various anime narratives.

This highlights two important points about both Kajiura’s compositional style and about the anime productions that she scores. While fans and critics comment on her ethereal sound, much of which can be linked to the aforementioned layered musical medievalisms, Kajiura considers her style to be adaptable but primarily rhythmic in nature (*Tokyo Otaku Mode*, 2016). With audience focus often centred on melody and timbre, her skill with percussion, especially with choosing appropriate percussive sounds as well as beats and patterns, tends to be overshadowed. Given the global and technological palette of sounds available to modern composers, choosing the driving or wandering quality of a piece calls for its own artistry. Kajiura is sensitive to this and uses her percussion on many levels to represent the sound qualities of the narrative: driving rock percussion with heavy synth for *Sword Art Online* counters the medieval qualities of the melody to underscore the *isekai*, video-game based storyline, and hand drums punctuate Fena’s dance to create an exotic sound that embodies a Caribbean

acoustic quality often associated with the so-called golden age of piracy (c. 1650s-1750s). This attention to narrative and careful sonic choices that both relate to and help to build the soundscapes of anime is an aspect of her success with soundtrack composition.

The question of the anime Kajiura chooses to compose soundtracks for is another important point in the discussion of both her style and her larger career. Though Kajiura fiercely maintains that she has no conscious style, she does acknowledge a desire to make the music fit as appropriately to the story as possible. As with any artist, her earlier projects were formative but relatively scattered across narrative genres. This demanded stylistic breadth and flexibility to create soundscapes for jazz clubs in space, dystopian death games, *Dungeon and Dragons*-style *isekai*—historical fiction from medieval times to space and beyond. With success came more opportunity to consider the idea of her narrative preferences in relation to her style. Reviewing the titles and franchises, a preference for *isekai*, fantasy, and adventure comes to the fore. Starting even as early as *Noir*, her anime projects often feature female characters as important action figures. The fact that her projects have leaned in this direction may have implications for her sound, which for many anime audiences has become synonymous with fantasy, or fantasy-adventure narratives. Many of these fantasies, whether they are set in alternate dimensions, inside video games, or even in contemporary landscapes with time-travelling figures from the past, all feature a strong sense of the medieval—an imagined, largely European past.

Medievalism, as a theme this collection seeks to unravel, is always a negotiation between popular conceptions of the past and how we *feel* about the past at any given moment. Was it peaceful or barbaric? Was it spiritual or sinister? Karen Cook notes that “such oscillations are ubiquitous in medievalism” (Cook, 2019: 484) and Claudia Gorbman comments that, “medievalist musical tropes have taken on a sort of bifurcated polyvalence, such that the same sound can act as a “connotative cue” (Gorbman, 1987: 5). Musically, however, one often hears a discursive confusion with the sounds of the medieval that may implicate folk songs, or folk songs patterns, and often sound markedly Celtic or Irish in nature. This last point relates back to the international success of fantasy franchises set in versions of Britain, such as the ecranisations of J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* or J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series that combine lyric folk song (Nugent, 2018: 107). A significant number of twenty-first

century anime have used many of the same aural strategies, mixing medieval chant with folk-like melodies. This is referenced and can be heard throughout the futurist-medieval franchise *Fate/Stay Night* (2006) and its sequel *Fate/Zero* (2011).

This portion of the larger *Fate* series, which began with *Fate/Stay Night* (2006), was initially a Japanese adult visual novel developed by Type-Moon. Modern characters participate in a fight-to-the-death tournament called the Fifth Holy Grail War, where combatants employ magic and heroes drawn from throughout history for a chance to have their wishes granted by the eponymous Holy Grail. One of the main figures that is brought forward from the past is the medieval British figure, King Arthur. Rather than the burly, bearded man the summoner expected, Arthur is Artoria, a woman who actually *was* King Arthur, leader of her people. This sets up a gender-bent story line that features a medieval king, one of the most famous warriors in European history (one of the Nine Worthies), as a female, complicating notions of history, strength, martial skill, aggressiveness, and related stereotypes. Connect this to themes of time-travel and British or Celtic medieval adventure, like the quest for the Holy Grail, and Kajiura is in her prime imaginative space.

Several of the pieces in this soundtrack use chant, or chantlike sounds, using her Kajiura-go, with high voices and synth orchestra, including “Fate/Zero,” “The Battle goes to the Strong,” and, “The Sword of Promised Victory.” This last piece is featured in a climactic battle that allows Artoria to prove that she is a true monarch, an undefeated champion, despite the active derision of her male competitors. It comprises two musical themes: theme one uses aggressive, staccato flute accompaniment of the high female chorus with orchestral background, while theme two might be described as more romantic, with solo violin meditatively outlining a modal, melancholic tune. The first theme is clearly aggressive, but also aggressively female in its choice of instruments that produce high timbres and high female voices. Kajiura emphasises the medieval qualities further here in her use of musical intervals, such as the fourth, which along with the fifth, was preferred prior to 1400, due to the perception of their mathematical beauty. Theme two contrasts this with its slower, lyrical melody, evocative of European folk tunes. Although female voices are not heard in this theme, the violin maintains a higher pitch profile. This broadens to include a full orchestral accompaniment with brass, bells, and percussion as Artoria raises Excalibur to strike the final blow.

The music of this scene and all of Artoria's decisive battles evokes the yin-yang or contrasting effect. This musicality echoes the tension felt throughout the narrative as the author of the original visual novel, Kinoko Nasu, likely intended from the moment he switched Arthur from the male prototype to her final female form. Identity negotiation, especially the identities of the historic heroes, is a critical issue throughout this franchise in which music participates. As Helen Dell notes, "music plays a significant role in the establishment and maintenance, sometimes the evolution, of an identity. The quest for identity can also be seen as a factor in determining which particular associations remain dominant in medievalist music" (Dell, 2019: 415). Certain timbres are associated with the Western or Christian church, such as the pipe organ or a Capella male voices and thus evoke male-dominated associations (Whittaker, 2018: 220). Voices often have a certain artificial sound that denotes their religious quality. In this scene, the high female voices take on the historically male role of the fierce aggressor, while the violin, historically associated with masculine energies (due to the mathematics involved in the tuning of the strings), adopts the slower, quiet female role. Both themes embrace these opposing energies and develop them as the second theme acts as a musical analogue to the narrative visuality of the scene. As the narrator informs the audience, Artoria summons the supporting energies of warriors past—those associated with King Arthur and beyond—to empower her legendary sword. Male and female join visually, narratively, and musically as the orchestra swells to support the solo violin for the decisive attack. Kajiura's additions to this soundtrack meld medievalist tropes with historically gendered musical signifiers to complement and musically support this narrative.

The medieval is primarily discussed as a European construct of castles, knights, and sword fights. Arthur/Artoria represents this. Assuming, however, that medieval is somehow only Western is problematic and may, as Cook explains, "create harmful, insidious versions, ones that reinforce ideas of the medieval as all-Christian, all-white, all-male, all-powerful, all-universal, which have led some attempts to remake the present in the past's twisted image" (Cook, 2019: 493). As Pugh and Weisl aptly observe, medieval Japan also contains the medieval, with castles, knights, and sword fights (Pugh & Weisl, 2013). The Edo period maintained sociopolitical isolation (*sakoku*) that kept these power structures in place until the later nineteenth century. By the Taisho period (1912-1926), pre-Meiji concepts of *yōkai* and swordsmen were

old-fashioned, almost medieval in comparison to electricity, telegraphs, and other markers of modernisation. *Demon Slayer* (2019-2021) recreates a sense of medieval Japan in the midst of the modern. The soundtrack combines the efforts of Kajiura with composer Masaru Shiina, better known as Go Shiina. If the medieval often sounds like chant, Kajiura responds with an Asian medieval soundscape in the form of female-voiced, strident chant that intentionally imitates south-east Asian religious chanting. Though it is not derived from any one tradition, it sonically indexes a pan-Asian auralty, weighted with a sense to age, solemnity, and power.

Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba is one of the largest and most popular anime properties of the last three years. It began as a manga series written and illustrated by Gotouge Koyoharu. The main character, Tanjiro, trains to become a demon slayer after his family is slaughtered by a demon, leaving only his now-demon sister, Nezuko, alive. Unlike many monster slayers before him though, Tanjiro's quest is not primarily to slay, but to find a cure for his sister. That this series has become so popular during the Covid-19 pandemic has been understood by scholars as a reflection of contemporary anxieties and even the race for a vaccine (Hartzheim and Yoshimoto, 2021). The soundtrack references this epic quality, playing an important part in both the merchandising and the narrative.

Music for the anime series and the movie ranges from pop songs to lush orchestral works filled with choirs and layered effects. The extradiegetic music for both the opening "Gurenge" and closing credits "From the Edge" of the anime feature vocalist LiSA with the group FictionJunction on the latter piece. The main theme of *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba the Movie: Mugen Train*, "Homura", performed by LiSA, won the grand prize at the Japan Record Awards in 2020, continuing the successes of the series themes. While there are some forty-two tracks on the soundtrack, *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba Tanjiro Kamado, Unwavering Resolve Arc Original Soundtrack* (released May 2021) with themes for all the main characters, several tracks stand out. Kajiura delivers aspects of her signature sound in the track "Brace up and run!" which opens each episode. This small section, highlighting female voices chanting Kajiura-go is a musically haunting reminder of the otherness of the past related to concepts of medievalism and the world of monsters and slayers. Its chant defines the piece and arguably the whole franchise, as it is the one aural element heard in every show, movie, and game. Its exotic sound evokes unfamiliar ritual practices locating tradition,

mysticism, and the unknown within mundane modernity—an aural analogue to the main narrative theme of the series. Another piece, “Survive and get the blade, boy,” is a rock-influenced, orchestral work featuring shakuhachi solo. Again, referencing an Asian, specifically Japanese, instrumentation, Kajiura reaches for a higher timbre and settles on the shakuhachi flute. While the instrument is capable of higher ranges, the shakuhachi, both visually and aurally, has strong historical-cultural connection to samurai swordsmen. Kajiura has continued to expand her musical and orchestrating palette throughout her career through collaborations with many movie composers as well as through her affiliations with talented performers in both pop and classical circles.

For *Mugen Train*, Kajiura composed “Mugen Train Avant-Grade M01” (“Mugen Resshahen”), a theme for the movie that evokes this powerful arc while still connecting to the first season. Beginning with high shimmering bells that recur at various points throughout, the piece creates the majesty and the size of the train with the swelling low brass. This is immediately contrasted with a mechanistic percussion, again to depict the train musically along with the sonic qualities of the engine. Though the percussive quality remains part of the piece, a melodic theme in the high strings enters and connects to several of the familiar melodies from the first season, including Kajiura’s main theme of “Kimetsu no yaiba” and “Tanjiro no uta” by Go Shiina. This functions as an overture, using segments of earlier themes to connect the listener’s ear subtly to the earlier season. The shimmering bells and lower gongs allow the melodies to dissipate, and the train reemerges as the star of the piece with full orchestra, percussion, shimmering synth, and a final gong left resonating as both a signifier of danger and as a metallic object that again recalls the physicality of the train itself. Gongs and bells, also medieval musical sounds, are both Western and Eastern, evoking, on the one hand, the clang of the iron horse (an archaic term for the steam locomotive), and on the other, the sounds of gongs in various eastern religious practices. That all these sounds are layered within a piece barely longer than three minutes is clearly deft and sensitive composition that semiotically connects sounds associated with both mystic antiquity and modern technology—a theme that runs throughout the series.

While the focus of this study has primarily discussed and analysed Kajiura’s non-diegetic or underscore music, her theme songs deserve some attention. Along with Shiina, she has composed several of *Demon Slayer*’s theme songs including “Akeboshi”

and “Shirogane” for *Mugen Train* and “Asa ga Kuru” for *Demon Slayer*, Season 2: Entertainment arc. The singer Aimer wrote that she, “swam ecstatically through Kajiura-san’s music,” and that she “always shudders” when she hears music Kajiura has composed for her to sing (Komatsu, 2022). It is easy to get swept up in the sound of Aimer’s voice, however, accompanying it one hears many of the same elements that are featured in Kajiura’s other works. Shimmering bells in the percussion open the piece followed by driving drum-set percussion, accented with tambourine-like bells. Violin is featured, standing out from the rest of the string texture by outlining a counterpoint to the voice. Though the piece is strophic, its repetition is broken by the lyric bridge and Aimer’s smooth vocal techniques. Kajiura’s harmonies are dramatic, almost brooding in places, befitting the lyrics about a “world full of cuts and bruises” (JKPop Lyrics, 2022) as the violin leads out to the shimmer of bells and cymbals. The largely orchestral nature of the soundtrack creates an overarching epic tone that suits the dark, historicised fantasy of this story.

4. Conclusion

Medievalism, identity, and conceptualisations of authenticity are all interconnected through complex webs of cultural history. Helen Dell considers that identity is fugal, pieced together from different strands and patterns (Dell, 2019). Popular culture constantly negotiates and renegotiates these elements, especially as cultural influences grow ever more transnational. Karen Cook, considering medieval musical sounds through the lens of ludomusicology, recalls Gorbman’s discussion of polyvalence to recognise that the medieval is not only complicated by layers of historical meaning and popular culture associations, but potentially injurious. That is to say that the medieval has been perceived as a “blank slate” upon which people inscribe their own meaning, supposedly imbuing it with the weight of cultural history (Cook, 2019). Approaching this same question from an Asian popular-culture perspective, John Griffith notes that the medieval West is “a foreign space in which to question identity indirectly, safely as if were, without having to directly address the cultural setting of one’s own day” (Griffith, 2009: 115). The medieval then, its visuality, but more important to this study, its aurality is a marker of potentiality.

The aurality of medievalism often involves the sounds of bells and gongs, organ, and most notably, chant. Although Kajiura’s initial use of chant was a response to the

borrowed layering of sounds popularised by Enigma and other groups during the worldbeat movement of the 1990s, her usage has changed substantially over time to become what fans have called the “Kajiura Sound” (Tokyo Otaku Mode, 2016). She has regularly woven together chanted song, usually with high, lyrical or strident female voices, rhythmic punctuation evocative of various styles, shimmering synthesised backdrops, rich chromatic, orchestral music, even including leitmotifs, but juxtaposes moments of repose with driving rhythms. Many of her longer works fall into an organic development model, allowing for the return of themes and other recognisable motivic materials. This rewards the listener with both a sense of recognition and familiarity.

Additionally, the manipulation of the idea of chant, which in the West is almost exclusively a male-voiced music, is definitive for Kajiura. The use of female voices, often in imitation of chant that vacillates between the timbres of Gregorian chant, Bulgarian women’s choirs, and traditional Filipino chant, is an element that Kajiura favours. Her orchestral sound shifts to suit each anime, emphasising the use of higher-timbre instruments such as the flute or violin, which effectively float the melody above the orchestra. Cook considers that the “wordless voice” with a chant quality has been used throughout neo-medieval video games as a dual signifier of both safety and danger, although in both cases it is often tied to magic and a sense to the unknown (Cook, 2019: 492). Kajiura’s Kajiura-go is not wordless, but its inherent lack of meaning creates a more textured version of the “wordless voice.” This element combined with bells and gongs, intimates medievalism, sometimes as danger, but more consistently as an aural signifier of magic, the unfamiliar, and the unknown.

Kajiura’s style has been criticised by some as “consistent” (i.e. predictable) and defended by others as “recognizable,” her musical strength lies in her melodicism that can evoke a singable style that strikes a chord with listeners. Concerning themes and her compositional choices, it should be noted that many of the later anime she has set since 2009 fall into fantasy or *isekai*-related genres (Anime Instrumentality Staff, 2011). These interrelated genres in anime consistently involve the use of magic or futuristic technology in or from alternate dimensions that have been dressed as fantasy, simultaneously recalling the unknowable past and a magically-potent future. Kajiura has arguably created a genre-defining sound that blends orchestra with high or even strident chorus, often incorporating indigenous Japanese instruments that strike a note

of mystery or exoticism—neither past nor future, but capable of simultaneously conveying both the fantastical and the folkloric.

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From *Dungeons & Dragons* to *Dragon Quest*: Cultural dialogue and material shifts

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ABSTRACT

Arguably one of the most popular genres in today's video game market is the Japanese role-playing game (JRPG). The distinguishing traits of the genre are often a matter of debate. The final decision on whether something is a JRPG usually relies more on general feelings than on rigid criteria (Mallindine 2016). However, one shared trait among the exponents of the genre is that they find its roots in Western tabletop role-playing games, such as *Dungeons&Dragons* (1974). As a matter of fact, *Dungeons&Dragons* served as an inspiration for many other role-playing games (RPGs). One such example is *Wizardry* (1981), which, together with *Ultima* (1981), was among the most successful computer role-playing games of its time (Barton & Stacks 2008). The two games served as the beginning for long-spanning series, which enjoyed wide success in Japan (Adams 1985), where the RPG genre as a whole was soon integrated, through various platforms, into the local media ecology (Steinberg 2015). *Wizardry* in particular was also among the games which influenced Horii Yūji (Horii 2018a, 2018b) to create *Dragon Quest* (1986), one of the earliest examples of JRPG. This article seeks to draw a connection between *Dungeons&Dragons* and the early JRPGs. First, I compare *Dungeons&Dragons*, a tabletop RPG, to its most well-known digital counterparts of the time, *Wizardry* and *Ultima*. By doing this, I expose the differences between 'pen and paper' and 'screen and software.' Then, I observe the differences between *Wizardry*, *Ultima*, and *Dragon Quest* in terms of both aesthetics and gameplay, in order to understand how Japanese developers and distributors negotiated the concept of RPG for the Japanese market. In both comparisons I consider how characters, avatar, gameplay, and narrative are mediated by the platform and the cultural milieu hosting them.

KEYWORDS

Dungeons & Dragons; Neo-medievalism; JRPG; Role-playing game; *Wizardry*; *Ultima*; *Dragon Quest*.

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Introduction: Culture, play, and platforms

In the introductory issue of the *Japanese journal for analog role-playing game studies*, table talk game designer Kondō Koshi states that role-playing games in Japan were imported, adopted, and adapted (2019, 4). In other words, role-playing games have entered a new environment, and they have changed in response to it. This is reminiscent of a paradigm describing information flow between symbolic systems, that of the *semiosphere*, proposed by Jurij M. Lotman (1992 [1984]), which aims at describing the production of information within a culture, conceptualised as an open

set of texts. In short, it posits that communication and new information can be produced solely within a system of existing references. As new, foreign texts access it, they are simply rendered coherent with the existing information and incorporated within the whole.

Such an overarching system – a culture – could be intuitively compared to what Eiji Ōtsuka (2010 [1989]) envisioned as a “grand narrative,” a connective tissue, bringing together all elements within a specific canon of texts, ready for any user to consume. The grand narrative links and creates seemingly unrelated stories, which form a cohesive whole by virtue of partaking in the same open-ended system. Azuma Hiroki (2009) challenges this view by proposing that a database of traits and characteristics, rather than an all-encompassing narrative, is the real object of consumption. A bundle of semi-autonomous features, that is to say, a character, is therefore taken as the new centre of a “grand-nonnarrative.” The scholar later introduces a different category, the *sōzōryoku no kankyō* (“imagination environment”) as an additional way in which we understand the media to which we are exposed (2007). These frameworks share the assumption that a set of existing interpretive regimes (i.e. a narrative, a database, or a culture) serve as conditions for meaning, in the form of content, to emerge. Additionally, in these models, meaning is often envisioned as being fluid, and flowing freely across systems (e.g. the case of a text moving across cultural spheres, or that of different iterations of a narrative across media).

Keeping in mind the way in which content can move from one of these ideal spaces to the other, one possible way to think about Kondō’s statement is connecting it to the opposition between hardware and software. That is to say, what Steinberg describes when he mentions Kadokawa magazines as platforms (hardware) generating content (software) (2015b). Role-playing itself may therefore be seen as software, running through different machines, as well as different sociocultural milieux. Its adaptation may just be the result of the affordances of a wide range of platforms, defined in a broader sense, which may include both material and social infrastructures¹. In this

¹ Steinberg (2019) provides a thorough and insightful account of different kinds of platforms. His typology individuates three types of platforms: 1) foundations for layered structures, 2) infrastructure supporting content, or 3) spaces of mediation and transaction. Taking all of these into account, I wish to avoid a purely electronic or digital conceptualisation of platforms – an issue which Steinberg addresses when discussing transactional platforms (ibid., chap. 3)

context, it is relevant that the cultural dimension has been rendered not just pertinent, but preeminent in the case of Japan. In fact, the label of “Japanese role-playing game” (JRPG) has originated among non-Japanese audiences (Pelletier-Gagnon 2018), and it usually designates a distinct genre. This has been an extremely productive space for game scholars, which has seen the publication of major works, especially in recent years (Consalvo 2016; Hutchinson 2019; Hutchinson and Pelletier-Gagnon 2022). Among the different interpretations of the genre that have emerged, we find arguments for JRPG as a category of nostalgia (Mallindine 2016), or for its aesthetic performativity (Schules 2015). Some of these fall within the boundaries of what Pelletier-Gagnon (2022, 99) refers to as “culturalist” and “formalist” approaches, to which he presents the alternative reading of the JRPG as a marginalising label. The definition of a genre by virtue of its geographical place of origin would also represent a point of connection with recent literature on the anime industrial complex. For instance, Suan’s *Anime’s Identity* (2021) presents a detailed account of the network of transnational relations behind what he calls *anime-esque* performance. This is peculiar, because this kind of performance allows the form’s ties to Japan to remain extremely salient, despite its highly geographically scattered production history.

To further develop the parallel with platforms, Lamarre stresses the tenuousness of the boundary between “soft” and “hard” (2019, 217). He maintains that a platform should not be seen only as a content-host, but also as a potential subject-like interactor with other platforms (ibid, 222). In addition to speaking to the situatedness of certain material artefacts, this is especially relevant, since it opens the possibility to analyse game software as potentially interacting not just with the machines on which it is run, or with individual users, but also with other alleged content-hosts, such as magazines, or with social groupings, such as player communities.²

On these premises, this essay aims at tracing a genealogical trajectory of role-playing,³ conceived partially as content, and partially as platform. I start by addressing the birth of *Dungeons & Dragons* (Tactical Studies Rules 1974) (hereafter D&D), the first formalised version of the genre. Then, via the microcomputer game *Wizardry* (Sir-

² Lamarre (2017, 2019) refers to this type of interaction as “platformativity”.

³ The concept of role-playing taken as a unit of analysis here is socio-historically situated, so it should not be taken as neutral. My usage here is largely for convenience to set a starting point.

Tech 1981), I observe how the concept of role-playing was translated for the Nintendo Famicom, with *Dragon Quest* (Enix 1986). At each step of the analysis, I consider how each hardware constrained the role-playing software, by looking at the network of adjacent platforms and discourses – *apparatus*, in Lamarre’s terms (2019, 37-38). Throughout the analysis my focus is stronger on the ways in which commercial platforms, community engagement, and other factors influence and shape the notion of role-playing. However, this should not prevent us from observing the responses of players to specific incarnations of the genre – as it is evident at some points of the analysis. In thinking about hardware affordances or mutual influences, I do not refer exclusively to gameplay elements, either, as I argue that certain types of platforms often allow for the creation of virtual spaces (Huber 2012), as well as communities (Law 2005; Tobin 2013).

One of the aims of this study, in light of the attention that the term has received, is to interrogate the notion of “Japanese role-playing game.” In particular, through my analysis, I wish to reconstruct one branch of its genealogy, in order to try to understand the alleged emergence of its cultural difference, hopefully mitigating it. By centring attention on the interplay between various affordances, it may be possible to conceive of the divergence of genres as more than a strictly cultural phenomenon. Rather, conceptualising the shift in terms of a software flowing through different platforms may instead shed light on the indeterminacy engendered by networks of practices and infrastructures. In other words, I will be considering the displacement of a genre to different contexts. By focusing on the individual interactions, rather than ascribing general features to any given sociohistorical context, I hope that my intervention will provide at least a glimpse of the complexity of each one of them, as well as of their contingency and unpredictability. In doing this, I wish to place the influence of “culture” in a different, less all-encompassing perspective while acknowledging the necessary variations of an object circulating through different times and places.

1. The emergence of *Dungeons & Dragons*

D&D is often considered to be the inspiration for modern role-playing games. White et al. (2018) takes it as a prototypical example of a tabletop role-playing game, while its influence on the wider gaming landscape allowed Chris Crawford (1982) to define a category of games as “D&D games” in his early work on computer game design.

Stenros and Montola (2010, 308) claim that even the many Nordic live action role-playing (LARP) traditions originated in the 1980s as a consequence of the success of the game in concert with other media products. While it is true that the creation of D&D was a watershed, it did not emerge out of nothing. Peterson (2012, 2018) presents an in-depth account of its precursors. He argues that the experiences from the wargaming community and live-action experiments, together with the sheer success of the Tolkien mythos, coalesced into the development and rise in popularity of D&D. Barton and Stacks (2008) also list the presence of baseball player cards among the possible influences. However, for the purposes of this essay, only wargames and fantasy literature will be considered.

1.1. J.R.R. Tolkien and Fantasy dungeons

Tolkien achieved widespread success in the 1960s, following both an authorised edition of his works by Ballantine's Books, and a bootlegged paperback edition published by Ace Books. According to Foster (2012, 15), this success profoundly influenced the generation attending high school and college in those years, and since then, the books never experienced any fall in popularity. This is perfectly recognisable both in the text itself and in the paratexts⁴ surrounding D&D.

The first edition of the game was dotted with more or less explicit references. For instance, players could meet *nazguls*, *ents*, and *balrogs* during their journey. Additionally, the description of certain spells pointed to the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, in order to support the players' imagination of the powers in question (Tactical Studies Rules 1974, 23). However, such explicit references were erased starting from the sixth edition of the rulebook in 1977, as a consequence of a legal threat from the Tolkien Estate (Burdge 2012, 229). Moreover, Rob Kuntz, a contributor to the D&D project, denied any tie between the game and the literary works in a 1978 article in *The Dragon*.⁵

⁴ The official magazine and Gygax's The Strategic Review newsletter, for example.

⁵ *The Dragon*, later renamed *Dragon*, was printed by Tactical Studies Rules, the owner and distributor of D&D. It was mostly dedicated to fantasy and science fiction, and it was established as a related, albeit largely separate project from the game, even though it served as the main platform for fans and creators to express themselves. Applecline (2014) offers a thorough description and a first-hand report of the foundation and the functions of the magazines, which will be partially also covered in this article.

In a 1985 column, Gary Gygax explicitly stated that early references were a strategic move on his part, aimed at boosting sales. *The Dragon*, as the game's official magazine, provides compelling evidence to the effectiveness of the strategy. Both fans and collaborators on the project could publish there. Many contributions would involve, for instance, proposals for alternative rulesets (e.g. new classes, races, or environments), as well as serialised stories, where the players recounted real or made-up play sessions. Within all of this material, where official announcements meshed with user engagement, it is possible to find a significant number of contributions discussing the works of Tolkien. For instance, fans discussed how to adapt the ruleset to fit a Tolkien-inspired campaign, or ways in which the game-world differed from the literary work. This trend lasted well after the 1977 revised edition. In other words, although the connection had been erased on paper, it was in all likelihood still alive in the players' minds.

1.2. From wargaming to role-playing

The other current that contributed to the birth of D&D was wargaming, an activity which has a long and transcultural history. Kamm (2020, 34) traces a line spanning from recent history back to 18th century Prussia, where wargames emerged as an alternative to chess. From there, it is possible to stretch the narrative back to 7th century India and the game *chaturāṅga*, which is the shared ancestor of a number of board games such as chess, *shōgi*, and the like found throughout Europe and Asia. Wargames usually revolve around the conflict between two or more players pitting their armies against each other; in this case the activity is largely competitive, as opposed to role-playing, which is a rather more collaborative form of play. The sessions are supervised by a referee, who settles disputes and interprets statistics, since the outcomes of actions are decided by rolling dice.

The clearest link between the genres is found in the early history of the game. As a matter of fact, the first edition of D&D was hardly autonomous, and it was closer to an appendix to Gygax's previous game, *Chainmail* (Guidon Games 1971). The latter was a more traditional medieval wargame, with special rules for jousting allowing for the player to control a single unit, rather than a battalion, and it derived from an experimental campaign in the late 1960s (Gygax 1977, 7).

Although they differ significantly in structure, it is possible to recognise similarities

and traces connecting wargaming to role-playing, at least in its tabletop form⁶. One glaring example is found in the constituents for both practices. Games require a certain player configuration, and create mutual relations between participants. In both wargames and role-playing games an external figure acts as a mediator between different interests: in the former, the referee is a neutral middleman, whereas in the latter, the game master actively provides a challenge to the players. In other words, the prototypical configuration of people sitting at a table and playing with dice, miniatures, and a map remains largely the same, while their relative positions and values shift. In other words, the difference lies in the practice's semantics and syntax, not in its morphology.⁷ The figurines serve as proof of the connection, too. They are a superfluous element in D&D, only serving as stand-ins for easier visualisation of the diegesis. However, miniatures performed a function in the passage from wargaming to role-playing, as Gygax explains in *The Dragon* (1977, 7), where he mentions that the idea of shifting to personal adventures, instead of large-scale battles, came in part due to the heroic appearances of the figurines. The individualistic nature of the adventures would be conveyed not just by the possibility to control a single character, but also by the chance to customise the character by choosing features such as class, race, alignment, and name.

The degree of overlapping between wargaming and early role-playing is remarkable. Both genres generated communities of players, sharing an interest in the text, and enriching it through a constellation of platforms such as conventions, magazines, and newsletters. It is often possible to find cross-contamination between supposedly specialised or exclusive platforms, such as in the case of wargaming sections appearing in fantasy role-playing magazines. For instance, advertisements for medieval wargaming miniatures were present in every issue of *The Dragon*, whereas columns discussing military strategy in the ancient world were less frequent, albeit still present. Thus, it appears that the activities of each community were crucial to the connection of the two practices.

⁶ Role-playing is extremely varied in both materials and modes of play, each one further divided into different traditions. For instance, see Kamm (2020) for the Japanese context, while Stenros and Montola (2010) cover Nordic LARPs.

⁷ For a general account of practices as meaning making activities, see Fontanille (2006, 2010). The semantics of playfulness, on the other hand, have been tackled extensively by Thibault (2020)

Lastly, it is necessary to interrogate D&D's formalisation. The long-format rulebook is common for wargames, and it has interesting features, which, to use a digital metaphor, render it closer to a developer's kit with an in-built asset package, than to a game.⁸ In other words, it is an extremely open-ended platform. The activity of play is often defined as the space of possibility within the game, which is a system of rules and restrictions.⁹ A rulebook does not offer a structured experience, but a set of tables, themes, and an invitation to combine, or even alter them, creating multiple layers of authorship (Hammer 2007).

The statistical values in a volume are balanced for the enjoyment of an audience, and the global vision for a potential story-world is present. However, it would not be possible to pick up a manual and play in the same way in which one could do with, for example, a computer game. Thus, players are required to become designers to have a return on their investment in the purchase of the volume.¹⁰ A dungeon master may spend days, weeks, or more, thinking about a scenario they want to present to their players. This explains the high level of engagement often found in the magazines: a user may design not just a scenario, but also new spells, races, or classes, which may or may not be shared with the community later on. User production was overtly incentivised since the beginning by the creators of D&D, who opened the first edition of the manual by stating that old rules can be altered, and new ones added, in order to keep the experience fresh.¹¹

In sum, D&D as a formalised version of role-playing is platform-like in many ways. First, it offers all the possibilities of a game developer's kit, which renders it close to a prototypical programmable platform. By virtue of this, it produces scenarios, as well as engagement, and it can also host new building blocks for content. Second, it interacts

⁸ I am taking a game studies perspective. The topic of role-playing is extremely vast, and many heuristic tools can be applied. This analysis ignores many aspects of the activity for the sake of coherence. For more about possible approaches to studying role-playing, see Harviainen (2008).

⁹ See Salen and Zimmerman (2004, 2006), Bonenfant (2010), Thibault (2020). Even Roger Caillois (1958) relies on the presence of rules for the *paidia/ludus* spectrum of his typology.

¹⁰ Albeit on a different scale, it may be possible to draw a parallel with Ôtsuka's (2016) repurposing of his theory of narrative consumption as a theory of narrative labor, as players effectively generate the content they consume.

¹¹ If not for the intention behind its creation, the functioning of *The Dragon* in the creative process of the D&D ecology bears an eerie resemblance to Steinberg's (2015b, 12-13) account of the role of magazines as platforms in the Tsuguhiko media-mix in the 1980s, such as *Conputikku*.

with other platforms, such as magazines. In doing so, it creates fertile ground for the development of a community of practice of sorts, as clearly demonstrated by the contents of *The Dragon*. It also organises space and time, both diegetically and extradiegetically. In other words, the game master produces a virtual time and space which is shared among players inhabiting a scenario, whereas the game's codes enforce a specific configuration of users and objects around the table, with varyingly precise rules for turn-taking.

2. Analogue and digital: *Wizardry*

Around the time when D&D was first published, videogames became part of the public consciousness. Home consoles and arcade cabinets have been commercially available since the early 1970s in the United States, while the first domestic microcomputers appeared only later in the same decade. The former two machines represented affordable and comparatively powerful options, whereas the latter had a much higher threshold for usage, in addition to having less processing power allotted exclusively for playing. Even at the end of the 1980s, when one fifth of households in the United States owned a microcomputer (Dutton et al. 1987), gaming on that platform was considered an activity for hobbyists and programmers. Ultimately, even though microcomputers were recognised as game machines, among other things, they were not perceived as the optimal or more accessible way of gaming for many (Kline et al. 2003, 93).

2.1. Connections to tabletop play

The relatively small, technically literate community of computer players seems to have shared much with both the wargamers and role-players. A significant portion of the literature on the topic (Barton and Stacks 2008; Kline et al. 2003; White et al. 2018) has focused on the clear influences of D&D on computer game design. For instance, one of the most influential role-playing games of the time, *Wizardry*, actively remediated elements of a prototypical tabletop play session.

The game consists in a fairly straightforward fantasy quest: the player must defeat the evil wizard Werdna, by assembling a party and reaching the depths of a dungeon, "the maze." In proposing this, *Wizardry* draws from different traditions of programming in order to create a relatively similar experience to that of D&D. For

example, it likely takes inspiration from text-based adventures for its main hub, simulating a castle with a tavern, a temple, and other infrastructures. The environment is only shaped by descriptions, rather than by a graphical interface. The latter comes into play when the player enters the dungeon. The view shifts from a purely verbal interface to a Cartesian first-person view, whereas the commands (e.g. attack, parry, spell) need to be typed on the keyboard.

Elements from its tabletop counterpart can be found in the process of character creation. Races and classes mirror those found in D&D, and the distribution of attributes follows a similar logic, too. These observations can be extended to games seemingly elaborating on the original formula by adding science fiction elements, such as *Ultima* (California Pacific Computer Co. 1981). Lastly, the social component of tabletop role-playing gets replaced in *Wizardry* with the addition of the possibility to control individually each character of an entire group, rather than a unique avatar.

In addition to formal similarities, however, the connection also lies in the activities of the community. Many emblematic examples of the links can be found in the specialised magazine *Computer Gaming World*. In the first article of the opening issue, game designer Chris Crawford writes about the future of computer wargaming. Moreover, in a 1986 interview, the creator of the *Ultima* series Richard Garriott explains that his interest in programming games owes in part to D&D and in part to a computer class taken in high school. Additional evidence of the connection with the tabletop gaming community can be found in the magazine's surveys. Since the earliest publications, *Computer Gaming World* has had a section called "inside the industry," where industry surveys and readers surveys would be published—a mutual exchange of information between corporations and players, as it were. One of the first reader surveys included questions about the readers' gaming habits, such as whether they had quit tabletop games (including both role-playing and wargaming) since their shift to computer gaming (1984, 6). Although the results may not be especially interesting or reliable, due to the lack of comprehensive data (e.g., there are no indications of how many readers took part in the survey), the fact that such questions appeared on page still serves as a testament to their relevance.

2.2. Digital games and space

In order to understand the discontinuity between tabletop and desktop, it is useful

to refer to an early review of *Wizardry*, which appeared in the magazine *Softalk*. According to the reviewer, the game is “the ultimate computer Dungeons and Dragons, extremely faithful to the original. Greenberg and Woodhead [the creators] merely act the role of the Dungeon Masters” (1981, 70).

Such a characterisation is extremely accurate in some respects, and it reveals one of the crucial differences between tabletop and computer role-playing. The dungeon master is no longer present at the table, as opposed to the situation in D&D. Kondō (2019) describes tabletop role-playing as being extremely malleable, the result of a continuous dialogue between the player and the game master, as well as within players. In fact, tabletop role-playing heavily depends on the participants’ adherence to rules, power structures, and other structural elements of the game (Montola 2008), all of which are fundamentally negotiable.¹² On the contrary, computer role-playing games enforce a rigid division between user and text. In order to flout the rules in a computer game, it is necessary to either possess high digital literacy, or have access to external help.¹³ Thus, the first relevant shift from analogue to digital rests in the user’s relation with text and designer. As the designer abandons the table, all which is left is the text, now set in stone – if not from an interpretive point of view, then from a material one.

Earlier in the same piece, the reviewer states that “*Wizardry* is not a game. It’s a place” (1981, 69). Based on the previous elaboration on the state of the scenario, the reviewer’s opinion acquires a deeper meaning. Namely, the same scenario is now shared among all the players. As mentioned in earlier paragraphs, rulebooks only provide a worldview and a set of statistics. Pre-made adventures exist, but they do not constitute the core tabletop role-playing game experience. Open-ended design is part of the pen-and-paper platform’s main affordances. As a consequence, despite originating from the same core text, every game session displays a certain measure of variation. Creatures, spells, and settings are shared among the D&D community. However, fan additions and individual variations to the rules are common, either

¹² An example of the complexity of interpretative role-playing can be found in Loponen and Montola (2004), where the scholar illustrates the malleability of a play session’s diegesis by explaining it through Peircean semiosis.

¹³ In the case of *Wizardry*, a particularly famous case is that of *WizPlus*, a third-party software which allowed the players to alter statistics and modify the game in a number of ways. This sort of subversion was highly discouraged, as it would alter the intended balance of the game (Barton and Stacks 2008, 96-97).

because of a creative dungeon master, or simply because any person may interpret the rules in a slightly different manner. In addition to that, every element of the game is interpretable in a number of ways, depending on the participants and their real-life connections. As noted by Pettersson:¹⁴

Most of the players in this game were people I know. [...] I walk into a room and I see my friends Mike, Mika and Jaakko playing their characters. Suddenly Mike approaches me and starts shouting at me, accusing me of corrupting his sister. At that point, he switches from being my friend into being his character, because at that point I have to deal with him in character. (2006, 103)

In the passage from analogue to digital, the scenario, once the object of negotiation between dungeon master and players, crystallises into a single vision by the authors of the game, who are now separated from the text and therefore no longer responding to the users. At the same time, that vision, in the form of software, reaches the machines of every person who owns it.

Previously, only small groups of players shared points of references to their campaign, while now all players would visit the same virtual space. As the reviewer puts it: “It's a village you've not been in before [...] Why not stop in the tavern for a frothy ale? Gilgamesh welcomes new guests, and you're apt to find some worthy companions” (1981, 69).

Huber's (2012) analysis of *Final Fantasy* spatiality through Harvey and Lefebvre is especially useful when considering this shift. He reframes the player's aesthetic experience of a videogame through Harvey's (2006) matrix, which expands Lefebvre's (1974) tripartite division of space, by considering not just how space is produced, represented, and experienced, but also accounting for its absolute, relative, and relational dimensions. In sum, through Harvey, Huber considers the player's lived experience of the virtual environment, emphasising the realness of the sensations, rather than the fictitiousness of the space.

With the shift to digital, the game's material space becomes fixed, as opposed to tabletop play, where space and actions are created discursively and are continuously

¹⁴ Although Pettersson is describing his experience in LARP, the same scenario may take place in many different kinds of interpretative role-playing.

negotiated (Montola 2008). The diegetic spatiality of the computer game, as well as its narrative, are shared and unchanging amongst a community of players; thus, they develop the potential to become stable referents. The magnitude of this change can be recognised, among other things, in the – relatively sparse – appearance of complaints in the “letters to editor” section of *Computer World Magazine*, as well as in the reasonably common concern in articles and reviews that too many clues will spoil the fun.

In sum, the tabletop hardware affords broader creative freedom than the microcomputer. This is due to the fact that in the latter’s case, designing is no longer part of the experience, due to the high literacy required in order to engage with the game’s code. The relations between the two manifestations of the role-playing software are that of a code (ruleset and assets) and a text (a scenario). This limitation, however, produces a stable virtual environment which is shared among the community. Therefore, instead of being built upon a broadly common language—that of the ruleset—the players share a text, which provides ample space for individual interpretation, but which is in turn bounded by the fixedness of the properties of its object (Eco 1990, 1998). Simply put, every *Wizardry* player could interact with any other player and discuss the same experience,¹⁵ as if they were part of the same D&D campaign.

3. Crossing national borders: *Dragon Quest*

3.1. A different cultural sphere

The transition from analogue to digital involved two partially overlapping communities – wargamers and programmers – in the context of a blossoming videogame industry inside of a single country. The boundaries of these communities, dictated by the apparatuses of their platforms of reference, however, were not equal to the national ones; each community shaped its borders through practices, texts, and machines. This is especially evident when one looks at the early Japanese videogame market. In fact, as noted by Kobayashi and Koyama (2019), it is possible to see relatively similar patterns of hobbyists partaking in communal activities centred

¹⁵ Allowing for the variation tied to the aleatory textuality of a game.

around the personal computer, with shared networks of magazines, manuals, and events. Where the national borders come into play is in the constitution of these networks. More specifically, existing institutions and economic incentives heavily influence an industry's development, which has ties to the social connections and the use of platforms. In Japan's case, this meant a well-established corporate complex and existing pools of experts upon which companies could draw (Aoyama and Izushi 2003, 2006; Picard 2013), and who were quite often part of other subcultural groups, tied to a number of cultural industries. Finally, access to non-Japanese software often passed through porting between machines, re-elaboration by Japanese developers, or import of machines on which it could be run.

Dragon Quest is an emblematic case. The minds behind its creation, Horii Yūji and Nakamura Kōichi were hobbyist programmers who were hired into the corporate world through a game-development competition sponsored by Enix (Ishinomori and Takizawa 1990). Horii, in particular, is a good example of the phenomenon to which Aoyama and Izushi (2006) refer, when they mention cross-pollination between different creative industries. In fact, Horii was an employee at Shūeisha, another pop cultural corporate giant, before joining Enix, in addition to being an active member of manga circles and clubs at Waseda University in his academic years (Waseda University 2016). His turn to the computer industry happened at a later date, when he taught himself how to code. Moreover, as Altice (2015) points out, his main strength had always been writing and characterisation. Borrowing Janet Murray's (1997, 15) terms, he could be described as a bard turned into a hacker, rather than the opposite.

Additionally, the collaborative effort of game developers and other professionals, such as Toriyama Akira and Sugiyama Kōichi, harmonises with that period's general blurring of the lines between media. That is to say, what both Steinberg (2015b) and Lamarre (2019) have recognised as an exponential growth in the focus on the software/hardware dichotomy. Both Toriyama and Sugiyama were established artists in their own right. The former was especially well-known for his *Dr.Slump!* series, published by Horii's former employer, Shueisha, whereas the latter was a successful composer for television and other media. Building on Campana's (2015) illustration of transmediality and of the porousness of platforms, the inclusion of these authors into the production of the game was likely successful as it managed to attach the title to innumerable other facets of everyday life. As a platform, it created a common space

where Toriyama and Sugiyama could exist together. In Peircean terms, the network of objects—the authors and their aesthetics or works— became mutual interpretants. Something as immaterial (as “soft”) as Toriyama’s drawing style would immediately take the viewer’s attention to the recently released game, or to the composer’s works, or any other directional relation between the three.

Other sociocultural elements are to be found in some of the formal aspects of the game, some of which have already been noted by Altice (2015, chap. 6). One example of this is connected to the technical limitations of the console. Since saving was not possible, it was necessary to insert a password to unlock access to items, levels, and other in-game advantages which could be accessed after reaching certain milestones. Some of these passwords were rendered easier to remember by using famous *haiku* instead of inventing 14-line strings of characters from scratch.

3.2. A multi-user software

The common narrative surrounding the birth of the game reinforces the idea that not just a worldview or a story, but the very concept of role-playing is adaptable to different platforms. In fact, the official origin story of *Dragon Quest* sees Horii and Nakamura discovering *Wizardry* at the 1983 AppleFest in San Francisco,¹⁶ only to later set out to bring the genre to the Nintendo Famicom.

That said, the story is likely more complex. Japanese hobbyist programmers had already developed a great number of role-playing titles by the time the game was released, in 1986 (Schules et al. 2018). However, all these titles were released on personal computer, which greatly reduced their potential audience; as stated by *Dragon Quest* developer, Horii Yūji, “The threshold [for playing these games] was too high” (Nintendo 2009). In addition, while different technical standards had rendered Japan’s computer game market comparatively detached from Euro-American ones, it would be wrong to consider Japan as an impenetrable bubble. In fact, hobbyists imported games and systems from overseas (Schules et al. 2018) while other influences on the genre, namely fantasy tabletop games (Kamm 2020) and Western

¹⁶ Some scholars (e.g. Huber 2012) take *Ultima III* as the first release of an American computer role-playing game in Japan. However, the official dramatisation produced by Enix (1991), as well as Horii himself (Nintendo 2009) take the American convention as the origin point.

high fantasy novels (Arduini 2012), were also present in the country, although they were usually consumed by smaller audiences.

Following the line of software moving across platforms, role-playing was transferred onto a more powerful machine than the Apple II, as the dedicated Picture Processing Unit (PPU) allowed for a considerable degree of freedom with graphics, as well as for a distinction between a sprite layer and a background layer (Altice 2015). More importantly, however, the genre became part of a structurally and aesthetically different ecology. It has already been noted how the change from wargaming to role-playing involved a syntagmatic shift in the mutual relations of players and game objects. In this case, on the other hand, while the formal, on-screen elements and the player's direct relation to them remained largely the same, the passage from personal computer to home console required the software to adapt to a different mode of engagement.

Bruno (2021a) describes the visual novel apparatus in terms of intimacy.¹⁷ In fact, the personal computer space invites usage from one person at a time—any intrusion potentially spoiling the experience. An analogy could be drawn with computer role-playing games. *Wizardry* requires high concentration and mindfulness of the in-game space. The player may need to keep track of many disparate in-game events, the cost of a misstep being the loss of characters and resources. This individualistic relationship is perfectly exemplified by *Ultima*, as the game keeps track of the time and of the player's age, constructing a frenetic experience which requires high levels of concentration on the user's part.

In contrast, the home console environment hosts a qualitatively different practice. The television, being usually placed in a communal space in the house, rather than in a private room, favours a one-to-many directionality of the information flow. This tendency is also clear when we look at the screen-interface. Home console heads up displays (HUDs) convey considerably more information than their personal computer counterparts. For instance, statistics and character level. This redundancy aims to involve every participant in the activity—be they users or onlookers, in order to let them know what is happening at any moment. In other words, the screen, and its

¹⁷ This is clear from his usage of the expression “character intimacy games,” although he has engaged more explicitly with the notion of a visual novel apparatus through a media-ecological lens (Bruno 2021b).

position in the room, encapsulate a specific form of engagement, which sees one to several people partaking in a single activity.

This mode of play is clearly supported by paratextual evidence. The release of the first instalment of the game saw a dedicated serialised column in one of the main videogame magazines of the time, *Famirī Konpyūtā Tsūshin*, or *Famitsū* for short. In it, a model of textual-social interaction is produced and clearly presented in an almost pedagogical manner. Starting from the first issue, in 1986, a columnist under the nickname of *Ganma Suzuki* presents himself as the hero, entrusted by the king with the fate of Alefgard (*Arefugado*). He reports his in-game actions and dialogue, reminiscent of replays.¹⁸ After a few lines, a second person enters the frame, *Gēsen Ueno*, who claims to have just finished playing *The Legend of Zelda*. Their interaction is extremely informal, featuring interjections—exclamations being clearly reported on the transcripts—as well as their digressions, such as *Gēsen* talking about his keyboard and computer setup in the second issue of the serialised transcripts. This setup serves to evoke a scene of the two in front of the television screen. *Ganma* is playing, whereas *Gēsen* is only commenting on the game. However, they are both equally engaged and excited about the on-screen action.

Therefore, the practice inscribed in the Nintendo Famicom engenders a different, shared space than that of the personal computer, which, on the contrary, favours an intimate mode of play. The relationship between user and software afforded by the hardware is one-to-one, whereas the Famicom allows more and differing degrees of participation. On the other hand, the features of the hardware constrict to a certain extent the design of the software, which in turn has effects on the mode of consumption. For instance, the simplification of the game mechanics opened the genre to a wider public, while the clarification of the possible actions made group participation viable.

Interestingly, some of the elements which help to construct a more inclusive play setting are the result of previous experiences, rather than overt design choices aimed at opening the information flow. For instance, the HUD displaying the player's possible

¹⁸ Replays were a form of serialised fiction which appeared in magazines in the 1980s. They were dramatised transcripts of tabletop play sessions, used as a way to popularise the genre. With the rise in popularity of sword-and-sorcery fantasy in the public imaginary, replays such as *Rōdosutō Senki* ("Record of Lodoss war," Group SNE 1986) gave rise to successful franchises (see also Steinberg 2015a, 2015b; Kamm 2019).

actions derives from earlier efforts to adapt Horii's *Pōtopia Renzoku Satsujin Jiken* (Enix 1983) from computer to Famicom. The game was an investigative adventure game where the player had to type their actions (e.g. moving to a different location, talking to someone, etc.) on the keyboard. Since the Famicom peripherals did not allow for typing, the programmers came up with the action selection menu (Ishinomori and Takizawa 1990).

4. Final remarks and conclusion: Japanese role-playing?

In a short column appearing in *Voice* magazine, Asada Akira speaks of *J-kaiki* ("return to J"). He frames the insertion of a "J" in front of concepts such as "pop music" ("*J-pop*") to be a form of seclusion, as in "obviously pop, but with a Japanese twist" (2000). The scholar's critique is addressed at the then recent serious turn of the discourse on *otaku* and Japanese subcultures, which were perceived as increasingly more fashionable abroad and as a possible source of leverage for nationalistic rhetoric, as they were another tool to construct an imagined Japan. In other words, claiming the uniqueness of Japanese subcultures and pop culture would create the necessary premises for the development of, and capitalisation on what Miyake (2018) calls "neo-Japonisme," as demonstrated by the then soon-to-come *Cool Japan* campaign (Miyake 2015, 103).

Albeit with a different directionality, a similar phenomenon is that of Japanese role-playing games, often called "JRPGs" by – almost exclusively – non-Japanese audiences. Pelletier-Gagnon (2018) individuates the popularisation of the term at the turn of the millennium, in magazines and online reviews, often with disparaging connotations. The word seems to denote a particular kind of Japan-coded performativity, which is tied to other cultural industries such as those of comic books and animation, or to cute aesthetics (Schules 2015). The Japanese adaptation of the genre, therefore, allegedly imbued it with a certain type of expression, in the same vein as the *anime-esque* (Suan 2017, 2021). In its iterations, role-playing has been adapted, as suggested in the statement by Kondō chosen to open this essay. However, it has indeed been interpreted differently by various communities even at the transition between tabletop and digital. Despite the large overlap between subcultural groups with relatively similar points of reference (e.g., wargaming or Tolkienesque high fantasy), the form of play has undergone heavy modifications.

The software mutated as a function of the limitations of the hardware, as well as of its community. However, this shift was not unidirectional. The community adapted to the affordances of the software, which led to a different form of playful sociality. That said, even the machine on which the software is run has had to be rethought. Relatedly, the emergence of a benchmark for accessible home consoles in Japan, and its later international propagation, may have laid the foundations for a home-console role-playing game to be successful. The convergence of these factors may have influenced the concept of role-playing at the crossing of a national border. The existence of specific cultural industries in Japan may not have informed the notion of JRPG any more than the success of Tolkien-inspired high fantasy has contributed to the making of “RPGs without an adjective.” In the same way, the history of media-mixing experimentation (Steinberg 2012) may have facilitated other professionals – Toriyama and Sugiyama – to become part of the project. Comparable efforts were made, albeit less successfully, in the United States, when a D&D TV show aired in the late 1980s (Applecline 2014).

At the same time, the degree to which certain phenomena or behaviours are in fact transnational emerges from this analysis. The computer hobbyists contributed to the crossing of borders by the genre, whose flow established a bridge between communities of players, separated by different technical standards. The initial cultural brokerage (Kamm 2017, 2020), can be thought of as one of the ways in which transcultural flows begin, as evidenced by recent non-Japanese JRPGs. This further reinforces the notion that the drawing of the boundaries of an imagined community often passes through some form of mediation, which renders phenomena such as the transmission of role-playing from the United States to Japan, and the consequent renegotiation of Japan-coded aesthetics, all the more in need of analysis. Kamm’s (2020, 19; 231) observations on the construction of “JRPG” as a category finds further confirmation. Not only do differences within the Japanese context should make us question the utility of the label, but also observing its roots, and its future, inter- and transcultural trajectory may be cause for concern. The articulation of difference along cultural faults thus creates the space of possibility which allows the birth of a distinct “Japanese” role-playing genre. The projected otherness solidifies into labels such as “JRPG,” where cultural difference acts to isolate the genre from anything already in existence. By contrast, positioning role-playing as an external, soft concept, may allow us to shift to a formulation of culture as an adjectival and contingent dimension of a

phenomenon, rather than as one of its substantial properties.

To conclude, this study has traced a tentative genealogical trajectory of role-playing across different material platforms and sociocultural milieux, as well as media ecologies. It has been proposed that we look at media and genres as possible outcomes in a space of indeterminacy engendered by material and social forces, among other things. Observing media and practices in these terms may constitute a pathway towards a more holistic judgement about their aesthetic potential and limitations. Rather than binding the analysis to social, cultural, or material factors, there may be merit in looking at the space created at their intersection.

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MAIN SECTION:

ON POLITICS OF VISUAL MEDIA

Introduction

On politics of visual media

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“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.

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Video Gaming and Narratives of Love as a potential stance of cultural-political meaning in current societies: A Study of *It Takes Two*, 2021

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ABSTRACT

In 2021, arriving shortly after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the social distancing it required, a creative co-op video game, It Takes Two, created by Swedish developer Hazelight Studios and published by American gaming giant Electronic Arts, gained huge popularity on a global scale, including unexpected success in the Chinese market. Although the game is not officially available in China, has no publishing license, and no official promotions, still half of its sales come from China. The game is based on a divorce-themed story, and by integrating cooperative gameplay mechanisms, it enables players to engage in constructing their own “narrative of love” that reflects and coincides with specific cultural indicators. Bringing the dynamics of marriage and divorce to the forefront, the game has generated enormous discussion in mainstream Chinese online platforms, and drew attention to political-cultural notions of what it means to be married and then to struggle and go through the (emotional, practical, and legal) divorce process. The aim of this article is to approach video games such as It Takes Two as a cultural form that should be understood as part of our politics as citizens and individuals in a broad sense, and as part of a wider and more complex connection we have with each other and with society (Street, 2007). Drawing on an analysis of the function of gameplay mechanics in relation to video game setting and structure, this study provides a discussion of the visual and narrative representations of an ostensibly “typical” universal love and divorce issue within the sociocultural context of a Western family, and examines how Chinese audiences make sense of such “lessons” and ideology, and how they work (or might not work) for them. It Takes Two raises awareness of and questions about how games can elicit emotional responses and deep reflection in real life for its players about the vicissitudes of marriage (and love relationships in general) and the culturally specific, at times legal, and broadly visual political implications of their successful or disastrous unfolding.

KEYWORDS

Video games; Narrative; Interactivity; Participatory culture; *It Takes Two*; COVID-19 pandemic.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been a surge in the popularity of various forms of entertainment in China, including games, movies, TV dramas, as well as a notable increase in the profile of the actors who are integral to these media modalities. This trend, known as “出圈” (chū quān) online, which refers to the fame of a celebrity or the

sub-cultural discursive narratives that transcend their fan community and reaching a broader audience. In terms of video games, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (2020), *It Takes Two* (2021), and *Elden Ring* (2022) are among the video games in China that have gained immense popularity, sparking significant online discussion. *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (2020), a life simulation game, has gained popularity in China for its soothing gameplay and themes of community, while *Elden Ring* (2022) attracts players with its expansive open-world design, challenging gameplay, and cooperative multiplayer component. Despite their unique appeals, these games, along with *It Takes Two* (2021), have managed to attract the attention of a considerable number of non-players and have ignited discussion in online spaces beyond the usual purview of their sub-cultural gaming communities.

This paper investigates the impact of popular video games on contemporary Chinese society, focusing on the factors contributing to their widespread appeal and the emergence of sub-cultural narratives. Through an online ethnographic study, it examines the gaming experience of Chinese players and their individual narrative construction during the Covid-19 pandemic, using the co-op video game, *It Takes Two* (2021), as a case study. The game's phenomenal success ("chu quan") and extensive online discussions among Chinese netizens, particularly regarding pandemic-induced shifts in human relationships, make it a relevant subject for analysis. These factors, along with the popularity and themes of togetherness present in such other games as *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, for example, endow the game with significant relevance for analysis in the context of contemporary Chinese society. Interestingly, *Elden Ring*, though not primarily socially-oriented, also showcases togetherness as online audiences share experiences by watching others face challenges rather than struggling alone. This paper explores how social media and digital communication have facilitated widespread online narrative construction and sharing among a broader audience in the context of the pandemic in Chinese society.

Despite not being officially available in the Chinese market — *It Takes Two* does not have a publishing license or any official promotion in China — *It Takes Two* has achieved unexpected success in the country, with half of its sales coming from Chinese gamers. External journalist Daniel Camilo attributes the surge in popularity of *It Takes Two* to its thematic focus on concepts of family, love, and divorce, which has resonated with players in light of China's increasing divorce rates. China has experienced

declining marriage and birth rates, while divorce rates have surged, reaching a peak of 4.71 million couples in 2019 before dropping to 2.1 million in 2022 (Wang, 2023). The game's themes reflect the changing dynamics of relationships and family structures in China, demonstrating how video games can connect with players emotionally and culturally across borders. As a gamer and researcher, I am interested in exploring this phenomenon by closely observing Chinese video game players.

The specific aim of this article is to explore video games as cultural forms that should be comprehended as integral to our politics as citizens and individuals in a broad sense, and as part of a broader and more intricate connection we have with each other and with society. Therefore, by conceptualising gamers as a media “audience” (Gosling & Crawford, 2011), researchers can obtain valuable insights into the intricate interactions between gamers and how they utilise the games they play. To address the primary research questions posed in this article, an ethnographic study that combines game playing and observation with gamers and online communities is employed. For the analysis of *It Takes Two*'s narratives, I played this game twice between March 2022 and March 2023, experiencing it both with my partner and a friend. Through textual analysis of the game narrative, narrative interactivity, gameplay mechanics, storytelling, and embedded ideologies within the game, this paper provides a case study to discuss how Chinese gamers and audiences interpret pre-existing narratives and ideologies within games and how they work (or might not work) for them.

More broadly, this paper aims to add to the discursive field through an examination of video games as cultural phenomena by conducting a critical analysis of the cultural-political meaning occurring around *It Takes Two*. Rather than focusing on defining video game culture or studying the culture surrounding video games, this analysis will approach video games as a cultural form that requires an understanding of gaming subcultures marked by specific tastes (Schleiner, 2001; Shaw, 2010; Winkler, 2006), a specific appreciation of a unique art form (Jenkins, 2006; McLuhan, 1964), and as a social practice (Jenkins & Squire, 2002; Taylor, 2006). In these contexts, the study of games cannot be examined in isolation from the broader social and cultural structures of a specific society. To obtain its insights, the research herein will address the following questions. How do video game players negotiate the pre-programmed narratives and the ideological messages conveyed by game creators? How do players construct individual narratives about love and relationships on social media?

(particularly Bilibili, which is chosen for its prominence in and impact on Chinese society). What function does narrative serve in gaming experiences? And how can it be understood as a socio-ideological phenomenon beyond the confines of video games? In the context of these inquiries lie considerations of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on people's daily lives and the influence of video games—using the widespread success in China of the otherwise narratively-odd game *It Takes Two* as a case study—for their capacity to elicit emotional responses and deep reflections by their players and observers in the real world.

Indeed, over the last decade, scholars in the field of cultural studies have examined social meanings generated around video games, prompted by the experiences of ludic engagement (Vella, 2015; Selander, 2008; Christopher and Leuszler, 2023b), the impact of producers on games from the perspective of political economy (Kerr, 2006; Nieborg, 2014), the role of players in narrative construction and cultural meaning-making (Gee, 2003; Jenkins, 2004; Murray, 1997; Rutter, 2004), and the importance of societal norms and desires (Consalvo, 2003; Taylor, 2009; Leonard, 2004; Kocurek, 2015). Such scholars have further identified several issues as crucial for understanding the impact of video games on society and culture, including their role in the construction of cultural identity (at least within their cult-oriented player communities) (Gee, 2008; Muriel & Crawford, 2018; Newman, 2008; Schwartz, 2006), the negotiation of gender issues (Feng et al., 2007; Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Murray, 2007; Williams et al., 2009; Shaw, 2014), the global effect of colonialism (Mukherjee, 2017), the global spread of capitalism (Dyer-Witheford and Peuter, 2009), virtual environments (Kozlov & Johansen, 2010; Steed & Oliveira, 2009), and ludic narratives and the de facto agency of players to navigate them (Bogost, 2007; Jenkins, 2006; Murray, 2004; Ryan, 2006). With these contributions in mind, the consideration of the popularisation of this game in China requires attention to the unique circumstances of its historical moment. The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic not only posed a serious threat to people's health and well-being but also greatly impacted social order and people's daily lives. During this period, people have used social media to share their personal experiences and emotions, further contributing to the broader narratives presented by the government and mainstream media. These individual narratives serve as records and memories of the pandemic experience; a part of the production of

social narratives that have prompted a rethinking of normative interpersonal family relations, bonding, friendship, marriage issues, etc.

In the following, I first situate this study in relation to the growing scholarship of game interactivity and narrative, as well as the role of social media in connecting players' emotions through providing interactive opportunities. Based on the methodological approach outlined in greater specificity below, I will explain the development of *It Takes Two* in China and how it has become an important text for Chinese netizens to discuss and construct emotional narratives. I will emphasise how Chinese players negotiate and construct their own narratives on Bilibili. I will also address the role and importance of interactive narrative in video games. Overall, the findings of this study suggest that video games are an increasingly relevant medium for cultural analysis, particularly in relation to their political implications, which are often discursively subverted into their broader acceptance as mere low art (Christopher & Leuzler, 2023a; Cover, 2006; Juul, 2013). By examining the ways in which video games contribute to the construction of individual narratives, researchers can critically examine the role of video games as rhetorical cultural artefacts, while also considering the broader social and political contexts in which they are situated. Ultimately, and most broadly, this article argues that a nuanced understanding of video games as cultural artefacts can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of society and culture as a whole.

2. Literature review: From 'active-gamers' to 'active creators'

This paper offers a theoretical framework to gain insights into the complex world of digital gaming culture—the complex interactions between gamers and their uses of the games that they play. Moreover, Crawford & Gosling (2011) have put forth the idea of conceptualising gamers as more of a media “audience” as opposed to their typical understanding as interactive-associative media *users*, thereby opening up avenues to explore literature on media audiences and fan cultures beyond the activities of the gamers proper. To a large extent, the Internet and video games grew together as largely symbiotic new media forms, each supporting and helping the other grow (Crawford & Gosling, 2011); and today, that strong relationship remains well intact. Online platforms such as YouTube and Bilibili are all packed with gaming channels, which provide the opportunity for gamers to upload videos of themselves playing or

reviewing games, share the production of walkthroughs, mods, fan art and fiction, new games, hacks, game guides, reviews, interpretations, cosplaying, and so on. While both platforms enable gamers to share content such as walkthroughs, mods, fan art, and reviews, Bilibili's distinctive "bullet screen" (danmu) system sets it apart. Bilibili's bullet screen system displays real-time comments directly on videos, fostering a dynamic and interactive experience for viewers. This feature encourages user engagement and creates a sense of community.

Today, video gaming is so much more than simply the interaction of one or a few individuals with a video game machine, and has become one of the key examples and drivers of a participatory culture (Jenkins, 2004; Newman, 2004). Jenkins (2004) argues that participatory culture has brought about a significant cultural transformation, moving away from a passive audience of consumers to a more active culture where the boundaries between production and consumption are blurred. In the context of video games, players, therefore, "do not merely consume a pre-established piece of media but are active participants in the creation of their experience" (Calleja, 2011, p. 56). This interactive and productive nature of gaming enables players to develop not only artefacts and texts but also online communities (Banks & Potts, 2010; Behrenshausen, 2013; Taylor, 2006). The growing importance of social interactions and online communities in the gaming industry is evidenced by the increasing number of individuals who share their gaming experiences on social media platforms and within fan communities. This trend has been facilitated by new digital technologies that provide tools for communication and collaboration, enabling both gamers and non-gamers to participate in and propagate massive communal narrative worlds (Baym, 2010; Jenkins, 2004). This cultural phenomenon raises important questions about the nature of gaming, interactivity, and storytelling, as well as the role of narrative both within and beyond the realm of games, which are central to the primary research questions of this paper.

The discourse surrounding whether digital games have a definite narrative structure has been a topic of discussion amongst ludologists and narratologists for some time now. Although this debate may be perceived as less prominent in current discourse, its examination remains valuable as it highlights the narratological perspective in game studies (such as Jenkins, 2004; Murray, 1997). This approach allows researchers to analyse games as "text," using theoretical tools borrowed from

literary or media studies. It focuses not only on the story being told but also on underlying ideologies, discourses, patterns of reception, interpretation, and so on (Crawford & Gosling, 2009). At its simplest, a narrative can be defined as consisting of two elements—a ‘discourse’ and a ‘story.’ The story provides the material for the narrative, but the way in which the narrative is constructed is influenced by the discourses involved (Carr, 2006). According to Jenkins (2004, p. 121), critics who oppose the narratological approach often pay more attention to “the activities and aspirations of the storyteller” than the actual process of narrative comprehension. However, these critics fail to acknowledge that narratives go beyond the medium they are presented in, whether it is a book or a screen, for example.

Building on this understanding of narratives in digital games, Nitsche (2008) explains the concept of ‘ludonarrative’, closely related to our previous discussion. This concept focuses on the intersection between gameplay and storytelling in video games, examining how they work together to create immersive experiences for players. Ideally, gameplay and narrative should complement each other, but sometimes they can conflict, resulting in “ludonarrative dissonance” (Hocking, 2007). Game developers aim to create harmonious ludonarrative experiences by integrating story elements into gameplay mechanics, offering meaningful choices to players, and using environmental storytelling to support the game's themes. Games like *The Last of Us* (2013), *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015), *Life is Strange* (2015) exemplify the effective integration of ludonarrative, blending gameplay and narrative elements to craft immersive and engaging experiences for players.

Scholars in game studies have contributed to the critical evaluation of interactivity in video games. In the context of horror video game narratives, for example, Christopher and Leuszler (2023a) identify nuanced forms of ludic interactivity that distinguish the ludic elements of “participation” from so-called “transportation.” Similarly, but more immediately relevant here, rather than treating “interactivity” as a singular phenomenon, Zimmerman (2004) identified four models of interactivity through its pairing with narrative experience: cognitive interactivity, functional interactivity, explicit interactivity, and meta-interactivity. The last two have received more attention from scholars, particularly in the context of participatory culture, where they discuss the fourth mode, meta-interactivity, or cultural participation with

a text. Interactive elements play a vital role in video games as they allow for user participation, resulting in a more engaging and immersive gaming experience.

When situating game narrative within the context of participatory culture, it is imperative to ascertain two crucial characteristics of video games, namely interactivity and narrative, and their interdependence. The two features are inextricably linked, as interactivity allows for the player to actively engage with the narrative and shape their own experience. This interdependence has been recognised by scholars such as Marie-Laure Ryan (2004), who argues that video games are a unique form of narrative that combines storytelling with a participatory game world.

While gamer interactivity is viewed as productive in participatory culture, interactivity within video games is seen as underpinned by “democratisation of participation” (Cover 2004, p. 174), saluted with its liberating potentials. It is the third mode mentioned by Zimmerman, the explicit interactivity, or participation with designed choices and procedures in a text, including choices, random events, dynamic simulations, and other procedures programmed into the interactive experience. The interactivity feature in video games allows players to become active agents in the game world, enabling them to shape the narrative through their choices and actions (Zimmerman, 2004). In this context, the concept of interactivity is commonly used to describe the agency of players or player control in video games studies. Some scholars suggest “the notion of interactivity means that the decisions and skills of the player will move the story in a certain direction” (Sawyer et al., 1998, p. 112), thereby allowing the player to change the game as it is played. Janet Murray has argued that agency in video games is not only a matter of player control, but also involves the player's ability to shape the game world and its narrative. From this point, agency can be summarised as what produces changes and transformations in reality (Murray, 1997). According to Janet Murray, this form of agency is both empowering and transformative, as it allows players to experiment with different identities and explore new possibilities. The concept of agency in video game studies is closely tied to the interactivity feature within games. The discussion of agency in video game studies sheds light on the unique appeal of video games as interactive media, where players have the ability to actively participate and influence the virtual worlds they inhabit.

Nevertheless, a tension exists between the *interactivity* of video game stories, which allows players to alter them, and the *narratives* constructed by the designers.

Interactivity has changed the way digital media tells stories, and that is something not taken into account by legacy media narrative theory (Koenitz, 2015). Game narratives, which shoulder the responsibility of giving impetus to the game flow, impose restraints on how the player can interact with the virtual world, as they are not given the agency to change the game's structure and design. This tension between player agency and designer control highlights the importance of understanding the interplay between interactivity and narrative in video games. As players engage with the narrative through their actions, on a micro-narrative level at least, they are also shaping the narrative itself. Even though in almost all video games the overall narrative offers limited choices towards an often-singular game "ending", the choices players make and the paths they take while playing create a unique experience that is different from other players. This personalised experience is what makes video games an exciting and dynamic storytelling medium.

Ultimately, the relationship between interactivity and narrative in video games is a complex and multifaceted one. It requires an understanding of the different models of interactivity and how they interact with narrative, as well as a careful consideration of the balance between player agency and designer control. By exploring and understanding these dynamics, we can gain a deeper appreciation for the unique storytelling potential of video games. In light of the emphasis on video game interactivity and the significance of player choices in existing research, questioning the importance of game narrative in contemporary gaming is inevitable.

3. Research Method

In the study of media culture phenomena, ethnography has been a common methodology for examining audience reception of television programmes, using participant observation to explore audiences' reading of a particular text (Ang, 1985; Radway, 1984)—how they interpret the "information" received; how to express their agreement or opposition to the ideology in the text, create a sense of self, and imagine other realities (Hall, 1983/1996); and how they organise social, political, and economic activities around the media. Ethnographic research on online practices and communications has become increasingly popular in recent years due to the growing influence and prevalence of the Internet in people's daily lives.

This study specifically utilises online ethnography (Baym, 2000; Hills, 2002) to explore the online engagement of Chinese gamers, focusing on their life on the screen rather than their life in front of the screen (Facer et al., 2001; Livingstone, 2003). In particular, I will follow Matt Hills' model of online ethnography, examining specific modes of "communication" and "interaction" that are allowed and promoted in online platforms (Bilibili), and assessing the presence of other forms of interaction, creativity, and critique. The incorporation of an online ethnography approach to collecting data was useful in identifying and locating the audience for conducting this research and in accessing players' engagement with *It Takes Two*. This method allowed for an in-depth exploration without interfering with the perspectives of video game players. Online ethnography permits researchers to unobtrusively examine players' behaviours, interactions, and experiences within their native digital environments. By immersing in online communities and gaming domains, researchers acquire insights without affecting players' actions or views. This non-invasive methodology ensures authentic data collection, accurately representing players' experiences and fostering a thorough comprehension of the subject matter.

After searching for "It Takes Two" on Bilibili, the recommendation system displayed various sorting options including comprehensive ranking, most views, latest releases, most bullet comments, and most favourites. However, regardless of the selected filter, the platform only displayed 1,020 videos, which equates to 34 pages, with 30 videos per page. To narrow down the search, this study focused on videos under 10 minutes long that belonged to the gaming category and were sorted by the highest number of views. By implementing this filtering process, the aim is to exclude from the research scope videos made by professional gaming streamers. Without limiting the video duration, the recommended videos suggested by the system would mostly consist of content from popular gaming streamers, with a significant number of views well exceeding an average of 2,000,000 views. This article focuses on ordinary users who create videos to share and express themselves. After viewing most of the selected videos, I noticed that certain keywords appeared recurrently in the titles, following a specific formula. These will be visually presented in four groups later in this article. Using this information, I narrowed down the sample size to 50 videos that represent the category. The search terms used in this study were biased towards Chinese-language videos, leading to the majority of video creators being based in Mainland China. This article analyses how a specific sector of

Chinese gamers constructs narratives of love and relationships. The subjects of the sampled videos are freely available on Bilibili and may also be accessible on other platforms like TikTok or Sina Weibo.

Similar to other methods used in researching YouTube videos (e.g. Ellis, 2012; Banet-Weiser, 2011; Dobson, 2016), my study employs discursive textual analysis to examine the recurring narrative and aesthetic patterns that influence the presentation of “relationship” in these videos. This analysis focuses on various aspects, including but not limited to the use of time, editing, imagery, camera angles, and sound. I converted the titles and textual explanations of the videos created by the users into text to identify the discursive techniques used to influence the perception of the stories. While I examined the comments posted by Bilibili users to understand their reactions towards the videos and games discussed, I did not conduct a comprehensive analysis of these comments. Feedback comments will only be addressed if they highlight conflicting interpretations of the videos.

5. It Takes Two: A co-op video game

In order to examine how video game players perceive pre-programmed narratives and how to develop and construct new ones, *It Takes Two* (2021) will be analysed. Released in 2021, *It Takes Two* was created by the Swedish developer Hazelight Studios and published by the American gaming giant Electronic Arts. Like Hazelight’s debut game, *A Way Out*, *It Takes Two* does not offer a single-player mode and can only be played through online or local split-screen cooperative multiplayer modes. By February 2023, the game had sold over 10 million copies, making it a commercially successful product on a global scale. It won multiple year-end accolades, including two BAFTA awards, Best Multiplayer Game at the Golden Joystick Awards in 2021, and the Game of the Year at The Game Awards 2021 and the 25th Annual D.I.C.E. Awards. In addition, *It Takes Two* won Game of the Year 2021 at the Bilibili Game Awards in China.

Two dimensions of ludic narrative emerge as significant in this analysis because they provide insights into the narrative experience of playing *It Takes Two*: pre-programmed narratives and user-generated narratives. The game narrative is intrinsically intertwined with the game mechanics and revolves around the central theme of a marital relationship within an American middle-class family. Nevertheless, Chinese players may not be receptive to the ideological messages concerning love and

relationships that the game conveys, as evidenced by their resistance to the 'text' on Bilibili. Interactivities within the game are prioritised through its design, fostering a framework for collaborative play that has attracted a significant player base in China.

5.1. Pre-programmed narrative and narrative interactivity

Game narrative plays a central role in exploring storytelling within video games, focusing on the "what" and "how" of stories told in games. Storytelling is an important aspect of game mechanics that can significantly impact users' immersion and interaction experiences by embedding narrative elements like characters, story worlds, emotions, and narrative interfaces (Bizzochi, 2007). While game narrative provides a basic structure created by developers, its development relies on the user's imagination and emotional engagement. In a response to the debate about the relationship between game narrative and gameplay, the pre-programmed narrative of *It Takes Two* offers an interesting case demonstrating how ludic narratives are crafted to enhance gameplay.

Scholars have emphasised the importance of balancing narrative and gameplay to achieve a state of immersion and engagement. It is widely acknowledged among scholars that in traditional cinematic storytelling, there exists a state of mutual detachment between interactivity and narrative. If too much emphasis is placed on the narrative, the player may become passive and only observe the story. Conversely, if too much focus is placed on gameplay, it can absorb cognitive resources, leaving little room for the player to perceive complex narrative patterns (Adams, 2010). Therefore, achieving an inverse distribution of interactive and non-interactive content is key to striking a balance between gameplay and narrative. An increasing number of narrative games that captivate players seem to suggest a clear direction: game narrative should be conveyed through every action, interaction, and gameplay within the game.

It Takes Two is a game (Figure 1) that has recently garnered attention for its seamless integration of game narrative and interactive gameplay mechanics, providing a gaming experience that exceeds previous games and interactive devices in both scale and richness. The game narrative of *It Takes Two* actually mirrors the typical three-act restorative structure of modern commercial cinema (Dancyger & Rush, 1995), which includes a beginning (the first act), a conflict (the second act), and the resolution of the conflict (the third act). It tells a simple story about a couple on the brink of divorce (the first act), who, after going through a fantastical journey of self-reflection (the second

act), rediscover their love for each other (the third act). The narrative involves a bizarre co-op obstacle course that Hazelight describes as “a metaphorical merging of gameplay and narrative that pushes the boundaries of interactive storytelling.” In this game, the narrative unfolds entirely within the gameplay itself, where the stages, mechanics, and puzzles of the game drive the storytelling.



Fig. 1. Split screen shows the interactive gameplay that encourages collaboration and communication in *It Takes Two*. © **Electronic Arts, Hazelight Studios.**

The game begins with a married couple, May and Cody, getting into an argument, after which they inform their daughter that they are getting a divorce. While playing with dolls in the form of her parents, Rose’s tears fall on them, causing in May and Cody to be transported into their cloth counterparts. The couple is then greeted by *The Book of Love*, who explains that he is Rose’s guardian and will not allow May and Cody back into their bodies until they reconcile their differences and attempt to rekindle their love. This divorce-themed narrative incorporates cooperative gameplay elements, where two players must work together to navigate seven dreamscape levels. These levels are filled with platforming, puzzles, and distinctive combat challenges. The game also features a very intricate, story-driven narrative filled with plenty of twists and turns.

The gameplay has been expertly designed to complement its interactive storytelling needs, reflecting the central theme of collaboration in a marital relationship. The methods of using these elements and solving the puzzles offer a ludic reflection of the game’s overall theme of “cooperation.” Indeed, the character Dr. Hakim from the book explicitly exclaims, “This is a story of collaboration!” as Cody and May escape from a large, enraged mandrill in an orange onesie, a sentiment that is prominently echoed throughout the entire game. Regardless of the gameplay or

cinematic elements, everything serves the story about "a couple on the brink of divorce and their journey to rediscover their love for each other." Jenkins (2004) describes this type of narrative as "embedded narrative," which involves integrating scripted narrative components within a game to create a backdrop for the story. In this context, the game space transforms into a memory palace, requiring the player to interpret its contents and piece together the storyline. The game designer has meticulously crafted seven distinct chapters: the Shed, the Tree, Rose's Room, Cuckoo Clock, Snow Globe, the Garden, and the Attic. These chapters are carefully set around the protagonists' residence and objects that hold great significance within the story. Each chapter corresponds to a critical phase in the couple's relationship. The game's two-player cooperative gameplay is perfectly aligned with its narrative philosophy. Every action and level completion are focused on rebuilding trust, familiarity, and synergy between the two characters. The game's two-player cooperative gameplay requires players to work closely together, communicate effectively, and rely on each other's strengths to progress through the game, reinforcing the significance of teamwork and collaboration in relationships.



Fig. 2. Mini-games: Musical Chairs. © Electronic Arts, Hazelight Studios.

While completing missions that follow a predetermined storyline is important in gaming, it is the cooperation and interaction between players that truly engage them in the game. In *It Takes Two*, the gameplay mechanics are designed to complement the narrative by providing challenges that require teamwork and communication. Players must collaborate to solve puzzles, requiring effective communication and attentive listening. Along with a plethora of teamwork-centric puzzles and "bosses", the game

also features 25 mini-games that encourage players to explore the space and compete against each other (Figure 2). These mini-games, which are narrative interactivities interspersed throughout the story, allow players to actively shape and influence the story as it unfolds. By doing so, they offer a refreshing change of pace and further enhance the game's immersive qualities. While game narrative can be expressed through various mediums such as language, sound, visuals, and filmic techniques, its unique significance lies in the concept of narrative interactivity. Narrative interactivity refers to the participation of users in a text through design procedures, including choices, random events, dynamic simulations, and other programmed interactive experiences (Zimmerman, 2004). Such non-linear gameplay often enables and fosters emergent narratives (Muriel & Crawford, 2018), granting players the freedom to explore the game universe and act without adhering to a pre-established script.

Under such conditions, the game incorporates several ideological thematics, including love, collaboration, and perseverance. Among these, love is the primary theme that holds a prominent place in the game's narrative. The game portrays love as a powerful force that can overcome any obstacle, even when a relationship is on the brink of collapse. The game's narrative constantly reinforces this theme, especially in the way that it requires players to work co-operatively to overcome challenges encountered throughout the gameplay. The game posits that successful and fulfilling relationships require effort and persistence, but with the right mindset, they can be achieved. The therapy sessions facilitated by Dr. Hakim ('Book of Love') delve into issues surrounding time, passion, and attraction, providing a comprehensive framework for players to reflect on their relationship-building skills (see Figure 3). The narrative approach of "Three Lessons to Save a Broken Relationship" is interwoven into the gameplay mechanics, requiring players to exercise prosocial relationship behaviours to play effectively. Throughout the game, players are immersed in a rich emotional experience that is activated through interactive gameplay.



Fig. 3. Dr. Hakim's therapy sessions in *It Takes Two*. © **Electronic Arts, Hazelight Studios.**

Moreover, the game narrative also addresses gender ideology within a Western context by challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes. The game narrative empowers both Cody and May by granting them equal agency and enabling them to contribute equally to their journey. Through the struggles of communication and understanding that Cody and May face, the game explores the gendered power dynamics that often exist within romantic relationships. By reflecting on these dynamics, players are encouraged to consider the ways in which gender roles and expectations may impact their own relationships. The game's collaborative puzzles emphasise the importance of working through relationship problems and not giving up when things get tough. Ultimately, *It Takes Two* suggests that love is not simply a feeling but an action that requires effort and dedication.

While *It Takes Two* offers insights into relationship-building skills and encourages players to consider gender roles and expectations in their own relationships, the game's representation of gender normativity and relationship structures is limiting. The game's narrative focuses on a heterosexual, bourgeois, married couple, potentially excluding players who identify with diverse sexual orientations or relationship structures. There is no option in the game to allow, for example, two gay men to play as a couple, which would have contributed to a more inclusive and democratic representation of relationships. This absence highlights the need for further consideration and expansion of diverse relationship representations within video games. Additionally, the depiction of women in the game, especially in the "girlfriend" role, often diminishes or trivialise their gaming skills and experiences. This representation reinforces certain gender stereotypes and could limit the potential for

players to fully explore and challenge traditional gender roles and expectations. Addressing these issues could contribute to a richer, more inclusive gaming experience that encourages players to think critically about the various dimensions of relationships and gender dynamics.

Beyond these identity-based shortcomings, however, *It Takes Two* is a remarkable example of how game narrative and gameplay can be integrated to offer a unique and immersive experience for players. The game highlights the significance of communication, cooperation, and trust in a marital relationship, while also demonstrating the potential for video games to deliver impactful and emotional narratives. While the narrative and interactivity of video games are widely discussed, there tends to be less focus on players' personal gameplay experiences and everyday practices related to narrative and interactivity.

5.2. 'My/Our story': gamers constructing narratives of love on Bilibili

Although the interactive gaming experience is often celebrated as a form of the "democratisation of participation," it is important to explore the cultural meaning generated from user-created videos on platforms like Bilibili. These videos offer deeper insights into players' perspectives and experiences, shedding light on the nuances of gaming culture. Players use various methods on social media platforms to reinterpret and share their gaming experiences. One approach involves exchanging game videos and commenting on them. This exchange not only helps other players understand the game better but also enables the discovery of additional details and stories within the game. Another approach involves creating original content, such as images, videos, and written pieces, which enables players to express their thoughts and imaginative interpretations of the game world.

Herein are samples of a series of videos that provide a resource for analysing gamers' personal narratives regarding love and relationships with respect to their experiences with gaming. These narratives are situated within the broader context of everyday online practices on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic. Love, as a complex and multifaceted experience, can be challenging to navigate. Closely examining the personal narratives of Chinese gamers regarding love reveals a deeper understanding of their relational patterns and behaviours.

Based on an analysis of the titles of 1,020 user-generated videos on Bilibili, this study classified the most frequently-appearing indicative words and phrases into two main categories: descriptive gameplay and emotional narrative (see Figure 4).

Descriptive gameplay		Emotional narrative	
game narrative	live streaming	'elephant'	broke-up
game walkthrough	gaming streamer	amuse	divorce
hidden level	friends pass	romantic adventure	love
mini game	Link EA Account	girlfriend	couples
completion	Co-op game	tacit	hilarious
pre-recorded	singer player	rescue	become enemies

Fig. 4. Indicative key words and phrases from the titles of user-created videos on Bilibili between March 2022 to March 2023.

The high-frequency vocabulary found in the “descriptive gameplay” category indicates that a significant portion of the videos were created to share gaming experiences and strategies. On the other hand, videos containing words from the “emotional narrative” category tend to convey a heightened emotional resonance through their content and storytelling. Analysis of the second category shows that pre-programmed narratives and divorce-themed storylines have declined in popularity on Bilibili. Notions concerned with collective viewing and interaction also permeate the discourse, whereby watching others play the game becomes a gaming experience in itself. It is not necessary to have prior knowledge of the game or to play it personally to participate in this collective experience. The creators of these videos often construct their stories through a combination of moving images and accompanying audio, such as in-game footage recorded by players or amusing moments captured from a boyfriend’s perspective while his girlfriend plays games. While textual descriptions are not commonly used, the videos do convey a sense of authenticity and documentary-style realism. Many similar videos also exist on other social platforms, such as TikTok.

The selected sample videos in general shares a similar narrative. They were chosen to showcase the co-op gaming experience with a ‘girlfriend’ from a male perspective. Overall, these videos often portray the ‘girlfriend’ as either clumsy and inexperienced in gaming or as a hardcore gamer who defeats her boyfriend in the game. Evidently, the former represents a greater proportion. This could take the form of a gentle reminder to cherish life and avoid making the girlfriend angry (“Cherish life, don’t

upset your girlfriend”); a playful teasing that showcases the ostensibly ‘adorable’ side of having a ‘silly’ girlfriend (“When your non-gamer girlfriend starts playing *It Takes Two*”); or a caring approach that emphasises the importance of patience and teamwork in overcoming the game together (“we make a great team,” “our cooperation is seamless”). The bid to share gaming experiences with a girlfriend can also be interpreted as a longing for empathy, resonance, and support in a space where they can *get away* from the notion of *reality* (Calleja, 2010). In the context of social distancing, where physical interactions with loved ones are limited, these videos also serve as a means for individuals to connect and bond with others virtually, even if they cannot do so in person. It highlights the importance of these videos in providing a sense of community and belonging.

The study shows that video gamers are not solitary individuals but are capable of sharing and constructing collective experiences about video games in various ways. As such, this article highlights the development of an agency that is collectively articulated and digitally mediated through participatory culture (Budgeon, 2003). From a gamer’s perspective, “the importance of gaming is never about the game itself when you embark on a journey with your girlfriend,” and “having someone to play games with must be such a joyful experience.”

6. Conclusion

Video games, as evolving narrative media, hold significance not only in interactive design but also in fostering social activities and connections beyond gameplay. While game narratives may impose constraints on player interaction with the virtual world, understanding these narratives in a broader participatory culture requires focusing on players’ personal gameplay experiences that are produced, shared, and circulated within online media platforms. The gaming experience has shifted from merely playing games to encompassing who we play with, how, and where we gain experience. By viewing video games as comprehensive experiences that go beyond gameplay to include participatory culture, personal experiences, and social activities, we can gain a deeper understanding of the narrative’s role, player agency, and the influence of online media platforms on shaping game narratives.

If, as Jenkins (2006) argues, gamers can be considered both consumers and producers, then they are audiences engaged in an *active* process of “decoding” the

ideological messages that are “encoded” in a media text (Hall, 1980) whereby gamers reject, reinterpret, and/or negotiate the “meaning” of the original text. Through the active engagement of players, *It Takes Two* challenges players to question the cultural norms and expectations surrounding relationships, while also encouraging them to reflect on their own experiences and beliefs. By doing so, the game highlights the potential for video games to serve as a powerful medium for social commentary and change.

By examining the co-op game *It Takes Two* (2021) and its diverse narratives reconstructed by Chinese gamers, this research highlights the importance of understanding video games as valuable cultural artefacts that contribute to our comprehension of ourselves, society, and the broader political landscape. While game texts may reinforce conventional notions of love and relationships, individual narratives outside of video games can challenge and expand our understanding of these concepts. From this perspective, this article has explored the impact of video games as cultural forms on contemporary Chinese society, especially considering the COVID-19 pandemic and the increased longing for love and connection. The pandemic has accentuated the significance of narratives within specific social, political environments, and historical moments. Through playing games such as *It Takes Two* (2021), *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (2020) and *Elden Ring* (2022), and observing the diverse interpretations generated by players, we can appreciate the impact of these narratives and their influence on our understanding of relationships, identity, and societal norms.

Moreover, comparing the pre-programmed narratives in *It Takes Two* with the individual narratives created outside of the game, foregrounds the complex interplay between containment and resistance, as well as the challenges and expansions to conventional notions of love and relationships. Scholars have recognised the crucial conceptual and political role of self-representation in shaping subjectivity in the context of digital media. This has involved examining how such practices compare to, challenge, or respond to the established representational discourses of mainstream media (Thumim, 2015). In this context, the study of the narratives analysed in this paper shows that they offer sophisticated and complex constructions of individual and collective identity. These constructions navigate between containment and resistance,

situated along a continuum, showcasing the dynamic nature of player engagement with mainstream ideologies and norms.

Furthermore, the analysis of self-representation in digital media contexts demonstrates the crucial conceptual and political role it plays in shaping individual and collective identities. It is time to rethink what gaming experiences and communication mean to us in the real world. Interpreting video games as experiences opens up a vast field of theoretical and practical possibilities, and plays a central role in discerning the different aspects—material, symbolic, political, and social—that constitute video games as culture. For this game, it attempts to establish a narrative of how couples drift apart and the powers that can hold people together, arriving, unsurprisingly, after a year of pandemic social distancing, at this challenging time. Summarily, *It Takes Two* raises awareness and questions on how games can connect us emotionally in real life, rather than how we fall apart in a relationship.

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Be a part of the narrative: How audiences are introduced to the “free choice dilemma” in the interactive film *Bandersnatch*

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ABSTRACT

The first major interactive film on Netflix with live-action scenes was Bandersnatch, released in December 2018. Bandersnatch offers viewers a unique viewing experience distinct from traditional cinema, as it provides the viewer with multiple choices within the narrative trajectory. Digital interactive media technologies have become increasingly popular due to public demand for interactive engagement and a democratisation of text control. There is a social desire to deprive the author of total control over the story; to co-create stories using imagination while adhering to formal limitations and structures; to play with the text as an incomplete form; for the ability to rearrange the story’s order, alter its quality, and other such things. These meet the audience-creative user’s needs and satisfaction (Cover, 2004). Where personal emotions can be invested and free choice can be exercised in cyberspace, the emergence of interactivity as a kind of audience engagement is a robust culturally rooted desire. This article attempts to understand and analyse the uses and gratifications experienced by the audience during the interactive viewing process. However, digital participation proves to have limitations. Through a case study of the interactive film Bandersnatch, this paper explores how the interactivity and the features of video games can be used to give users so-called “free choice,” but that can actually be frustrating and ultimately offer only the illusion that the audience has any significant control over the story. In the end, the decisions made by the audience offer some relevant affordances to the interactive user but eventually proceed to reinforce the ideological control from the production team.

KEYWORDS

Bandersnatch; Interactive narrative; Video games; Free choice; Author’s control; Author-Audience Relationship; Democratisation.

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1. Introduction

In December 2018, the first major interactive movie on Netflix featuring live-action sequences was called *Bandersnatch*. Since *Bandersnatch* gives the audience multiple choices within the narrative trajectory, it offers a unique viewing experience that sets it apart from traditional cinema. Digital interactive media technologies have become increasingly popular due to public demand for interactive engagement and a democratisation of text control. It is a need to deprive the author of total control over

the story; to co-create stories using imagination while adhering to formal limitations and structures; to play with the text as an incomplete form; for the ability to rearrange the story's order, alter its quality, and other such things. These meet the audience-creative user's needs and satisfaction (Cover, 2004). Where personal emotions can be invested and free choice can be exercised in cyberspace, the emergence of interactivity as a kind of audience engagement is a robust culturally rooted desire. This article attempts to understand and analyse the subjectivity unleashed on the audience during the viewing process, which has long been suppressed by the dominance of the author. However, the producer team restricts audience interactivity and engagement at a range of levels in order to retain narrative control over digital participation. Indeed, the audience's active participation in the cultural production of interactive films is limited, allowing producers to maintain a dominant position in the film's main theme's ideological output. By applying the interactive film *Bandersnatch* as a case study, this paper examines interactivity in films and how interactive mechanisms can be set up to give the illusion that the audience has control over the story and free choice. In the end, the decisions made by the audience proceed to reinforce the ideological communication from the production team.

As early as 1994, Marshall McLuhan anticipated that 'obsession with the older patterns of mechanical, one-way expansion from centres to margins is no longer relevant to our electric world' (36). The space in which the audience sits has transitioned from the closed cinema with many viewers watching the screen in silence, to the home-based DVD where they can decide how long they want to watch and pause, end, or start at any time. Ultimately, in the online space, the audience can choose content on diverse devices, such as mobile phones or computers. They have the freedom to select the content they wish to enjoy, and viewers can watch it alone or with others in various scenarios. They can even adjust the video speed to match their preferred viewing pace. As digital tools continue to proliferate globally, the participatory engagement intensifies, ushering in a new era where consumers become co-creators. The participatory culture not only transforms the mode of communication but also redefines consumption patterns and content creation dynamics (Piccinini et al., 2015: 1645). The connection between the audience and media communication tools evolves into a symbiotic relationship where users actively contribute to and shape the narrative. Information flows bidirectionally, with the audience playing a vital role in

transmitting, interpreting, and even generating content. This participatory paradigm marks a departure from the traditional model, embodying the essence of a culture where the audience is no longer a passive spectator but an active participant in the rich tapestry of digital communication.

The change of the audience's role from 'passive viewer' to 'active user' has become part of a global consumer culture. The paper emphasises that the audience's role and position in *Bandersnatch* have changed from that of traditional media. We are no longer passive viewers and consumers. Kristoffer Gansing (2003) provides a novel perspective on how interactivity is already reflected in the *medium and the inevitability of its development*. In addition, the audience participating in the interactive film is not the audience in the usual sense. Nitzan Ben Shaul (2008) mentions in his book: it seems incorrect to call them viewers who participate in interactive dramas because they do more than watch. Calling them players does not seem entirely correct because it does not provide enough interactivity to prove that it is a game. Based on the interaction mechanism of *Bandersnatch*, in this paper, we refer to the audience as--users.

'*The Internet* is touted as a democratic space in which anyone can participate in cultural production' (Keltie, 2017: 1). The audience's role has shifted dramatically from the pre-20th century idea of the academy in such a media environment of increased audience participation. The idea that audiences are passive media consumers has changed since the twentieth century (Keltie, 2017: 14). Audience theory and audience practice have refuted Adorno and Horkheimer's claim made in the early 1980s that audiences are positioned as highly passive consumers (Hall, 1980). The Uses and Gratifications theory has superseded the passive audience framework as a result of the linear pattern of one-way propagation in the 'sender-message-receiver' (Hall, 1980: 128) being replaced with more intricate multi-step patterns.

The manner and extent of audience participation in the medium are also inextricably linked to changes in the form of the medium. The rise of streaming media in digital communication culture has altered how cultural content is dispersed. In the 2010s, streaming services like Netflix became increasingly popular and sophisticated. The emergence of new media technologies and platforms (here, notably, recorded, digital, and interactive forms of communication) not only necessitates the development of a 'new media theory' but also provides numerous opportunities for re-examining older forms of media theory and how they conceptualise information exchange, transmission,

authorship, discourse, and audience reception (Cover, 2004: 173). Audiences in the cultural industry can now share and watch video content in novel ways. For example, interactive films aimed at adult audiences emerged on Netflix in 2018, and interactive animated programs aimed at children and adolescents have long been released. Transitions in digital communication have influenced media consumption patterns.

Our current form of media communication is a decentralised, consumer-centric model. These changes may also provide a foundation for the development of interactive films:

Despite allowing greater participatory access than broadcast television, the Internet is not an entirely democratic medium, either to access or to use. Nevertheless, audience-created texts, from social media activity to Web series, operate as forms of resistance to the culture industry whilst utilising online platforms that the industry is also slowly extending into. (Keltie, 2017: 5)

Black Mirror was initially commissioned by Channel 4 in the United Kingdom and then co-produced by the US media company Netflix. From an ‘anti-utopian’ perspective, the series expresses the impact and concern of the constant development of science and technology. *Black Mirror* has found a space in popular culture over the last decade to become a moniker representing the negative impact of digital technologies on human beings and society (AKŞİT and NAZLI, 2020). Netflix released its first interactive film, *Bandersnatch*, as part of the *Black Mirror* series around Christmas in 2018. *Bandersnatch* is a stand-alone film presented as a video tale mixed with elements of the interactive video game and TV series (Nee, 2021). Thus, the audience can control the protagonist’s actions and choices through the remote control or touch the screen (AKŞİT and NAZLI, 2020). *Black Mirror’s Bandersnatch* was marketed as the first interactive narrative aimed at a mature audience on the streaming platform Netflix (Rezk and Haahr, 2020: 183). The far-reaching influence of *Bandersnatch* has aroused the attention of scholars. It has been widely praised for its unique theme and innovative style (Elnahla, 2020).

Bandersnatch is a movie set in the 1980s about a protagonist named Stefan. Inspired by a book called *Bandersnatch* left by his mother, Stefan decides to make a choose-your-own-adventure video game similar to the content of the novel. The death of his mother has always been a trauma in Stefan’s heart, and he has been receiving psychological

counselling. With the deepening of the game's production, he begins to have strange ideas and behaviours. This film adopts a non-linear narrative method and uses different branch narratives to guide the audience to choose the protagonist's behaviour in given plot points, finally conducive to different endings. These thoughts and actions of his are presented to the audience in the form of choices, which the viewer makes in conjunction with the plot and his/her own experiences, thus controlling and guiding the trajectory of Stefan's destiny. It allows the audience to operate through the touch screen (of a mobile phone or digital tablet), or the keyboard (of a laptop or desktop computer), or a remote control (of a TV set): the viewer/user can/must choose between two options to control the plot. This sets the movie apart from most other viewing experiences, allowing the viewer to watch it alone or in a private setting. This unique viewing mechanism predicts that different audiences will watch various protagonist endings and have a distinctive viewing experience. The film does not have a set viewing length; viewers will need a minimum of 40 minutes to watch it and make the minimum number of mandatory choices to bring the plot forward, but most people will experience it for around 90 minutes due to more reticulated choices at the given narrative forks. The choices are presented as dichotomous. If the options are largely simplified, they will be shown as "yes" or "no" choices. Since each viewer makes his/her own choices, the viewing time also varies.

The emergence of interactive movies has brought an unprecedented new experience to the audience, and it also marks that content producers gradually put a certain amount of power back into the hands of the audience. *Bandersnatch* guides the development of interactive video through the powerful platform of Netflix. This case study will focus on how *Bandersnatch* establishes a "cyberspace utopia" for the audience as a way to satisfy their non-social need for relaxation and escape. Digital interactive media technologies purport to satisfy audiences' need for interactive participation and democratise textual control, stripping authors of their control over the story as *Bandersnatch* envisions, promoting the democratisation of visual identity while attempting to unleash the subjectivity of the viewer, a subjectivity that the primacy of the author has long suppressed. Therefore, this article analyses how *Bandersnatch* creates a fantasy world of free movement for the viewer, identifying the consequences to the uses and gratifications benefits and the ostensibly democratic interactivity that stem from the viewer's limitations in terms of choice and interaction.

A cinematic language such as the one in *Bandersnatch* is presented as an interactive film that reconstructs the meaning and character of the narrative's authorial agency. In the end, the study reveals that there is tension between the audience agency and the interactive mechanism of *Bandersnatch*.

2. Literature review

In most realistic and naturalistic dramas, actors pretend that the audience does not exist when performing while the audience sits in the auditorium, and the actors on the stage will not interact with the audience off the stage. Accepting the transparency of the fourth wall is part of the suspension of disbelief between fiction and the audience. It allows the audience to feel fiction as if they were witnessing an actual event (Wallis and Shepherd, 2018). The fourth wall is not a set design but a performing convention in a theatre venue. In a theatre performance, the actors ignore the audience and focus entirely on the world of the play. Breaking the fourth wall is a violation of this performance convention. It can be called 'breaking the fourth wall' to speak or greet the audience directly in games, films, plays, or TV programs (Bell, 2008; Abelman, 2013). Meanwhile, in other media, such as film and television, producers try to incorporate different approaches to breaking the fourth wall between the audience and the work of art.

For example, in the 1961 film *Mr. Sardonicus* produced and directed by William Castle, before the last scene of the film, the film viewers can use a card given to them at the beginning of the film to vote on the fate of the villain: each viewer can raise or put down the card to decide whether Mr. Sardonicus should be cured or dead. Presumably, no viewers choose compassion, so another ending has never been screened (da Silva et al., 2019). This interactive approach breaks the fourth wall at the structural narrative level, attracting the audience to enter the story. This draws viewers into the fantastical world of plays, films, or television shows. Characters may occasionally go so far as to solicit audience feedback and involve them as active participants in the narrative.

Interactive movies with immersive experiences are not an entirely new form of entertainment. The first film in history to have user interaction in plot design was *Kinoautomat* in 1967, directed by, and three Czech New Wave auteurs. It is a black comedy, and the audience at the cinema theatre could press a red or green button on

their chairs to vote for two different plot developments at a particular moment in the film. There were nine narrative forks during the movie. The performance would be suspended at each 'time node' of the plot. The host would come on stage and let the audience vote between the two scenes. Finally, the plot selected by most of the audience through the buttons would be projected (Burgos, 2019).

In this study, the concept of interactive drama aligns closely with Brenda Laurel's (1986) useful definition of it. Laurel contends that interactive drama involves a first-person experience within a fantasy realm, allowing the user to create, enact, and observe a character whose choices and actions influence the unfolding events, akin to a theatrical play. Interactive drama presents a nuanced and highly interactive world through the use of multi-line, fork-structured techniques. This narrative realm lacks a predetermined route and conclusion, integrating the audience's style, experience, ideas, personality, and other real-life elements. The audience's experience is accepted by interactive drama and reshaped by the dramatic fate.

For a long time, scholars have not agreed on a uniform definition of interactive film. Film and new media have been called 'interactive films' by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (2000: 93) [1999] by merging features of new (digital) media and established media. Kristoffer Gansing (2003: 1,6,7) writes that interaction in digital media has become a daily practice and subverted audience consciousness to consume film and television content. Janet H. Murray (2017: 126) [1997] once explains that 'in interactive digital narratives, the audience has dramatic agency—the ability to make meaningful choices and to see their effects.' This 'dramatic agency' is what *Bandersnatch* tries to give to the audience. Agency is the condition of activity rather than passivity. It refers to the experience of acting, doing things, making things happen, exerting power, being a subject of events, or controlling things (Liu et al., 2010). Based on this narrative model, some scholars argue that the interactive film provides the audience with limited agency.

Paradoxically, it has been acknowledged by academics like Henry Jenkins (2006b; 2009b) that participatory culture does not occur equally. Observing and understanding (from the viewer's perspective) whether the control of narrative text and audio-visual language by forms of interactive media offers the possibility of equal democratic participation or whether it attempts to influence the viewer's ideology regarding unequal power relations. 'In contrast, participatory culture, as a concept, arguably

enables audiences to challenge the power structure of the culture industry by participating not only in the consumption of cultural products but also in their production (Keltie, 2017: 2).’ The continuous construction and reinforcement of audience agency provide a framework for the conceptualisation of participatory culture. The shift of agency towards the direction of the audience makes it a constant challenge to the internal power of the cultural product.

Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century by Henry Jenkins (2009a: 7) provides a summary of participatory culture’s characteristics: ‘relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations, and some type of information mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices.’ Additionally, they noted that a culture that values participation is one in which individuals feel somewhat socially connected to one another and value the contributions they make. Thus, as the participatory nature of the mass media continues to evolve, the relationship between the audience and the media grows ever closer. The audience’s place in the participation culture is also becoming increasingly important. Jenkins (2009a) points out in his research on the characteristics of online participation that media consumers crave a participatory experience in which the audience can feel that their contribution is essential. This is a key requirement for the emerging phenomenon of cultural integration. Since the early 1990s, there has been a fundamental shift in our individual and collective participation in mass media, as Henry Jenkins (2006a) suggests in his book *Fans, bloggers, and games: Exploring participatory culture*.

3. Methodology

This article will adopt a qualitative research method, using *Bandersnatch* as a specific sample. *Bandersnatch* is not the first Netflix drama with interactive and technical features, but the first interactive film with a mature audience. The number of people who watched it also indicates a significant global influence. This study will be based on Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis method to explore how *Bandersnatch*’s audio-visual language and mechanism settings enable a deeper emotional experience for the audience. Fairclough divides the analysis into three steps or ‘dimensions’: ‘description, interpretation and explanation’ (Titscher et al., 2000: 52). This analysis will interpret the film text from the perspective of its filmmakers,

audiences, and critics. The audience's comments on IMDb, Rotten Tomatoes and Twitter will be used as key information to analyse their viewing experiences and journeys as a way to deconstruct *Bandersnatch* itself. Moreover, this article will use "Uses and Gratifications" theory as support to examine *Bandersnatch* by positing three layers of analysis heuristically: Narrative choice and deeper emotional engagement, Ease and escapism, and the illusion of a democratised space in the interactive film.

3.1. Details on the method of enquiry

According to the classic uses and gratifications theory, how the audience uses the media depends on the satisfaction, demand, hope, and motivation they have or want to obtain from the media. This approach focuses on how the audience uses different media in relation to their expectations and the different gratifications they seek from using them (McQuail, 1997). In the 1970s, researchers focused on the audience's motivations and developed new forms of media to their study that people used to meet social and psychological needs (Biocca, 1988). In his book *Audience Analysis*, Denis McQuail includes, a new variant of the uses and gratifications theory on media-personal interaction with Blumler and Brown in 1972. Following a study of a large number of British radio and television programs, they outlined the most important types of media gratification:

- a) diversion: escape from routine, escape from problems and release emotions;
- b) personal relationship: make friends, look for people of the same taste, social function;
- c) personal identity: self-referencing, exploring reality and strengthening values;
- d) surveillance.

This theoretical model provides a clearer picture of the cognitive and emotional demand factors that can influence the audience's behaviours when using media. A more specific reason for media use is summarised in the theoretical framework constructed by Cecilia Von Feilitzen (1999):

- 1) entertainment and emotional satisfaction;
- 2) information and cognitive needs;
- 3) social needs (get recognition, communicate with others);
- 4) non-social needs (especially those related to escape, the need for solitude and emotional adjustment);

5) some needs related to consumption patterns and the medium bring a degree of intrinsic satisfaction to the user (McQuail, 1997).

Early U&G research was primarily descriptive, attempting to group the audience's responses into meaningful categories (Berelson et al., 1986; Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1966; Lazarsfeld et al., 1968; Merton, 1948). In this context, Mass media scholars became embroiled in a theoretical tug of war regarding the active or passive nature of the audience.¹ Some regarded part of the audience as active, believing they were 'individualistic', 'impervious to influence', 'rational', and 'selective'. The other camp regarded an audience as a passive, thinking that they were 'conformist', 'gullible', 'anomic', 'vulnerable', 'victims' (Biocca, 1988: 51). However, in the 1980s, researchers reassess the long-standing concept of the active audience (Ruggiero, 2000). Levy and Windahl (1984) try to elaborate a relatively more complete concept of audience activity in theory. They tested the audience-oriented model linking activity with U&G.

According to Levy and Windahl's (1984: 73) concept of a 'totally active audience', audiences would participate in three different types of audience activities when using mass media (1984: 59): 'Preactivity' refers to behaviour that occurs before an experience, such as when choosing mass media content, 'Duractivity' refers to personal participation and psychological attention during the experience process, and 'Postactivity' refers to behaviour that occurs after an experience, such as discussion or reflection. Each person participates in these activities to varying degrees.

The uses and gratification of ideas centred on audience activities are now considered one of the most useful conceptual basis for the study of media, as it is possible to take advantage of one of the strengths of the Internet-interactivity (Siraj, 2007). Today's audiences can watch TV series and movies through mobile phones, digital tablets, laptops, and other electronic devices. *Bandersnatch* offers the viewer the possibility of active choice, giving the viewer something of a sense of satisfaction. With the continuous integration of the characteristics of the media and technological innovation, the interactive relationship between the media and the audience gradually reveals its superiority.

¹ See, for example, Christopher, David, and Aidan Leuszler. "Horror video games and the "active-passive" debate." *Games and Culture* 18.2 (2023): 209-228.

4. Discussion

4.1. – Narrative choice and deeper emotional engagement

Stefan is the protagonist in the interactive film *Bandersnatch*, and it is through choices that the audience determines the narrative content and ending in relation to him. *Bandersnatch* would then allow the audience to choose Stefan's behaviour, actions, and ultimate fate, according to their own preferences, values, and cognition. David Griffin (2018) argues that *Bandersnatch*'s production team found a way to enhance the audience's personal feelings. Griffin claims that he was able to feel more involved in the film after making a series of choices for the protagonist Stefan. Alan M. Rubin et al. (1985) propose that if the viewer participates in the action closely relating to the characters, s/he is likely to create a parasocial relationship with the characters, thereby increasing the effectiveness of the audience's understanding of the character's behaviour. This is why the interactive film can make the audience feel more empathy by no longer passively watching and accepting the output of the content but actively participating in the story's plot development along with the protagonist.

Bandersnatch presents to the audience their first narrative fork with the obligation of choice in the third minute of the movie: the choice is about whether Stefan will eat cereal or not at breakfast. As the second-choice moment, when Stefan has to decide which music tape to listen to, it seems an irrelevant narrative fork that has no meaning or impact on the advancement of the plot. However, according to Nada Elnahla's (2020) textual analysis of the various options that appear next in the film, these two options have a particular impact on the viewer's perception and experience. For example, the audience's first cereal choice for Stefan will affect which brand of cereal appears in the advertisement content while Stefan sits in front of the TV set (it appears somewhere in the latter of the film). Moreover, this otherwise innocuous choice invokes the user's personal choices for something as intimate as their breakfast cereal and creates a perceptual first-person identification with the character. The audience's choice of music has this effect even more profoundly, and it not only determines the musical preferences of the protagonist but also controls the soundtrack in the following scenes (Elnahla, 2020: 508). At the same time, the background music can guide the film's rhythm and give emotional colour beyond what is on-screen, providing the audience with a sensory supplement and sense of the emotion of the protagonist.

The use of shots and camera movements in *Bandersnatch* also enhances the audience's involvement. When there are clips in the film that require the audience to make choices, the photograph lens that the audience can see will first focus on Stefan's face. The film adopts a close-up picture composition, using zoom in shots to constantly close the distance between the character and the audience. In the early 1990s, close-up shots of characters were introduced into interactive movies. However, due to technical limitations, most of these shots were static. Producers believed that staying on a frozen screen could give the audience space and the possibility to think so they could choose freely (Perron et al., 2008). Nevertheless, it is not presented as static shots in *Bandersnatch*. The images in the film are dynamic when the choices are offered. The main focus is on close-ups of Stefan, with the camera pulling towards the protagonist's face, directly conveying his expression change when faced with a choice due to pressure. In *Bandersnatch*, when offering the audience a choice, the cinema camera forces the audience to gaze at the protagonist for an extended time, and this prolonged gaze makes the character present a sculptural still-life-like state that creates a great tension with the environment as a material background, forcing the viewer to think about and perceive life in the power of silence. These shots can mobilise the contemplative experience of the aesthetic subject and activate the subjective consciousness of the audience's viewing behaviour in the aesthetic relationship. These shots prompt the audience to empathise with Stefan in some way to immerse the audience in the plot and the emotions of the protagonist.

4.2. Ease and escapism

The U&G approach has a crucial theoretical branch arguing that the audience seeks a non-social need through media use, using the online spaces to escape and thus adjust their emotions in the form of solitude and to gain a psychological sense of relaxation (McQuail, 1997: 72).² As discussed in the previous section of the article, escaping from reality to feel at ease is inseparable from a narrative that provides sufficient immersion. A fictional narrative can draw the audience into the story and thus isolate the audience

² Katz and Foulkes (1962: 379) argue that: "The favourite answer of the popular-culture writers to this question, 'What do people do with the media?' is that they use it for escape."

from the real world. When the audience chooses Netflix to watch *Bandersnatch*, they have isolated themselves from the problems in the real world and entered the virtual world. At this time, the satisfaction of escape has been reached.

The first important choice in the movie is when Stefan needs to decide whether to create the game on his own or form a team with his partners in the game company. A cautious audience may choose to work with the team to ensure the successful release of the game. However, it may then turn out that choosing this option will allow the company to mess up Stefan's game. This choice has to be made in ten seconds, so the intense and thoughtful viewing process allows the audience to become more immersed in the plot. Adding time constraints to the choices sections breaks up the relaxed atmosphere but also helps to immerse the audience.

Bandersnatch does not allow the audience to choose a temporary exit. This rule makes it mandatory for the viewer to be fully engaged once they start watching, and it is not possible to store nodes (as is the case with games) for viewing on a random later date. Although today's technology has let the audience archive, the essential difference between interactive movies and video games lies in the continuity of their plots. While watching *Bandersnatch*, you must start again from the beginning if you want to quit. In this way, the audience can, at least according to the design, spend more time immersed in the plot and have a sense of attachment to the story. The interactive *digital* narrative is a new concept, previous studies have shown that when the audience interacts with digital content, this will produce positive emotional effects (Nee, 2021). The design choice in interactive films makes it necessary for the viewer to spend a relatively long and continuous time navigating the film if they wish to achieve its primary uses and gratifications reward of discovering how their plot choices will be ultimately resolved. The viewer is emotionally and thoughtfully invested in the interactive film for an extended period, isolating this viewing time from real-world time.³

As mentioned, the media plays a role in people's personal lives by providing a way to escape reality and engage with content that provides satisfaction and fulfilment. The responsibilities of the protagonist's role in the virtual society constructed by the film's

³ Cf. Cover, Rob (2004), New media theory: Electronic games, democracy and reconfiguring the author-audience relationship. *Social Semiotics*, 14(2), pp. 173-191.

narrative are transferred to the audience through choice so the audience can temporarily forget about the responsibilities of their role in the real world. *Bandersnatch*, a film where different choices can lead to different results, makes for a new cinematic experience every time with the same media mediator. With the premise that the audience will spend significant time on *Bandersnatch*, Kaplan and Haenlein's (2010: 64) findings are relevant. They point out that 'virtual game worlds offer the highest degree of social presence and media richness.' Some players spend too much time on interactive games, so they begin to identify with the virtual characters as actual incarnations. In *Bandersnatch*, the responsibility that initially belonged to the protagonist Stefan is transferred to the audience.

Then, Stefan mentions to the doctor, while undergoing psychotherapy, that he feels he is being controlled and monitored. Such a plot gives the audience a hint that everyone is already in the game. During the viewing process, the viewer only needs to be immersed in the choices made under the sole authority of the individual. Sleep, pleasure, and individuality are examples of non-social needs (in that they can be met independent of other people), and meeting them proffers certain valuable satisfactions. The consequences of the individualised options in *Bandersnatch* have a positive effect on the viewer, and therefore the pleasure part of the non-social need is fulfilled.

There is a claim that the mass media fulfils desires by providing an escape. For individuals experiencing feelings of alienation or powerlessness, the media offers a way to withdraw from real society or find meaning and connection in the media. The media offers a range of content choices that cater to the interests and preferences of the audience, providing a form of satisfaction and diversion from everyday life (Katz & Foulkes, 1962). In summary, the audience's choice-related behaviour when watching *Bandersnatch* can fulfil part of the need to release emotions and escape from reality and problems.

4.3 – The illusion of a democratised space in interactive film

The score of *Bandersnatch* on *IMDb* is 7.1/10; the audience score on *Rotten Tomatoes* is 53%. The score shows that *Bandersnatch* has gone from the audience's high expectations and high score to a downturn. After collecting and analysing most of the viewers/critics who rated the movie on *IMDb* from 1 to 5, it was found that the locus of concern within their comments revolved around the idea of "choice".

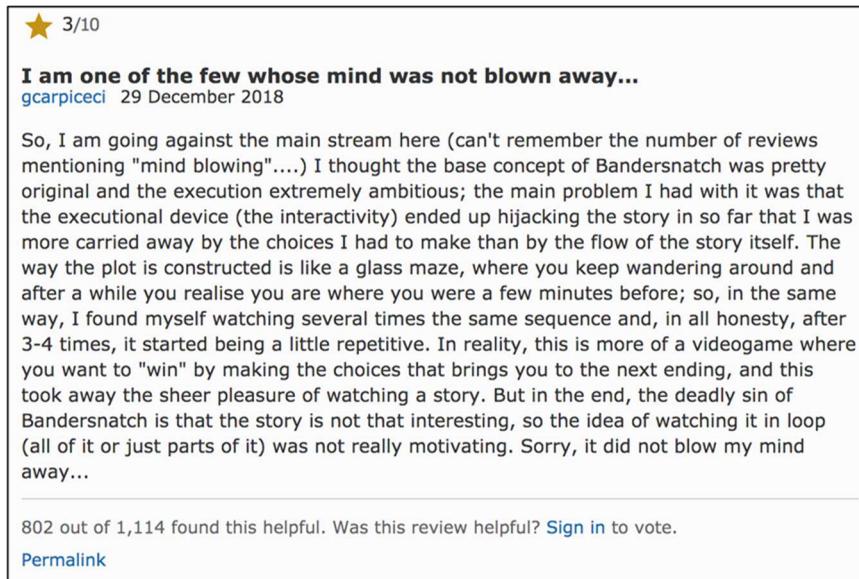


Fig. 1. *IMDb* user reviews: this user felt that the flow of the film was broken by the interactive choices and felt that the content after the choices was repetitive.



Fig. 2. *IMDb* user reviews: this viewer felt that Bandersnatch did not offer a real sense of choice.

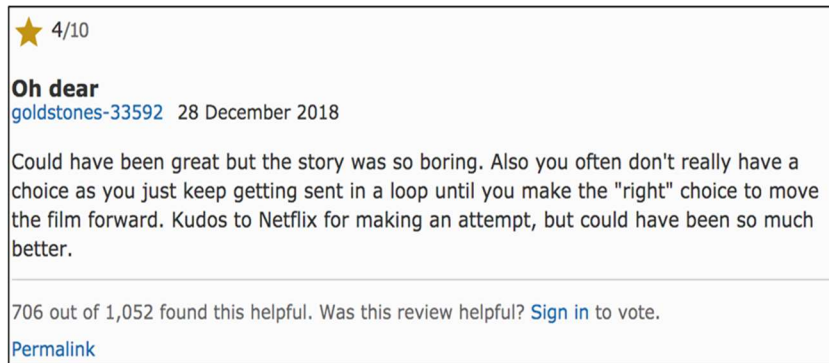


Fig. 3. *IMDb* user reviews: this viewer found the storyline boring and his/her choices did not really work.

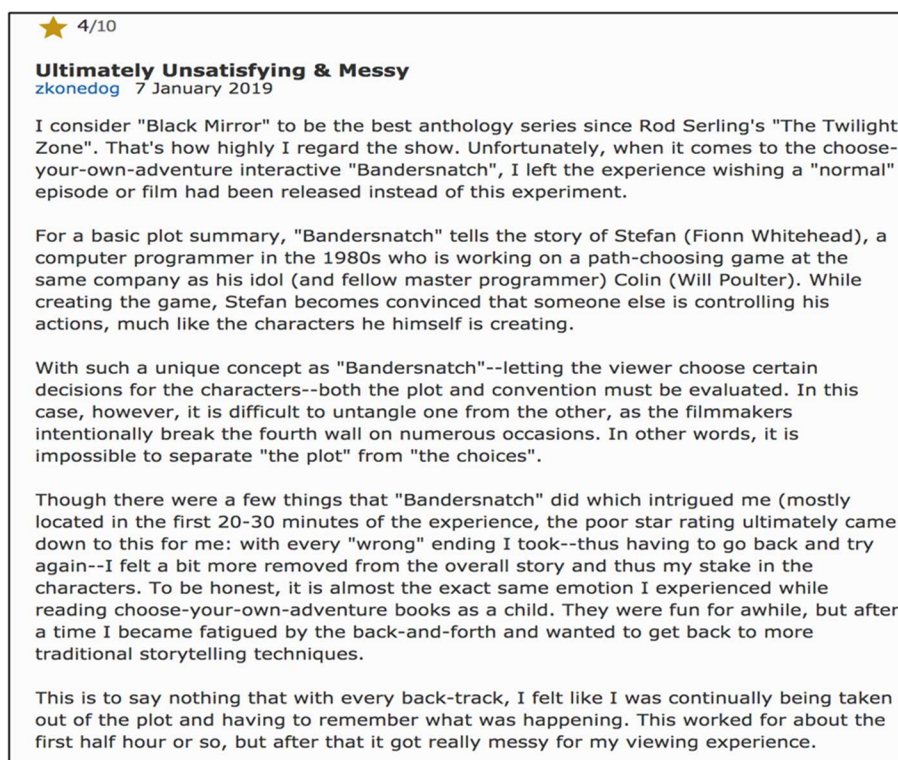


Fig. 4. *IMDb* user reviews: this viewer was exhausted and confused by the back-and-forth choices.

Some initial general comment on the tome of the concern regarding "choice." Not only was there a broad consensus that the choices were largely superficial or illusory (in that they knew there were only limited possible endings available), but the audience also felt they had to spend much time making repetitive choices. This repetitiveness and passivity bored them and separated their feelings from the plot and the protagonist. For instance, both the eighth and ninth choices in the film provide the audience with

the helpless feeling of being sent to dead ends.⁴ The eighth choice is that Stefan needs to complete an action under the operation of the audience: one is to pour tea on the computer, and the other is to get angry at his father. Suppose the audience makes the first choice according to their own evaluation and expectation: spill tea on the computer. After a few more selection rounds, the audience will return to a picture of two old TV sets. The system requires them to make a new choice at this plot node. The only way to continue the story is to choose to be angry with Stefan's father. I.e. there actually is no choice, just a cyclical return to the necessary "correct" choice. Forced return plot points like this occur throughout the movie more than once. In choosing whether to follow Colin or go to the doctor to confide in the node, for example, you *must* follow Colin in order to trigger a more extended storyline and meet the expected ending. If you choose to find a doctor to confide in after going through the latter two choice processes, the audience will then see a conclusion in which the game created by Stefan is listed in the market, an unsatisfying ending.

Users are or become aware that they lack agency and free will in this interactive film, but they do not know the reason, and they cannot explain why they will be contradicted and cheated because of the film presentation after watching. They watch the movie within the choice illusion created by the director. Users feel the limitation of option design when they apply agency to disconnected narrative choices. Moreover, during the selection process, users may have a time limit to think. They must make a choice within ten seconds, or a default selection and playback will be made based on the data collected by the system. Christian Roth and Hartmut Koenitz (2019: 249) call this characteristic 'passive consumption'. In the case of 'passive consumption', there is no way for the user to feel that agency is protected. As such, the ten-second time limit selection mechanism, rather than positively involving users in the plot due to the effect of urgency, also it might actually make them feel that they are being forced to decide by the filmmaker, shattering the illusion of voluntary choice.

Bandersnatch has other defects in the choice constructions. For instance, an interesting sequence, already mentioned earlier, is when the user has to decide for Stefan either to smash his PC or to pour tea on it. The consequences of the two choices

⁴ Cf. Juul, J. (2013). *The art of failure: An essay on the pain of playing video games*. MIT press.

are entirely at odds with what the user expected. Therefore, while users do not endorse either of the two options, they must choose between the two. In order to move the story forward, the user is forced to choose an option that is not in line with his/her wishes, and this has to be done within ten seconds. These defects may be due to the needs of the plot setting, but in the end, the user feels that the choice is limited. Murray (2017) asserts that taking intentional action and seeing the consequences of our own decisions are the inner core of agency mastery. Hence, when the user lacks the power to choose or does not see the expected result after choosing and is constantly trapped in the plot, s/he is likely to feel impatient and cheated. More extreme choice settings also appear in the screening process. When Stefan's mother asks him if he wants to go to the railway station with her, there is only one option "no" on the screen. Imposing and restricting or proposing incoherent choices may hinder, rather than foster, a feeling of freedom (Sengün, 2013: 6). It is easy to observe that in *Bandersnatch*, with its limited narrative paths and ways of presenting endings, user audience can only follow a pre-determined trail of choice-based viewing activities. This type of selective interaction is not a creation but an illusion of public participation. The author's intention in displaying only "No" on the screen at this point is to create a paradox with having freedom of choice. This implies that the previous experience is an illusory ability to choose for both the audience and Stefan.

Joshua Matthews (2019: 4) concludes that the freedom of choice *Bandersnatch* provides to the audience is merely an illusion. In participating in the film, the audience first thinks they have many choices, but the filmmakers have made all these choices for the audience in advance. Austin S. Babrow (1988), who also doubts the extent to which specific, conscious motives govern audience behaviour, summarises the past experience and suggests that the interpretive framework theory should be used to think. According to this theory, certain audience choices are meaningful, while other media exposure behaviours are motivated by mere habit and conditioned reflexes and can be considered unmotivated behaviours (McQuail, 1997). The media user--here, the *Bandersnatch* viewer--creates a psychologically satisfactory ending based on his/her own interpretation of the plot, analysis of the character's personality, and grasp of the character's emotional direction. However, when essential choices come up, for example, when the viewer chooses to click on an option on the screen that they have their heart set on, the result is that the game designed by Stefan was released via the game company to a poor reputation, the audience

will vicariously be the main protagonist and think that this is a dire consequence. In this case, whenever the viewer chooses to advance the plot point to the game's release but it is poorly received, they will remain dissatisfied with the ending and may believe that they have made the "wrong" choice and choose to start over. Therefore, in repeated selection, viewers might lose interest and motivation through too much banal repetition in tandem with too many dissatisfying moments of disappointment.

5. Conclusion

Audiences frequently watch "normal" films and TV series in a multi-purpose, casual manner. They perceive watching itself as a relaxation-oriented leisure activity. However, the interactive film viewing and participation procedure changes this single and straightforward relationship. While navigating an interactive film, the audience transforms from relaxed, unconcerned bystanders to participants or controllers responsible for the story's direction. In this circumstance, the audience needs to be more focused on the content, which helps to prolong the length of the user experience and their bond with the film or TV show. *Bandersnatch* uses digital technology to combine film narrative and game interaction. The addition of this technology deepens the audience's emotional engagement while watching the film. It transforms the user's identity from viewer to user.

Bandersnatch ostensibly offers a new perspective on the democratisation of user participation. However, in the process, the film's producers maintain absolute control of the narrative by limiting the audience's interaction and participation. While the audience can partake in a more integrated viewing experience when watching *Bandersnatch*, in prolonged immersive film viewing and selection, viewers can find themselves always repeating choices and backtracking the plot, which can cause a certain amount of stress and burden. At last, the audience will become aware that their agency of choice does not entirely belong to them and that *Bandersnatch's* director controls the plot as its only demiurge. *Bandersnatch* gives the audience the illusion that they have the same authorial rights as the screenwriter and director. But behind the freedom of choice is the pressure and illusion that viewers cannot interpret themselves when and after watching.

Through the analysis of *Bandersnatch's* narrative content, audio-visual language and audience feedback, it is not difficult to find that this interactive film can indeed extend

the audience's comprehensive feelings and experiences to a certain extent, and the use of interactive forms in film and television dramas can highlight the functions of entertainment, emotional satisfaction, deep immersion, and escaping from the pressure of reality. (In principle, the interactive film could attempt to lead the audience into an imagined utopia by using interactive mechanisms to give them the right to make choices unavailable in the ontologically real world). Nevertheless, it breaks the audience's illusion at the last moment and pulls them back from cyberspace to real space. The freedom initially thought to be handed over to the audience is not realised, thus causing the feeling of a more profound struggle after "waking up". The imbalance between the audience and the creators is still there.

A big part of the audience, initially unaccustomed to the interactive film format, is invited/forced to take back their subjective initiative of choice, adapting little by little to the process of interactive viewing, opening up to the desire for more autonomy in the film text. They grow accustomed to this form of control while watching/navigating the film but then gradually or suddenly realise that they never actually had the freedom to guide the protagonist's choices and the course of his destiny in the film's narrative space. In this way, they are constantly stimulated to nurture a level of demand that is eventually shattered, resulting in an even sharper disappointment.

Since the viewing process is relatively private, almost always from a single viewpoint, the entire experience differs from that in a cinema. In the cinema theatre, we are inevitably affected by peers or groups in the same closed space. For instance, if someone laughs, we may be driven to laugh involuntarily; or if we cannot catch the meaning of a scene or dialogue, we may want to discuss it with the people around us or hear others discussing it, which will affect our attitude and behaviour during the viewing, limit the release of personal perceptions of first-hand feelings and thoughts about the film. *Bandersnatch*, on the other hand, allows the viewer to return to a private room similar to a home cinema, maximising the viewer's sense of autonomy (but also, in a sense, of isolation) in the narrative and within the intensity of interaction with the narrative material.

Interactive movies give audiences a space, opening up novel opportunities for the democratic development of participation among users. Interactive movies seek to liberate the audience's subjectivity, which has long been constrained by the author's dominant position, while simultaneously encouraging visual identity's decentralisation.

These choices have value because they engage the audience in the story interactively, shatter the fourth wall structurally, and increase their level of engagement, which helps them comprehend the significance of the protagonist's journey to the satisfying ending. However, there are still significant restrictions and controls even though new digital technologies can increase audience participation in narrative construction. Tension is created between the audience's attempt to release more subjectivity through this satisfaction and gratification and the interactive cinema's integrated mechanism. From this hypothesis, we determine that the idea of audience fulfilment and satisfaction fostered by the mechanism of choose-your-own-adventure is, in fact, an illusion that serves the narrative's pre-determined purpose.

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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.

KEYWORDS

Anime and Manga; Cultural Agency; Visual Markers; Graphics Politics; Biased Scholarship.

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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

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.

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 clichés. 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,

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-

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

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

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

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

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 sept'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~le 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 *le 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

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 *le 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 prize¹¹—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

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 monocultural, 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 *multinational* production and *international* (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 transnational¹³ (*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

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

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](https://www.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](https://www.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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Horror and the *Cube* Films: An unlikely medium for the negotiation of Nationalist-Cultural ideologies

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ABSTRACT

Over the past several decades, scholarship has come to recognise the unexpected significance of horror cinema ventures as both culturally and politically relevant. One of Canada's greatest horror film successes was Vincenzo Natali's 1997 psychological thriller Cube that metaphorically explores the suffocating nature of vocational social relations under the conditions of a patriarchal military-industrial capitalism. So innovative was its premise that US interests quickly acquired the rights to produce and distribute Cube 2: Hypercube (2002) and Cube Zero (2004), but they were just as quick to reformulate the most subversive critique of the original film. Two decades later, in 2021, Japanese producers released a remake of the original film (which was so popular there), although it also re-coded the thematic critique, just as the American sequels had done. With this group of films across three national production traditions arises an opportunity to "detect shifts in the ideological constellation", as Slavoj Žižek has argued, by "compar[ing] consecutive remakes of the same story" (2011, p. 61). Following primarily Herbert Marcuse's understanding of political repressive tolerance, this article demonstrates the way in which constructions of cultural identity are negotiated across national traditions in the age of globalisation. Cube and its follow-ups demonstrate the nationalist-inflected limits of critical expression in the way that each subsequent film attempts to re-focus and re-code the horrors of the narrative machine in order to assert their own nationalist sensibilities threatened by the cultural levelling effect of globalisation in an age of transnational cinema distribution.

KEYWORDS

Horror; Cube Films; Nationalism; Canada; Japan; Repressive Tolerance;
Cultural Identity, Patriarchy.

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1. Introduction

Horror film might seem an unlikely medium through which to negotiate national identity. However, over the past several decades, scholarship has come to recognise the unexpected significance of horror cinema ventures as both culturally and politically relevant. Kevin Wetmore (2009, n.p.) argues that:

[m]ore so than any other film genre, horror concerns the fears and anxieties of the society that produced it. ... Only a post 9/11 America, concerned with torture and imprisonment, would produce the Saw and Hostel movies in which the horror comes from bodies subjected to physical torture and minds subjected to psychological torture.

However, even before 9/11, one of Canada's greatest horror film successes was Vincenzo Natali's 1997 psychological thriller *Cube*. It is a metaphorical exploration of the suffocating nature of vocational social relations under the conditions of a patriarchal military-industrial capitalism.¹ So innovative was its premise that US interests quickly acquired the rights to produce and distribute *Cube 2: Hypercube* (2002) and *Cube Zero* (2004), but they were just as quick to dilute and re-direct the most subversive critique of the original film. Two decades later, in 2021, Japanese producers released a remake of the original film (which was so popular there), although it also re-coded the thematic critique, just as the US sequels had done. With this group of films across three national production traditions arises an opportunity to "detect shifts in the ideological constellation", as Slavoj Žižek (2011) has argued, by "compar[ing] consecutive remakes of the same story" (p. 61). Following primarily Herbert Marcuse's understanding of political repressive tolerance, this article provides an explanation of the way in which constructions of cultural identity are negotiated across national traditions in the age of globalisation. *Cube* and its follow-ups demonstrate the nationalist-inflected limits of critical expression in the way that each subsequent film attempts to re-focus and re-code the horrors of the narrative machine to assert nationalist sensibilities threatened by the cultural levelling effect of globalisation in an age of transnational cinema distribution.

On the surface, the premise of the *Cube* movies is relatively simple, and the narrative construction in terms of both mise-en-scène and plot is quite ingenious in its simplicity. In each, unsuspecting victims are imprisoned in a labyrinth of cubicles, some of which are equipped with deadly booby traps. In this regard, the movies make use of at least two conventions of horror film: mystery and escape. The narrative dialogue focuses on the mystery of who or what built the machine and why. The narrative action focuses on escape. Working with "the cinematic equivalent of a bare stage" all of the films foreground the deterioration of gender-based and class-based social politics in an environment of such

¹ The "military-industrial complex" is a term coined by President Dwight Eisenhower in 1961 to warn of the social and economic implications of maintaining a large standing military in the US. In particular it indicates how the industrial manufacturing sector would come to depend on the ongoing production of military technologies that would require consumption to maintain the production output, thereby ensuring the need for ongoing military conflict in order to use up the weapons supply and justify the salaries of a standing army.

duress (Gates, 1998, n.p.). The social politics shift with every new room the characters enter. By focusing on these social interactions, however, these movies covertly distract from the vilifications of the larger social constructs that each presents.

Most horror films render the monster explicit but the *Cube* movies leave the malevolent force open to interpretations motivated by visual signifiers replete with ideological and nationalist underpinnings. Robin Wood's highly influential essay "An Introduction to the American Horror Film" (1985) explores the psychoanalysis of repressed anxieties manifest in the mostly American-produced examples of horror films he samples. The *Cube* movies subvert Wood's characterisation of horror film as a genre which depicts "the actual dramatization of ... the Monster" (p. 201). In all of the earlier three *Cube* films the locus of anxiety in the narrative pivots on the enigma surrounding the malevolent source of the cube. The first movie, a Canadian venture, indicates that the US military-industrial complex is the source of malevolence under which putatively egalitarian Canadian social politics break down. The two sequels reformulate the malevolent forces in terms more acceptable to the financial plum of US audiences following 9/11; they demonstrate a change in social anxieties that required less ambiguity in any challenge to dominant ideology and more distinct articulations of their villains and heroes. The Japanese film, released some two decades later in putative homage to the success of Natali's original in that country, appears to be a relatively straightforward remake. However, closer scrutiny reveals yet another re-coding that betrays a Japanese anxiety regarding the slow death of aged-based social hierarchy in the era of social media and rising youth Internet stars.

Broadly, each film demonstrates a willingness to be critical of capitalist culture, but within limits based on national sensibilities of the historical-political moments in which they emerge. The films compete to determine which aspects of each production's originating culture it is acceptable to criticise in the context of moral leadership and national hegemony. In doing so they reveal a governing ideology of patriarchal capitalism to which they all subscribe, but with differing critical limits and taboos.²

² Here and throughout the article, "patriarchy" is taken to be more than simply a social organisation where the woman enters the family of the husband, and the family of the husband takes care of her, while she provides the ability to generate offspring (although this remains one element of it.). Rather, as it is more commonly understood in scholarship today, "patriarchy" is considered the pervasive ideology of masculinist privilege that underpins all social constructs and power relations under the

While these films negotiate nationalist moral hegemony and the acceptable limits of social criticism, the negotiation itself reveals a universal “tacit acceptance of capitalist economic relations and liberal-democratic politics as the unquestioned framework of our social life” (Žižek, 1997, p. 128). Indeed, the films share a common representation of the plight of the subject under the oppression of the state apparatuses that capitalism produces. Ultimately, the films of the earlier *Cube* trilogy betray the superficial ideological differences between Canada and the US and identify a common propensity between the two nations to recognise and to attempt to stabilise their mutually “neo-conservative” patriarchal and capitalist cultures.³ The addition of the Japanese remake further demonstrates how these films work to negotiate the boundaries of cultural criticism as a mode of defining national or cultural identity within their mutually capitalist social economies.

2. Squaring the Cube in Scholarship

The small corpus of literature that considers the *Cube* movies define the original film as a significant Canadian venture, but these contributions do not address the film’s nationalist or ideological underpinnings. Most canonical surveys of Canadian cinema overlook or summarily dismiss Natali’s film. For example, in his survey of Canadian horror film, Caelum Vatnsdal (2004) describes *Cube* as “something of a renaissance ... for Canadian science fiction” (p. 221), but he says nothing more. In his survey *Film in Canada* (2011), Jim Leach also makes only a cursory reference to this first feature-length film in which he dismisses it as one that “still basically operates within generic norms” (p. 96). Similarly, George Melnyk makes only one fleeting mention of *Cube* in *100 Years of Canadian Cinema* (2004) and excludes Natali entirely from his edited compendium of *Great Canadian Film Directors* (2007). Christopher Gittings also makes only one brief mention of *Cube* in *Canadian National Cinema* (2002), and Brenda Longfellow (2009) only mentions *Cube* and Natali in her one short essay that focuses on its thematic concern

contemporary conditions of global capitalism and that manifests in multiple sites of oppression. As Robin Wood (1985) convincingly argues, “[t]he battle for liberation, the battle against oppression (whether economic, legal, or ideological), gains enormous extra significance through the addition of the term patriarchal, since *patriarchy* long precedes and far exceeds what we call capitalism” (p. 107).
³ Cf. Sharrett, 1993, p. 100.

with alienating urban space as a defining characteristic of the Toronto New Wave of films with which Natali's *Cube* is often compiled.

In "The Symbolism of Synthetic Space in *Cube* (1997)", Angel Mateos-Aparicio (2008) argues instead that "the movie epitomises the role of science fiction film in postmodern culture, for it creates a virtual (fictional) reality that reveals the complex meanings and hidden structures of contemporary reality in Western technological societies" (p. 1). Unfortunately, while looking at the film as exemplary of post-modernism, Mateos-Aparicio does little to elucidate or clarify the cultural work it does within a stratified capitalist social system, or as a nationalist artefact. In "Lacan's Life, the Universe, and Vincenzo Natali's *Cube*" (2000), Sheila Kunkle similarly largely limits her analysis to an examination of how the film demonstrates Lacanian signification. In the context of neo-Marxist cultural theory, Kunkle at least observes that *Cube* "allows us to draw an interesting parallel between the *Cube* as a headless and forgotten public works project and the 'blind insistence' of modern science, modern political bureaucracies, and the global expansion of Capitalism" (p. 284), although she does not extensively explore this trajectory.

Conversely, in *Cult Cinema* (2011), Mathijs and Sexton consider Natali's original *Cube* as something of a "do-it-yourself" labour of love project undertaken by Natali with extraordinarily limited resources, but that the film is not duly understood from this perspective. They argue that "[w]hile directors still receive a lot of attention in DIY criticism [of films including *Cube*], there is less emphasis on their efforts than on other components of the films and their receptions" (p. 54). Mathijs and Sexton do not significantly consider the particular "other components" of *Cube* such as its ideological impetus, but they associate it closely with another of Natali's films, *Nothing* (2003), which "invites audiences to speculate on issues such as user-friendly technology, pop-philosophy, and morality in a world where one can only trust one's closest friends" (pp. 54-5).⁴ This notion of trusting friends under the more dire and humourless conditions of the cube is central to each of the *Cube* films, if only by absence. The characters within

⁴ *Nothing* was another Natali labour-of-love that focuses on two down-and-out Toronto stooges who discover the ability to wish the unsavory aspects of their capitalist-driven urban lives out of existence, along with anything else they capriciously find an irritant. Although the modality of the film is comedy, ultimately they end up imprisoned together and at each other's throats in an endless white void of nothingness.

each film, identified primarily by their capitalist-inflected vocational positioning, are required to cooperate with the strangers with whom they are confined. Otherwise, while their claim that D-I-Y auteurism deserves greater weight in understanding these films might be problematic in championing the idea of directorial intentionality too heavily, it also buttresses an assumption that these films are replete with the ideological and moral sensibilities of their auteurs and/or the broader cultural limits from within which they operate.

Beyond the original *Cube* film, the body of literature surveyed under the purview of this research indicates that the Americanised sequels and the Japanese remake have received almost no scholarly attention at all. It appears that no complete study has been done that explores these films in the context of either neo-Marxist cultural analyses or nationalism, and certainly there is no full comparison of the films across their transnational boundaries and across time for their ideological similarities and differences. Considering the popularity of the original film in both Canada and Japan, each relative to their own unique market vicissitudes, and the fact that US interests were so quick to appropriate and eviscerate the ideological underpinnings of the narrative, this analytical oversight is one that leaves ideological negotiations that the films engender without due exposure and articulation in scholarship. This article offers part of a corrective by focusing specifically on this internationally disparate but narratively similar quadruplet of horror/sci-fi films to elucidate what we can learn from their unique pattern of relationships.

3. A methodology of nationalism and ideology

To examine the ideological and nationalist dimensions of the *Cube* films, this study fundamentally employs the concepts of myth and ideology as defined by Roland Barthes and Louis Althusser. In *Mythologies* (1972 [1957]), Barthes explains how visual signifiers in bourgeois culture are imbued with connotations. In “Myth Today” (2009 [1957]) Barthes extends this semiotic approach into a concept of nationalist ideology with his famous analysis of an image on the cover of a 1955 edition of *Paris Match* magazine in which a youthful black soldier salutes the French flag. Barthes elucidates the way in which this image, in the specific context of the magazine’s nationalist affiliations, acts to gloss over the French imperial project against racial minorities by demonstrating and fossilising (in a photographic image) the black soldier’s apparently willing deferral to

French nationalism (2009, pp. 265-6). Such connotations similarly inform the visual depictions of the military-industrial, corporate, and bourgeois/religious sources of the cube in each of the movies. Althusser defines such institutions as repressive (military) or ideological (bourgeois, corporate, religious) state apparatuses (Althusser, 2010 [1970], pp. 207-8). The state “communications apparatus” contributes to the reproduction of “capitalist relations of exploitation ... by cramming every ‘citizen’ with daily doses of nationalism, ... moralism, etc.” (p. 210). Althusser proceeds to summarily indicate that ideology works to mask and displace any antagonistic forces that are a challenge to the current system, and to fragment and separate subject identities causing unified factions to compete internally rather than coalesce against the oppressor. This last definition is particularly relevant as the victims in all of the *Cube* movies, identified primarily by vocation, are set against each other in their bid to survive against the unknown, oppressive forces behind the machine.

Moreover, the *Cube* films exemplify the negotiation of national identities within the larger framework of globally shared capitalist economies. Popular culture is the artistic and commercial arena in which horror film arises, and, according to Gramscian theory, the primary arena in which cultural hegemony is negotiated. Gramsci states that “[e]very relationship of ‘hegemony’ ... occurs not only within a nation, between the various forces of which the nation is composed, but in the international and worldwide field, between complexes of national and continental civilizations” (2009 [1947], p. 77). Herbert Marcuse’s concept of repressive tolerance further indicates that the forces of dominant ideology in a stratified capitalist culture tolerate a certain amount of critical dissent in order to create an illusion of agency and to contain and defuse resistance. In his 1965 essay “Repressive Tolerance” he states that:

what is proclaimed and practiced as tolerance today, is in many of its most effective manifestations serving the cause of oppression ... Thus, within a repressive society, even progressive movements threaten to turn into their opposite to the degree to which they accept the rules of the game (pp. 81-2).

Similarly, Louis Althusser states that “the ideology by which [capitalist state apparatuses] function is always in fact unified, despite its diversity and its contradictions, *beneath the ruling ideology*” (p. 209). As such, any appearance of subversive ideology can only be in the service of dominant ideology in a community of

global capitalism. In this context, the *Cube* movies each compete to establish the acceptable parameters of social criticism within symbolic narrative constructions of national culture, and in doing so, they subvert their more progressive criticisms of global capitalist social relations into a nationalist competition over the limits of repressive tolerance. What all the films share is the normative context of a shared capitalist economy and critical subversions in which nationalist ideologies compete on the level of moral hegemony rather than attacking the social contradictions inherent to capitalism in general. However, it is only through an examination of each film separately that the visual signifiers that imbue the larger constructs become evident as part of a nationalist negotiation of moral hegemony.

3.1. *Cube* (1997): The vilification of the US military-industrial complex

In the first *Cube*, a number of subjects awaken to find themselves imprisoned in a mechanical labyrinth of cubic rooms, some of which conceal deadly booby traps, within the construct of an enormous industrial cube. After an initial scene in which an unknown character identified as Alderson is killed, a black cop character named Quentin leads the motley group through each cube in a narrative trajectory that revolves around the notions of imprisonment and escape. Young Joan Leaven becomes the most capable assistant amongst the incarcerated, accompanied by a frustrating cynic named David Worth, a frenetic doctor named Helen Holloway, a criminal escape artist named Rennes, and an autistic savant named Kazan. Under the “horror” of industrial capitalism (Berman, 1983, pp. 120-1) social identities remain trapped in perpetual jeopardy and social harmony breaks down – a suggestion of the way in which capitalism reproduces a stratified social hierarchy, social inequality, and repressed violence. On the other hand, *Cube* posits a tacit acceptance of the capitalist culture that spawned it as the unquestioned and governing source of normalcy. There is also an underlying message that the social identities threatened are all middle-classed bourgeois capitalist identities; they are all cogs in the economic machine who long for a utopia in which they can maintain their capitalist identities without the contradictions the superstructure inherently produces. *Cube* defines a return to normalcy for the characters in the cube, never achieved by any of them except for Kazan, as a desire for a return to their quotidian capitalist vocations.

Otherwise, within its carceral space, *Cube* plays with an unsettling combination of spatial metaphors and identity constructions. Indeed, in *Cube*, the space itself is the threat. It is void of the necessities of life. According to philosophical anthropologist Mary Douglas (1991), it is the material insertion of commodities into a space that participates in identity construction, particularly in capitalist/commodity cultures. The commodities with which the subject chooses to fill domestic spaces reflect the identity that a subject wishes to project (pp. 287-307).⁵ The cube highlights the contradiction inherent in this commoditised spatial identity construction by demonstrating an aberrant commodity relationship between the space and the subjects within it. The cube is materially, culturally, and domestically vacant. The cube represents the impossibility of “producing” space because there are no things in it, only identities: *Cube* acts as a commentary on the way in which social relations in a capitalist culture are so heavily mediated by commodities that their lack is framed in a narrative of absolute nihilism. Not only are identities dissolved in the cube, they can hardly be constructed.

More broadly, *Cube* represents the maturation of the Canadian postmodern condition in which the dissolution of the individual subject is represented as a fatal splitting between national identities.⁶ Philosophers such as Frederic Jameson and John Docker point out that postmodernism is characterised by, amongst other things, the dissolution of the subject. Jameson (1992) claims that postmodern life causes the “fragmented and schizophrenic decentering and dispersion of” the subject (p. 413). Natali’s film offers a disturbing opening visual to introduce its critique of the annihilatory nature of such a splitting within the industrial confines of the carceral cube. Alderson’s dispatch is visually depicted by the character’s body splitting in half down the centre before completely collapsing – a typically postmodern dissolution of the subject – in a visually specific American-US environment. One obvious visual signification of the US landscape in which this death occurs is the colours of the first three rooms: white, blue, and red, respectively – colours frequently used to invoke a US

⁵ In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre offers further convincing arguments on the way commodity fetishism participates with identity construction.

⁶ Canada is not only officially bilingual and in the perpetual throes of political posturing between the French- and English-dominant cultural regions of the country, but it has also been famously characterised by Canadian scholar Northrop Frye as doubly-colonised with both a British colonial footprint and an invasive American culture and media. The postmodern subject is understood as split in the Foucauldian sense of a Cartesian duality between mind and body.

military nationalism. Ironically, Alderson survives his examination of the first three rooms but is diced by a mesh of metal wire in the fourth. The visual split of the Alderson character, centred and foregrounded in the frame, and slowly initiating the character's dissolution, hints at a fragmentation of identity for its victim in an American environment in which his identity is fatally split between two competing nationalist ideological modes (Figure 1). This early scene in the film establishes the nationalist context of its theme. Moving from red, white, and blue to a deceptively comforting atmosphere in which death occurs posits the visual metaphor of a US industrial prison, any escape from which is fatal.⁷

Cube also implicates those imprisoned within it as complicit with the machine's ambivalence on the level of complacency and political inaction. *Cube* is specifically concerned with the subjects' demise at the hands of the machine they helped create. John Nelson (2006) explains that "[t]he notion of terrorism as attacking innocents for political gain does not fit the genres of horror and dystopia" and, thus, "[t]he systematic, encompassing corruption of dystopias means that the civilians targeted by the regime share responsibility for its terrorism" (p. 188). All the characters in the film participate in the construction of their own horror. Worth, in particular, "finally admits to having been one among scores of people contracted by an unidentifiable source to help design the outer shell of the huge structure itself" (Kunkle, 2000, p. 284). Worth explicitly implicates himself by defining the unseen malevolence as an abstraction in which he participates. He asks, "What do you think the Establishment is? It's guys like me." Worth's admission is framed within the characters' conversation regarding their respective professions and suggests that they have all been directly or indirectly complicit with its construction. Before his grisly death, Rennes offers the well-scripted double-entendre "you have to escape yourselves." However, if they are all guilty of complicity, with what have they been complicit?

These anxieties regarding the threat to these bourgeois identities in the guise of an untenable social environment are mapped onto a nationalist vilification of the US military-industrial economy. The structuring threat in all of the *Cube* movies remains

⁷ Natali contends that the yellowish colour (of the fourth room) is the most aesthetically pleasing, a warm-looking and comforting environment (Natali).

an ambiguous non-identity that annihilates individual subjects – an elusive and unidentifiable superstructure that has enclosed around them and threatens their every move. The original *Cube* provides neither prologue nor epilogue to explain the enigma, unlike its sequels which use these narrative devices to clarify the source of the cube. *Cube* prefers to leave the source of the cube more ambiguously coded in its dialogue and visual environment. And visually, *Cube* implicates the military-industrial complex through images that identify the machine as a product of industrial manufacturing (Figure 2). Angel Mateos-Aparicio (2008) states that “the film’s main symbol, the cube, substitutes (and constitutes) the universe in terms of characters, setting and plot, and the discussion of its symbolic and metaphorical meanings (no ‘rational’ or ‘objective’ signification is evident) becomes the characters’ as well as the spectators’ task” (p. 6). Having invited viewer interpretation in the same sentence in which he claims that no rational or objective signification is evident, he goes on to observe the “virtually identical steel cells shaped as cubes” (p. 2). Both the steel and the cubical shapes he highlights indicate industrial manufacturing. Natali’s own description also implies industrial design. “I had this idea that it would be interesting to make a film that took place entirely in hell, but not in a Dante hell, but a modern one, you know symmetrical and free of all those Gothic trappings” (Natali, 2013). When I asked if he would agree that the cube was manufactured, he answered summarily, “Yes, absolutely”. The symmetrical aspect that Natali mentions is another visual feature of the cube that indicates its fictitiously industrial origin. The dialogue within the narrative then attaches the military to the industrial *mise-en-scène*. In *Cube*, a paranoid conspiracy theorist named Dr. Helen Holloway acts as the unlikely voice of reason. She articulates the most rational criticism that implicates governmental participation in the cube’s industrial design – a conflation that intimates the military-industrial complex. “Only the government could build something this ugly.” Holloway follows with another apparently paranoid observation that is less ambiguous. “Only the military-industrial complex could afford to build something this size.” However, contra paranoia, her analytical reduction to the cost of resources rationally implicates the military-industrial complex under the ruling ideology of capitalism that the film normalises.

Summarily, the narrative in *Cube* operates as a social metaphor for the way in which capitalist ideology and the military-industrial complex imprisons the subject within a social environment that is contradictory (in that it presents itself as benign or even

nurturing when it is, in fact, stultifying), if not openly malevolent. The cube is first and foremost a space of deadly incarceration. Indeed, Natali (2013) states that he envisioned “a prison escape film”. The metaphor is ironically highlighted in the characters’ names, each of which refers to an American prison institution. Many of the scenes feature low camera angles and extreme close-ups of the characters, creating a claustrophobic sensation of confinement (Figure 3). However, *Cube* is much more than a mere allegorical criticism of a problematic prison system. The carceral aspect of the narrative works to further implicate the military-industrial complex. According to Althusser both prisons and the military-industrial complex are amongst the repressive state apparatuses that participate in reproducing economic and social relations beneficial to the dominant classes (pp. 209-210). Again, Holloway makes the connection that “it’s all the same machine right? The Pentagon, multi-national corporations, the police.” The statement echoes Althusser’s broader thesis that all elements of a culture, whether repressive or ideological, work towards the maintenance of a singular goal: reproducing the dominant system. And in this case, the dominant system is a capitalist-driven military-industrial cultural economy which is coded as dangerously elusive and explicitly hostile.

3.2. *Cube 2: Hypercube* (2002): A corporate response

True to the horror genre, and the commodity culture which spawned it, *Cube* prompted sequels. However, *Cube*’s sequels were not just endless iterations, unlike the myriad sequels typical of the 1980s slasher cycles. They were rather negotiations: a conversation negotiating hegemony with the United States in terms of which state apparatuses it is acceptable to criticise. Although IMDb lists *Cube 2: Hypercube* (2002) as a Canadian production, it has few of the Canadian associations of the first *Cube*. Andrzej Sekula replaces Canadian director Vincenzo Natali. Most of Sekula’s career was spent as a cinematographer on almost exclusively US productions. His other major directorial venture is the 2006 US film *The Pleasure Drivers*. Similarly, the production input of the Canadian Film Centre is replaced with the more commercially motivated organisation Lion’s Gate Entertainment. Although Lion’s Gate was founded in Vancouver, it is headquartered in Los Angeles, and its production corpus holds no specifically Canadian impetus. Most of the cast members were originally Canadian actors, although some have moved into more lucrative American careers. However, their input comes after the script revisions of US producer Ernie Barbarash, and does

not provide an identifiably Canadian ideological tenor. The original script was written by American screenwriter Sean Hood. Compared to the original *Cube*, this body of transnational collaborative inputs is highly American. And while the original *Cube* film appears highly critical of the US military-industrial complex, such a critique apparently did not sit well with the American producers of its sequels following 9/11. It seems that the success of the first film with international audiences required an ideological backlash by the second two films following 9/11 so that US hegemony based on “moral leadership” could remain intact – a form of containment by reassertion of the US authority to define moral parameters, and, in the highly militarised post-9/11 political economy, to defend a militaristic ideology by corporate displacement.

Although the sequel maintains the premise of the first, it makes a number of revisions to the criticisms inherent to the original. The most obvious change appears to be merely aesthetic, but the ideological underpinnings of that aesthetic are significant. The ambiguous military-industrial source of the first *Cube* is explicitly identified as a corporate source. Corporate America unambiguously replaces the military-industrial complex as the source of malevolence. The industrial look of the first *Cube*, with its iron frame and coloured room panels is replaced with clinical, white cubicles and tie-toting, briefcase-bearing victims trapped within them (Figure 4). The film’s dialogue also indicates a shift from a military focus to a corporate one. After the characters determine that they have all been abducted from disparate geographical locations in the United States (eliminating any possibility that the characters might be ambiguously Canadian), Simon opines that they must have been flown to the hypercube in “private or military jets.” He separates the unnecessary adjectives “private” and “military” with the conjunction “or” designating a binary between private enterprise and military involvement. The military implication is perhaps unavoidable, but by saying “or”, Simon introduces private enterprise as a choice *against* military responsibility in a narrative that has been clear about the corporate origins of the machine. Sasha/Alex Trusk, who is later identified as a primary antagonist, is a famous hacker guilty of remotely crashing armed forces jets to protest military spending as well as having crashed the Tokyo stock exchange. This backstory of her actions justifies her incarceration as retribution for sabotage against the US military at the same time that it implicates corporate capitalism in the crime of malevolence against its own populace. Moreover, all of the characters are from private walks of life, with the

exception of the colonel who dies first. His knowledge of the previous cube, and his lacking knowledge of the hypercube is indicative of a change in vilification to private sector ownership. Lastly, *Cube 2* reveals that a corporation named IZON is responsible for the cube. IZON is a weapons manufacturer, obviously associated with the military-industrial project, but clearly a private rather than a public institution. *Cube 2* displaces the military-industrial malevolence of the first film onto a corporate weapons manufacturer and in some ways effaces American governmental responsibility.⁸

As with *Cube*, the characters are again implicated in the construction of the entrapping structure. However, in *Cube 2*, the crime remains explicitly corporate rather than social. In *Cube*, only Worth is *explicitly* implicated and the other characters provide a deeper and more ambiguous indictment of all participants within the social nightmare they have created. The second *Cube* film abandons the simple allegory of prison names, but extends the deeper prison allegory into an editorial metaphor against the cubicle world of corporate America. In the introduction, a number of victims, lying face up and encased in plastic sheaths, are framed from above; the camera pans upwards against their inverted supine postures as they depart on their symbolic descent into the corporate hell of the cube. The film's dialogue reveals that Jerry is an engineer who helped design the hypercube's door mechanisms; Max is a computer games prodigy who may have participated in the strategic aspect of the cube's labyrinth; Becky is an IZON employee whom Simon Grady is hired to locate; Mrs Paley formerly worked for IZON; and Sasha is later revealed to be Alex Trusk, a computer genius who designed the entire machine.

The fantastical nature of its reality-altering environment represents a shift from industrial fear to a fear of computer technology in a time when military-industrial technologies were a necessity for the Afghanistan war effort. The rising domination of Internet communication technologies, in which criticism of the war effort found a public forum, represented a threat to propagandistic agendas to justify the military campaign. Indeed, the opening scene of the film highlights corporate computer technologies. The terrified eyeball of the introductory character is intercut with

⁸ The extra-features on the DVD offer a deleted alternate ending in which the government is specifically implicated. The deletion of this scene demonstrates the way in which any specific reference to government involvement has been cut from the narrative.

flashbacks to scenes of computer hardware and what appears to be the science laboratory of a corporate research facility. An IZON identity badge belonging to one of the cube's victims then fills the screen. The claustrophobic cinematography of the first cube is replaced with a preference for higher angles on Steadicams. In concert with the rapid panning of the camera, the cinematography creates the disorientation of a series of cubes in which gravity and space are in flux. This is a world of surrealism and scientific experimentation more than industrial dread.

Another significant change in *Cube 2* is the postmodern condition upon which the narrative focuses. The first *Cube* explores postmodernism from the nihilistic perspective of the dissolution of the subject in untenable spaces. Jameson (1995) also discusses a temporal schizophrenia in his discussion of the dissolving subject: "as temporal continuity breaks down, the experience of the present becomes powerfully, overwhelmingly vivid and 'material'" (p. 119). "Jameson suggests that the postmodern condition is characterised by schizophrenic temporality and a spatial pastiche" (Bruno, 1987, p. 184). The space in the hypercube is a pastiche of rooms which frequently occupy the same space. In this cube, however, rather than subjects who suffer existential and social identity crises within a military-industrial nightmare they have helped create, the victims are more specifically cogs in the corporate machine, trapped in a nightmare of white cubicles in which time, rather than space, becomes the primary threat; the hypercube destabilises linear time and captures its clock-watching corporate victims in endless iterations of the same horrific monotony. *Cube 2* highlights the annihilation of time in the space of its postmodern corporate nightmare. In an early scene in which Kate and Simon are struggling, Max appears almost simultaneously at a number of the doors, moving around the outside of the cube in which they find themselves in impossible time ellipses. Later in the film, the group encounters their own decomposed corpses from a future in which none of them escaped. Much like the employed drones in a corporate office space, these characters are stuck in endless and timeless reproductions of futile labour, which is coded as fatal for all but a single survivor. Time constraints then eclipse time repetition; Kate races against time to escape before the tesseract implodes.

Almost immediately following 9/11, *Cube 2* demonstrates a desire for less ambiguity than that represented by the unsettling aperture of the first *Cube*; in contrast *Cube 2* provides a less unsettling narrative closure and a more comforting horror fantasy in

which to release social tension. In *Cube 2*, narrative and cinematographic patterns indicate that Kate is the character with whom the viewer is intended to participate most sympathetically. While identification with any character in *Cube* is destabilised, *Cube 2* affords viewers the traditional single character with whom to primarily identify, and through whom they can position themselves against any participation with the machine of corporate nightmare. Kate describes herself as a psychotherapist and is able to therapeutically assist other characters in managing their terror. It is not revealed until the end that she was also a dupe of the corporate powers of IZON hired to retrieve an information locket carried by Trusk. Kate is summarily executed by agents of IZON in this epilogue, however, allowing her to maintain some degree of sympathy, and subjecting her to the same fate as the other victims of the cube associated with IZON. In *Cube*, Kazan escapes into an ambiguous ethereal white void at the end, which is amongst the film's many ambiguities. In *Cube 2*, no such ambiguous surrealism occurs outside of the machine. Kate escapes to confront her corporate superiors and is executed. The subtle military implication works to create a fantasy of a complicit soldier who sacrificed herself for the military cause, more than it vilifies a military agenda. As with most of the characters, it is for her complicity with the corporate machine that she is eventually killed. This re-coding works as a fantasy to displace anxieties regarding US governmental duplicity under the questionable leadership of George W. Bush onto corporate America. In *Cube 2*, the government's malevolent machine is decidedly of corporate rather than military-industrial design.

3.3. *Cube Zero* (2004): Full circle and new displacements

The third film in the *Cube* series, *Cube Zero*, released in 2004, is also listed by IMDb as a Canadian film, but like *Cube 2*, its productive inputs are primarily from the US (although, admittedly, it is aesthetically more similar to the first *Cube* than the second). While the film maintains a primarily Canadian cast of actors, Ernie Barbarash, one of the producers of *Cube 2* steps in as director of this third instalment, and its overt re-coding of the criticisms present in the first film is substantially more conservative than the all-Canadian original.

By 2004, public sentiment in both the United States and Canada had begun to question the Afghanistan military campaigns. In *The Abu Ghraib Effect* (2007), for example, published only two years after *Cube Zero* was released, Stephen Eisenman

concludes with a harsh psychoanalysis of specific American soldiers who were involved in torturing prisoners of the Gulf War and a scathing indictment of the American military authorities that supported their actions. Eisenman recapitulates the worn US rhetoric of manifest destiny and the rising tide of opposition to it when he describes “the feelings of national and racial superiority of the soldiers and civilians at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere, to uphold the moral and political necessity of the American military venture in the face of worldwide opposition and condemnation” (p. 98). As public sentiment changed, the North American populace was in dire need of a fantasy that upheld their tenuous social mythologies. Indeed, unlike the cinematography of the first or second *Cube*, this third instalment makes use of wide-angle cinematography in its enclosed spaces to create a sense of delirium.

Cube Zero represents an explicit attempt to revise the significations of the first film with a semblant prequel rather than a sequel. Instead of moving in a different direction as the second film did, it re-codes the thematic implications of the first cube; the third *Cube* movie appropriates the narrative of the first film and attempts to overwrite its unsettling aperture with a backstory. To do so, *Cube Zero* problematises the suggestion of the first film that all victims of the cube, even supposedly innocent ones, are complicit in its design. In Althusserian terms, these characters are not transgressors against the Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs) but rather participants in the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). The third film, however, opts for a more explicit identification of the victims. They are all apparently convicts on death row, transgressors against the power structure, and more duly subject to the violent reprisals of the RSAs. Even the character of lesser guilt, Cassandra, is described as “a political dissenter.” This conceptual conceit is perhaps somewhat comforting to Western audiences in that it provides at least some vague rationale for the victims’ torture within the machine.⁹

Cube Zero also adds both an epilogue and a prologue, complete with a subplot that re-codes the amoral autistic savant in the first movie as a stereotypical male melodramatic

⁹ Indeed, the United States is one of those few western countries that have not ratified the Declaration of Man’s Universal Rights with China precisely because it does not wish to leave itself vulnerable to this horrific strategic mechanism without recourse to stratagem for itself. In this context, it remains a cultural lightning rod in American discourse.

hero. Eric Wynn is a cube technician who comes to believe that his superiors are condemning victims who do not deserve their punishment. He becomes enamoured of one of the victims, Cassandra Rains, abandons his position and his deference to authority, and enters the cube in an effort to save her. The main character, Cassandra, is represented as an innocent victim, and a maternal figure, unwillingly kidnapped while walking in the forest with her young daughter. Wynn remains complicit with his sadistic task under the understanding that all of the victims were convicted of capital crimes and were given the choice to enter the cube or face an immediate death sentence. When Wynn discovers that Cassandra's file is missing the requisite consent form, he realises her innocence in a symbol that immediately reverses the implications of complicity in the original film. He is eventually captured by the cube's authorities and is lobotomised by the evil agents that have imprisoned his love interest. He is subsequently placed into the cube and the performance of the actor playing him somewhat suggests he is the origin of the Kazan character of the first film.

Cube Zero further introduces a thematic trajectory in which the carceral technological environment of the cube hierarchy is set in opposition to nature. In both the epilogue and the prologue, Cassandra is shown outside the cube, hunted by its agents, trying desperately to protect her daughter as she flees through a forest (a convention of melodrama, a genre which maintains the clear distinction of heroes and villains). It is notable that she is not outside the cube in any sort of modern urban environment – an attempt to efface urban culture from the fantasy narrative. This new thematic focus is another diversion from the implications of the first *Cube* in which no-one within the social system is fully innocent of its malign side-effects. In so doing, the film creates a fantasy of innocent “natural” victims and personified evil oppressors that are distinct entities.

In addition to the re-coded “natural vs evil” thematic, *Cube Zero* also introduces a class-based critique into its narrative matrix through a sub-plot that personifies the otherwise absent authorities behind the cube. Indeed, *Cube Zero* longs to answer the bothersome question that the first film attempts to leave unanswered. When Cassandra asks, “What kind of animals would do this?”, her question is immediately followed by a scene change to two blue-collar stooges running the controls. These two eventually become the victims of the authorities who descend from above in an elevator. The bombastic villain, complete with a disgusting cybernetic eye implant, is both visually offensive and wholly unlikeable in his arrogant condescension to, and eventual murder

of Dodd. Thus, *Cube Zero* offers a narrative gambit between the working-class operators and their previously invisible senior authorities. In this version of *Cube*, it is no longer a vague and faceless US military-industrial monolith that threatens its complicit populace, but a specific class-based entity in which its own otherwise innocent proletariat is at risk. Dodd later concedes, “We’re just the button men. If we were meant to be analysts we’d be working upstairs.” The eventual call from upstairs is accompanied by military drums in the audio underscore and his repetition of “Sir, yes sir.” Here, *Cube Zero* highlights a theme in which questioning rather than participating with military authority is coded as fatal for both Dodd and Wynn.

Cube Zero finally attempts to complicate and dilute any military critique by positioning religious affiliations as the ideology behind the villainy. As part of the exit procedure for a victim who has nearly escaped the cube, the operators offer a grace to “the Lord” and are required to ask the victim, “Do you believe in God?” When he responds with an answer of “no” he is immolated. Any departure from conservative religious ideology, or any political dissent is fatal. The film’s attitude towards this mechanism of summary punishment seems to be one of disapprobation, implying that this power hierarchy is unjust. Wynn is clearly a protagonist against the belligerent authorities that condemn him. However, the nihilism of the narrative, and his ultimate banishment to the cube, indicate a more covert message that Wynn’s heroics are futile. The film vilifies the hierarchical (but only vaguely militaristic) and religified authority behind such fatal consequences, and ends with Wynn’s torture and demise. There is no cathartic romantic pairbond realised between Wynn and Cassandra, a trajectory strongly suggested by the melodramatic thematisation of his attempts to save her. As the denizens of another infamously horrific cube (the evil communist “borg” cyborgs of the *Star Trek* franchise) would insist, “resistance is futile” (Figure 5). In *Cube Zero*, while Wynn’s punishment is unjust, it is just as inevitable.

3.4. Japan’s *Cube* (2021): From corporate-military capitalism to the digital family

The biggest box office and home rental successes for Natali’s original *Cube* in 1997 and 1998 were in France and Japan (Natali, 2013). Linnie Blake’s examination of the American adaptation of *Ringu* (1998) offers insights into the success of such horror films as *Cube* in Japan (also in 1998). “Nakata Hideo’s *Ringu*, the first cinematic treatment of [Koji] Suzuki’s novel, was made in 1998 as a recession-hit Japan’s

technology markets crashed, unemployment soared, and the nation seemed plagued both by a rash of insurance-money killings and by a number of apocalyptic quasi-religious groups, such as the Aum Cult who mounted a poison gas attack on the Tokyo subway system” (Blake, 2017, p. 217). However, since that time, new social and digital anxieties have emerged in Japan, along with new forms of salvific technophilia to mitigate them, both of which manifest in the thematics apparent in Japan’s remake of *Cube*. In addition, much of the scholarly literature concerned with intercultural horror remakes between Japan and the United States, including Blake’s, observe a unidirectional adaptation (US production companies acquiring the rights to remake original Japanese horror films but not vice versa) of what Kevin Heffernan and Kevin Wetmore refer to as “J-Horror”: iconic franchises such as *The Ring*, *The Grudge*, and several other more contemporary examples (see Mee, 2014, p. 11). These contributions tend to discuss how the US remakes re-inscribe contemporary American ideological underpinnings within the confines of the surface narratives. But there is almost no literature that considers the remake in the other direction, a potential symptom of the fact that hardly any such remakes exist, positioning the Japanese *Cube* as a rare and valuable artefact through which to do so.

The Japanese version of *Cube* is a purported remake of the original, complete with a very similar opening scene of original slaughter, no prologue or epilogue, and the same characters by structural proxy. However, the film is informed by elements of the sequels as well. Each room is an aesthetic combination of the metallic frames of the original but with dulled colour panels of off-whites reminiscent of the corporate cubes in *Cube 2*. The opening scene that zeroes in on Yūichi’s eye as he awakens to confusion and delirium in the cube is also reminiscent of the opening scene of *Cube 2*, introducing a theme of ideological revelation to the imagery: moving from ideological “sleeping” to revelatory “seeing” within the cube’s bewildering environment (Figure 6). Nevertheless, although this Japanese *Cube* might be considered less ideologically insidious in its thematic re-codings of the original than the revisionist Americanised sequels, it is also more subversive as a “remake.” As an ostensible “exact copy”, the ideological subversions that are so obvious in the sequels are themselves subverted under a patina of identity, an identity that simply cannot maintain under the conditions of such a significant cultural and temporal translation from the original.

In his exploration of American remakes of J-Horror, Kevin Wetmore (2009) offers a useful and parsimonious summary of some of the contemporary Japanese cultural fears reflected in the original films. He explains that in *Chakushin Ari* (2003) (remade in the United States as *One Missed Call*) “it is discovered that the deaths have been caused by the ghost of ... a psychopathic, abusive child. Essentially the film is concerned both with the cycle of child abuse ... and with the interrelatedness through technology that provides only a simulacra [sic] of [social] closeness” (n.p.). In his discussion of what he refers to as “technoghosts” in films such as *Ringu* (1998) (remade in the US as *The Ring*) or *Kairo* (2001) (remade in the United States as *Pulse*), Wetmore claims that “[t]echnoghosts haunt the society that created them, and as often as not, they are children or women” (*ibid.*). He summarises all of these Japanese cultural anxieties with his description of *Ju-on* (2002) (remade in the United States as *The Grudge*): “In essence, *Ju-On* demonstrates both the failure of the family unit in post-industrial Japan, as well as the failure of conventional wisdom to solve problems” (*ibid.*). Cumulatively, these are the very anxieties with which the Japanese *Cube* is concerned, but the movie inverts and recuperates them as something of a response to these earlier pessimistic narratives. Instead of a straightforward critique of the military-industrial complex, as in the original, the Japanese *Cube* takes a different approach that is consonant with the rise of more contemporaneous digital anxieties and inquietudes surrounding the restructuring of the patriarchal family in the environment of corporate-controlled social media, all thematics that are entirely absent in the first *Cube*. Japan’s *Cube* directly maps the imagery of ideological revelation on to an ailing construction of family patriarchy and reconciles it with the metaphorically cybernetic subjects of a more digital age.

Both the enigma of the machine and the focus on vocational identity that were prevalent in the original, and that gave rise to the critique of both the military-industrial machine and social complicity with it, are largely subverted in the Japanese remake. One conversation early in the narrative indicates a suspicion that the characters’ unexpected incarceration may be in the service of a reality TV show, but this trajectory of thought is almost immediately abandoned. Instead, the suggestion works as merely a temporal marker of contemporary media dominance that is absent in the original *Cube*. Similarly, vocational identities are invoked and thematically repurposed. When the only female character in the narrative first encounters the rest of the group, she asks “*What* are you guys?”, rather than “*Who* are you guys?”, indicating identity by

vocation rather than subjectivity. However, the other characters are surprised to learn that she actually meant their names. Otherwise, the only relevant vocational identities are placed thematically in the service of generational distinctions. The older Andō character, who joins the group later, vaguely identifies himself as a business man. “I work at a company.” His primary nemesis within the group is Shinji, a young adult with the stereotypical job of a youthful slacker: clerk in a convenience store.

Indeed, throughout the film, there are various references to generational conflicts in the new age. The most obvious of these is comparative. In the proxy character transfer from the original, it is initially baffling why it was necessary to render the autistic savant character a child in the Japanese remake. The child, Chiharu Uno, even comments on the fact that he hates adults. When Andō joins the group and asks “Why is a child here?”, it does not make young Chiharu feel as though the question is sympathetic. Chiharu is, rather, immediately afraid of Andō. Eventually the child’s mathematical wizardry reveals the same numerical coordinate conceit to each of the rooms as in the original *Cube*. Each room is marked by a set of x, y, and z, coordinates, each coordinate three-digits, and Yūichi tentatively observes that “when there was a trap, there was always a prime number.” Of course, old sneering Andō dismisses the insights of a mere “child” in his disappointment that the prime numbers hypothesis is not absolutely certain. To prove he trusts the child against Andō’s anxiety-ridden dismissive scepticism, Yūichi (heroically?) risks his life by throwing himself into the next room without prime numbers before testing it with the boot-on-a-string technique. Less explicitly, the prime numbers conceit introduces a new narrative MacGuffin. Upon reaching a room in which *all* of the new hatches have prime numbers, they decide to go back, only to discover that the room from whence they came is now locked to them. As with the human condition of aging, they must move forward, even facing a potentially deadly future.

Andō’s main conflict, however, is with the bumbling Shinji. Andō maintains an authoritarian posture, rudely ordering especially poor Shinji around, to which the latter inexplicably capitulates. However, this posturing does eventually reveal the fact that the sound of human activity (and not the sound of opening hatch doors) is what triggers the deadly traps. With this insight, they are able to safely navigate the booby-trapped room through which they must proceed, but not without Shinji’s clumsiness causing injury to Andō (and almost his death) which does little to improve Andō’s respect for the youth

surrounding him. Shinji defends himself, however. “I’m not your subordinate. ... None of your age-based status matters in this place. ... Adults like you are nothing great yet you guys act super arrogant.” Andō’s proleptic response is just as redolent of typical generational disdain for putatively disrespectful and entitled millennials: “I also hate you ... You blame everything on the world, and are a brat that never grows up.” Eventually Andō screams at Shinji, “What kind of strength do you even have?! ... Because of this shit I almost died!” Ironically, however, Andō becomes increasingly incapacitated due to his age and injury, and as he struggles to climb the ladders, it is Shinji who becomes his aid. In fact, Andō repeatedly turns to his younger comrades to seek meaning from the clues that they accrue (for a third time when they circle back to the first corpse), an odd deferral for his age-based posturing. Yet still, Shinji eventually murders him by smashing a portal door on his head. “Filthy adults like you ... stole our freedom!” In this way, all of the cube’s military-industrial malice is displaced on to Shinji as a harbinger of a youthful revolution against age-based patriarchy.

In the same vein, the near death of several of the characters in one of the booby-trapped rooms prompts Yūichi to have a brief flashback to his own youth, proffering some symbolic backstory towards explaining his presence in the cube, a narrative aside that is a complete departure from the Canadian original, and which is more reminiscent of similar conceits in the American sequels. Yūichi remembers sitting at a desk, apparently doing homework, while he is uncomfortably examined by a subjective perspective behind the camera eye, presumably an oppressive parent. In this first flashback, it is implied that because his younger sibling, Hiruto, was less academically talented than Yūichi was, the younger brother was obviously randomly beaten by their father. In a later flashback, apparently motivated by a scanning of Yūichi by the cube, the wall in front of him appears as a stairwell in the open city. He sees himself scrambling breathlessly up the stairs to an outside vista atop a building. There, he is unable to convince his younger brother to step away from the ledge. He tells Hiruto to “Just do what dad says.” Hiruto replies, “That’s the only thing I didn’t want to hear”, and Yūichi witnesses Hiruto jump to his death. In this narrative configuration, it is undue parental expectations that killed Hiruto, and the cube is undue penance for Yūichi for failing to save him. In contrast, Yūichi manages to save the child Chiharu by reaching out his hand when he drops from one of the cube’s lower portals, a visual narrative mirror of his failure to reach his brother with the same gesture. Thus, the broader social

complicity and culpability of the original narrative are entirely subsumed and recuperated in Shinji's flashbacks. He feels a deep guilt over his failure to save his younger brother from committing suicide, and in his eventually sacrificial efforts to save young Chiharu, he absolves himself of his guilt and responsibility.

In the end, Yūichi dies in the machine, leaving young Chiharu to be united with the motherly Asako. Not only is she the only female character in the Japanese narrative, but she is significantly more subservient than the female characters in the original *Cube*; she performs mostly with a passively soft cadence of voice, if she speaks at all, and a vacuous wide-eyed glare (Figure 7). Chiharu and Asako inexplicably escape the cube in a conceit that aligns more conventionally with traditional horror and dystopia cinema than any of the previous *Cube* films. In his exploration of the transnational representation of terrorism in traditional American horror genre narratives, John Nelson (2006) observes that “[i]n horror, adults are guilty, secretly if not originally. That is how they can know and combat (but also be) the monsters. Children might begin as innocents, yet they must develop the moral and political sophistication born of facing their own eventual evils if they are to survive monstrous attacks” (p. 188). In the Japanese *Cube*, Yūichi's younger brother did not adapt these skills in time to save his own life, but this shortcoming is redeemed by the survival of young Chiharu. However, Chiharu emerges from the cube not merely into the potential utopia of the white abyss as in the original, but first into a long industrial hallway, a semi-digital realm that is reminiscent of similar scenes from *the iconic Matrix* movies (Figure 8). As he bravely ambulates his way into this realm, Asako chooses to stay behind in the cube.

She turns out to be a robotic part of the machine, indicated by a digitally cybernetic glimmer in her eyes, perhaps even a part of the machine system of the cube itself, but it is never richly explained why she or any of the others were incarcerated within it, especially the little boy. This new conceit, of her possible cybernetic ontology, again, subverts the capitalist vocational focus of the original film. Her original question of “What are you guys?” now indicates that, as a digital cyborg herself, she was actually scanning them and asking this particular question in order to determine whether or not they were also cybernetic. At the end of the film, she amiably returns to the innards of the cube to greet a new group of characters incarcerated within it with the same question and to begin the cycle of escape and revelation again. In something of yet another additional narrative epilogue, it is revealed that the former characters are all

“completed”, while Yūichi, thought dead, is ambiguously “continued.” Cumulatively, with the death of Andō, the salvation of the new maternal-like patriarchal hero Yūichi, and the reduction of the maternal-female to a mere techno-object, the film stages a gendered critique of generational trauma while positing the need for a new childhood independence of older cultural and patriarchal traditions for a digital age not yet as fully embraced in earlier Japanese horror films such as *Ringu* and *Kairo*.

4. Conclusions

What does all of this tell us about these respective cultures across such a broad swathe of time? Slavoj Žižek's *Plague of Fantasies* (1997) offers a framework through which to begin to answer that question. “[I]t is deeply wrong to assert that when one throws out the nationalist dirty water (‘excessive’ fanaticism), one should be careful not to lose the baby of ‘healthy’ ... nationalism” as opposed to the “‘excessive’ (xenophobic, aggressive) nationalism. Such a common-sense distinction reproduces the very nationalist reasoning which aims at getting rid of the ‘impure’ excess” (p. 62) of other cultural sensibilities, while justifying social contradictions as normal or “healthy.” On a nationalist level, in the late 1990s, *Cube* reveals Canadian anxieties about military-industrial capitalism and Canada's questionable complicity with this American economic machine. In the case of the first *Cube* movie, and Canadian horror cinema in general, the impure excess of capitalist nationalism is projected onto the Other of American culture, simultaneously hated and recognised as too much of the self. In the early twenty-first century, following 9/11, the American *Cube* sequels betray an anxiety about such a critique that called for a refocusing of vilification towards institutions such as corporate America and fundamentalist religion during the era of the advanced wars in Afghanistan and its Islamic allies when the integrity of such war campaigns was under attack. Decades on, the new *Cube* exposes a Japanese anxiety regarding the attrition of aged-based patriarchal social hierarchy in the era of social media and rising youth Internet stars. Indeed, the generational and gendered calculus of the visual and narrative distinctions in the Japanese film can be summarised thusly: youthful naivety (Shinji) is trivialised and vilified, older patriarchal seniority (Andō and Yūichi's absent father) is vilified, youthful brilliance (Chiharu and Yūichi) is valorised and heroised. Summarily, when contrasted against the previous films, the first one of which it is an ostensible remake, this film demonstrates a nationalist ideology in which a critique of age-based social hierarchies is

acceptable, but the critique must tread lightly around these other industrial, military, and especially corporate concerns.

From Žižek's perspective, remakes such as these readily reveal such ideological differences, in this case across nationalist boundaries. However, under the conditions of transnational cinema, a more globalised perspective that does not view these as discrete nationalist-cultural phenomena might reveal even more universal anxieties that may be shared across cultures and national boundaries. Whereas traditional horror film renders the monster explicit, *Cube* hides its monster and transfers its malevolence onto its victims. With "little more than a bare stage", it foregrounds explicitly human social politics and relegates the horror of the state apparatus that governs social relations to a second-order mystery. Barthes refers to this type of signification as "an empty signifier", in which "the concept fill[s] the form of the myth without ambiguity" (Barthes, 2009, p. 267). While Barthes' definition of the empty signifier applies to the ambiguous source of the cubes in each film, his concept of the "mythical signifier" applies to the presence of capitalism in all four of the films: "driven to having either to unveil or to liquidate the concept, [the mythical signifier] will *naturalize* it" (p. 267-8). Indeed, what all of the institutions that become the nationalist focus of critique in each *Cube* film have in common is their broadly unchallenged capitalist environment. Even as they each vilify an aspect of global industrial capitalism, they work to focus their criticisms on specific abstractions that leave other elements of the larger rapacious capitalist environments uncomplicated.

Overall, in the context of repressive tolerance, there is a tacit acceptance in all of the *Cube* films of global capitalism, and each film merely jockeys to define the limits of acceptable criticisms inflected by the bias of decidedly nationalist sensibilities. The more contemporary Japanese "remake" has a lesser need to compete for nationalist ideological hegemony being at such a significantly greater cultural and economic distance than the linguistically and geographically continuous United States and Canada. However, it is even more subversive as yet another film that appears to be critical of specifically patriarchal capitalist social relations, but that is replete with normalisations and moralisations that recuperate, or at least re-validate, masculinist heroes and conservative gender roles within an industrial capitalist environment. The organising framework of all of the films is the capitalist utilisation of military-industrial, corporate, or human commodities. While all of the films demonstrate a

fundamental concern with the contradictions of capitalism in which each country mutually participates, and the carceral aspects, whether literal or ideological, that such social economies generate, they conceal the governing acceptance of capitalist social relations and its industrial designs under nationalist-inflected demarcations of acceptable criticism.

Indeed, Althusser observes that “[a]ll Ideological State Apparatuses, whatever they are, contribute to the same result: the reproduction of the relations of production, i.e. of capitalist relations of exploitation” (2010 [1970], p. 210). Althusser explains that “[t]his concert is dominated by a single score ...: the score of the Ideology of the current ruling class” (p. 210). In this context, notions of nationalist cultural sovereignty, or worse, superiority, in a capitalist trading block are little more than repressive tolerance illusions in the service of reproducing the dominant ideology. Cumulatively, the four *Cube* films work to negotiate the boundaries of such social criticism under an illusory cultural sovereignty and use their implied indictments to conceal the manifestation of Althusser’s observation that, to some degree, they are all singing the same tune. However, if all capitalist ideological state apparatuses are singing the same tune across global nationalist demarcations and historical time, it seems that, according to the *Cube* films, Japan is generationally just a bit “off-key” in an era of new digital and patriarchal anxieties.

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Fig. 1.

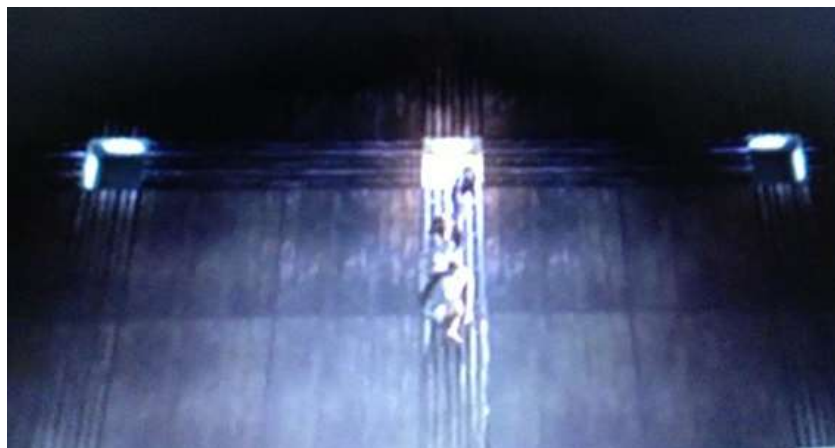


Fig. 2.



Fig. 3.



Fig. 4.

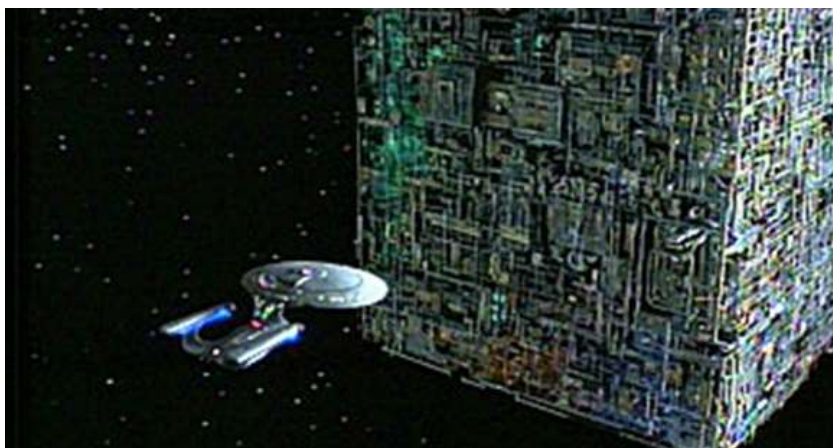


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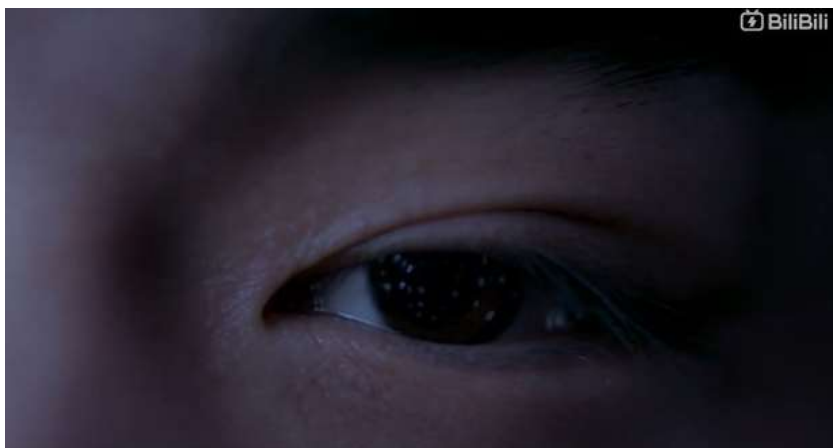


Fig. 6.



Fig. 7.

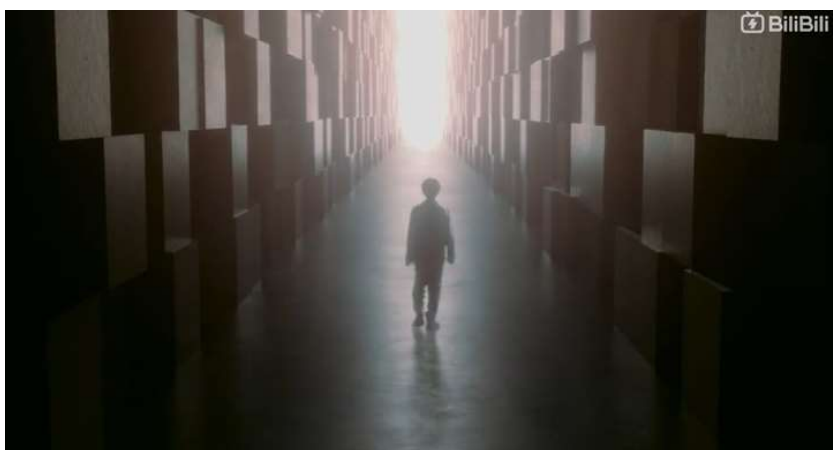


Fig. 8.

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Tobacco Packaging Design in China, Thailand, and New Zealand: A Comparative Study

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ABSTRACT

Packaging design has received much interest from the academic and industrial worlds. Numerous studies have shown that packaging significantly impacts purchase intent, product satisfaction, and repeat purchases. However, to some extent, tobacco packaging is not used to fulfil its consumer target's demands or increase the repeat purchase rate. By contrast, it has the official duty to discourage tobacco use, as it is a highly regulated business. Nevertheless, tobacco manufacturers do their best to find the last opportunity to advertise on tobacco boxes because the packet is their final or only marketing or advertising tool in many countries. Thus, tobacco packaging design could be the most challenging advertising practice in many nations because two contradicting advertising contents (persuasion and dissuasion) emerge in one medium simultaneously. In this paper, I comparatively content-analysed 65 popular cigarette brands from China, Thailand, and New Zealand to find out how tobacco companies use cigarette packaging to communicate with their customers. The results suggested that Chinese tobacco packaging is highly market-oriented and emphasises the use of traditional Chinese cultural elements. Conversely, tobacco packaging in Thailand and New Zealand focuses on health communication. But warning labels in the two countries are platitudes. The results also indicate that although policy factors have had a positive impact on tobacco packaging in terms of its discouraging function and contributing to tobacco control over the past decades, there is a need for policies to be tailored to the socio-cultural context. Efforts should focus on improving tobacco packaging from the perspective of smokers' psychology. This adjustment is deemed necessary due to the declining effectiveness of current tobacco packaging control policies in reducing smoking rates in recent years.

KEYWORDS

Cigarette packaging design; Policies; Tobacco control; Health communication.

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1. Introduction

In a global context of tobacco control, Philip Morris executive Mark Hult, in May 1994, at the Corporate Affairs Conference in Manila, underscored that “our final communication vehicle with our smoker is the pack itself. In the absence of any other marketing messages, our packaging [...] is the sole communicator of our brand essence” (White et al., 2012: 2). Tobacco packaging is widely recognised as the most important tool for tobacco marketing and advertising (Wade et al., 2010) or even the only direct link between consumers and tobacco companies in most countries (Hammond, 2010: 227). However, it is intriguing to note that this crucial aspect is not only about marketing

but also involves a nuanced interplay between persuasion and dissuasion, a point explored in detail in the subsequent discussion.

Tobacco companies seem to underline that “packaging has no role in advertising and promotion at all and that it has no impact on overall smoking rates” (Tobacco-Free Kids, 2018). However, many researchers indicate that tobacco packaging has a massive impact on both smokers and non-smokers due to its high level of public visibility (e.g., Dewhirst, 2004; Hammond, 2010; Wakefield and Letcher, 2002). For example, in China, cigarette packs are readily available in street shops, where tobacco advertising, in the form of posters, is prevalent (Parascandola and Xiao, 2019: 26). Although retail display bans have been implemented in some countries, such as Iceland, Thailand, Canada, etc. (Thomson et al., 2008), the cigarette pack per se may work as a kind of portable advertisement when smokers take their boxes out or share cigarettes with others (Wade et al., 2010).

Hence, in light of the strong correlation between exposure to tobacco marketing and subsequent tobacco use (McNeill et al., 2017), it is crucial for tobacco control initiatives to scrutinise the cigarette packaging employed by tobacco companies for advertising their products. This scrutiny may aid in comprehending how tobacco marketing influences usage motivations and contributes to overall product utilisation (Moran et al., 2019). The World Health Organization (WHO) emphasises that analyses of tobacco packaging can reveal prevalent tactics and serve as a warning to regulators and practitioners regarding potential strategies that might appeal to youth or disproportionately target vulnerable populations, thus contributing to health disparities (WHO, 2003). Tobacco packs, as advertising, could be the most challenging advertising practice in many nations. On the one hand, the tobacco manufacturer/brand seeks to use its packs (this final advertising tool) to attract or encourage the consumer, ultimately promoting sales. On the other hand, selling tobacco is strictly regulated in many nations due to the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) ratified by 181 countries under the WHO. The FCTC requires that tobacco packaging serves as a public service announcement (PSA) to discourage smoking. Hence, this creates a contradiction between the “encouraging” and “discouraging” aspects, making tobacco packaging design a hot potato or a contentious issue in many countries. Therefore, this duality creates a complex dynamic that warrants in-depth investigation and analysis. The complexity of tobacco packaging design is not only a result of conflicting objectives but is deeply embedded in

the socio-cultural fabric of each nation. Different nations grapple with this tension in distinct ways, reflecting political, economic, and cultural variations (Moodie et al., 2022). Therefore, understanding how policies are crafted and implemented in diverse settings is crucial for identifying best practices, potential pitfalls, and areas where adjustments may be necessary.

In consideration of the above discussion, which delineates a paradoxical scenario wherein tobacco packaging design becomes a subject of intense debate, entwining conflicting aims of “encouraging” and “discouraging”, this comparative research seeks to scrutinise the visual elements of tobacco packs in China, Thailand, and New Zealand. This investigation aims to find out how cigarette packs have been used to communicate visually with the consumer, how tobacco brands respond to FCTC, and what aspects have influenced the tobacco packaging design in these three countries. The reason for the country selection is that previous studies have indicated that the “tobacco economy” is decreasing in many developed countries but thriving in developing countries (Datte et al., 2018), which reflects a trend that the wealthier a nation is, the less reliant it is on the tobacco economy (thus, the tobacco industry is more tightly controlled). As such, New Zealand (a developed country), China (a developing country with a high GDP), and Thailand (a developing country with a relatively low GDP) have been selected to make the comparison highly meaningful.

2. Literature Review: Tobacco industries in China, Thailand, and New Zealand

This subsection will first analyse the tobacco industry in China through three aspects: (1) tobacco cultivation, (2) tobacco production, and (3) tobacco trade systems.

Currently, tobacco cultivation accounts for tiny portions of agricultural activities in both Thailand and New Zealand. Thus, I will only focus on these two countries regarding their tobacco production and trade systems, respectively. Furthermore, since smokers significantly contribute to the tobacco industry, the general demographic picture of smokers and smoking prevalence in the three nations will be illustrated accordingly.

2.1. The Tobacco industry in China

Tobacco is widely planted in China except in the areas of Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, and Tibet (Leng and Mu, 2020), and it is a major source of income for many rural

households. The purchase of raw tobacco materials and the production of tobacco products in China are fully controlled by the China National Tobacco Corporation (CNTC). CNTC is a state-owned enterprise, which means that tobacco production in China is entirely at the mercy of the Chinese government (the State of Council, 12 September 2014). The Chinese tobacco trade system comprises distribution points and point of sale (POS) sub-systems (Wang, 2006: 141). In 2000, POS in China were about five million (*ibid*); however, it is unclear how many cigarette POS are now operating in China. However, a report by the Chinese Association of Tobacco Control indicates that around 65 per cent of POS display cigarette advertising and about 58 per cent of POS do not demonstrate signs prohibiting the sale of cigarettes to minors (People's Daily Online, 5 September 2019).

CNTC is the largest tobacco producer globally, accounting for approximately 45 per cent of all tobacco produced worldwide (Cerantola and Ciurcanu, 22 June 2021). As of 2019, there are over 316 million smokers in China, accounting for roughly 30 per cent of all smokers and 40 per cent of all tobacco use worldwide (Parascandola and Xiao, 2019: 21). Of these smokers, 99.6 per cent are male (Wang and Xiao, 2021: 938). Despite the health risks associated with smoking, more than 70 per cent of Chinese adults are exposed to second-hand smoke every week (Madewell, 2018). This is presumably due to the belief that smoking is an essential socialising means (Leng and Mu, 2020) and a way of releasing pressure (Cheng et al., 2015). Cigarette sharing and gifting habits are deeply rooted in Chinese daily life culture as they are believed to uphold Confucian collective ideals (Chan et al., 2003; Qin et al., 2011; Leng and Mu, 2020).

2.2. The tobacco industry in Thailand

Established in 1939, the Thailand Tobacco Monopoly (TTM) had exclusive control over practically all domestic tobacco production, distribution, and sales for the following 50 years (MacKenzie et al., 2017). Thus, before 1989, the TTM enjoyed a position in Thailand's tobacco industry analogous to China's CNTC by virtue of their shared status as state-owned enterprises.

During the 1980s, the TTM's dominance in the market suffered from two main external threats. First, as noted by MacKenzie et al. (2016), there was a significant increase in the illegal tobacco trade in the mid-1980s, which occupied around 3-7 per cent of the market, flooding the nation with foreign brands such as Marlboro (MacKenzie et al., 2016).

Second, in the 1980s, the US Trade Representative (USTR) threatened some Asian countries, such as Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Thailand, with trade penalties unless they lifted cigarette import restrictions. Thailand's appeal to the USTR led to arbitration by the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT), which in 1990 concluded that import limits violated Thailand's treaty duties (MacKenzie et al., 2017).

TMM has been facing competition from global tobacco giants like Philip Morris International (PMI), American British Tobacco (ABS), and other transnational tobacco companies (TTCs); TMM has seen its domestic market share shrink gradually (Vateesatokit, 2003; MacKenzie et al., 2017). However, to fight against imported cigarettes, Thailand can establish non-discriminatory tobacco control laws without violating the GATT (MacKenzie and Collin, 2012; Chantornvong and McCargo, 2001). Meanwhile, tobacco control supporters caught the chance and effectively mobilised public health concerns over cigarette imports, garnered broad community support, and "made the issue of foreign cigarette imports a matter of national pride and 'face'. Thus, when Thailand was forced by GATT to open up the cigarette market, the anti-tobacco coalition was able to push for various measures as a quid pro quo" (Chantornvong and McCargo, 2001: 49). This may be the most crucial reason Thailand is regarded as "a country with substantial success in tobacco control over the past two decades" (Vathesatogkit and Charoena, 2011: 228).

The smoking prevalence in Thailand was about 50 per cent in 1991 (MacKenzie et al., 2017), roughly 15 per cent higher than China's in the late 1980s. But the current smoking prevalence in Thailand is 22.8 per cent, which is almost 4 per cent lower than the rate in China now (Macrotrends, 2022). Like in China, Thailand's smoking population is predominantly male, with an adult smoking prevalence of 39.4 per cent-41.8 per cent among men and 1.9-2.5 per cent among women (Aungkulanon, 2019). Apart from the tobacco advertising ban on mass media and new media, Thailand was the first Asian nation to implement a complete ban on tobacco advertising displays at POS (Chantornvong and McCargo, 2001); hence, cigarette packs in this nation are not highly conspicuous in public, as opposed to the prevalent visibility observed in China.

2.3. The tobacco industry in New Zealand

Tobacco manufacturing is managed and controlled by state-run companies in China (100 per cent by the CNTC) and Thailand (70 per cent by the TMM); however, a privately

owned company, British American Tobacco (BAT), is the leading company in New Zealand. After a series of restructuring, the market shares of tobacco in New Zealand are described as “BAT (80 per cent), Imperial (16 per cent), and Philip Morris (4 per cent)” (Thomson and Wilson, 2003: 10), and these three are all private corporations.

Undeniably, the tobacco industry significantly contributes to New Zealand’s national economy, but the national government has an unshakeable commitment to tobacco control. For instance, in December 2021, the government announced that residents born after 2008 would never be allowed to purchase tobacco products in their lifetime; the NZ Health Minister, Dr. Ayesha Verall, said, “We want to make sure young people never start smoking”. (BBC, 9 December 2021). Besides, in New Zealand, the tobacco packaging design is highly regulated under the Smoke-Free Environments Regulations 1999; it has been found that pictorial warnings are effective in educating New Zealanders about the knowledge that smoking harms (Hoek et al., 2010). Presumably influenced by New Zealand’s health communications in terms of quitting smoking, even most current smokers (65 per cent) have voiced support for more significant national efforts to control the tobacco industry (Edwards et al., 2013).

According to van der Deen et al. (2014), the smoking prevalence in New Zealand was about 15 per cent in 2013, much lower than those in China and Thailand. The smoking prevalence is expected to drop down to less than 5 per cent by 2025: “New Zealand is one of [the] four countries that has [have] a government with a smoke-free national goal” (*ibid*: 71). In New Zealand, smoking rates are currently much higher among men (15.6 per cent) than women (2.25 per cent), similar to the situations in China and Thailand.¹ In New Zealand, smoking appears to be heavily influenced by personal or familial economic factors; the smoking prevalence remains markedly high among Māori people, accounting for 45.7 per cent (Thomas and Glover, 2010).

2.4. Smoking prevalence in the three countries

Although Thailand and New Zealand have achieved more effective tobacco control than China, smoking rates in these countries have only slightly decreased over the past six years: see Chart 1, which is based on relevant reports (e.g. Aungkulanon et al., 2019;

¹ Retrieved from: [Tobaccoatlas.org/country/new-zealand](https://tobaccoatlas.org/country/new-zealand) on 26 November 2021.

CGATS, 2018; Ministry of Health NZ, 2021) on smoking prevalence in these three countries. The three countries have progressed in tobacco control over the past three decades. However, smoking prevalence has declined slowly in China, where the smoking rate fell by less than 8 per cent between 1984 and 2018. Smoking prevalence has also slowed in the last five years in the three countries, which suggests the challenges faced in tobacco control. The effectiveness of tobacco packaging regulations established under the FCTC framework, as evidenced by their contribution to reducing smoking prevalence, highlights the potential impact of comprehensive and standardised packaging policies (McNeill et al., 2017). The gradual decline in smoking prevalence observed over the past three decades in China, and more recently in Thailand and New Zealand, underscores the necessity of investigating the tobacco packaging design in these countries. This exploration aims to discern the reasons behind the slow decline in smoking rates in China, despite its adoption of the FCTC framework for tobacco packaging design. Furthermore, it seeks to understand the challenges hindering further reductions in countries that have achieved notable success in tobacco control in recent years.

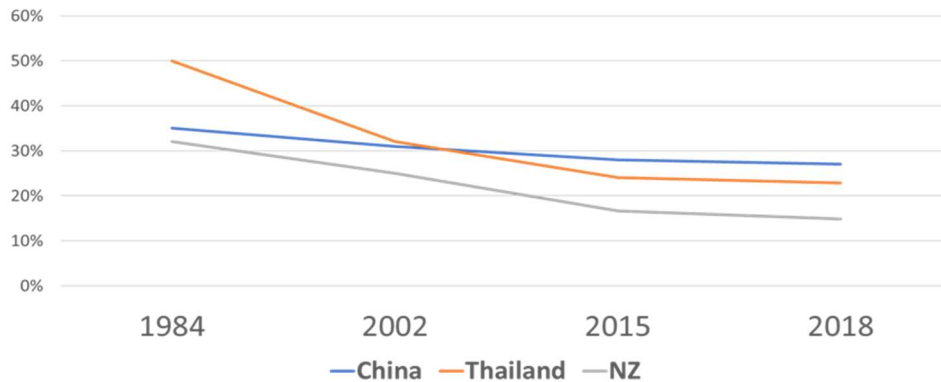


Chart 1. Smoking prevalence in the three countries (the 1980s—2018).

2.5. Criteria on warning labels for tobacco products in China, Thailand, and New Zealand

These three countries have all ratified the FCTC. However, the criteria mandated by the FCTC are ambiguous. According to the WHO (2003: 10), health warning labels on cigarette packs should be “(iii) large, clear, visible and legible, (iv) should be 50% or more of the principal display areas but shall be no less than 30 % of the principal display areas”. This gives member countries some degree of autonomy in implementing these

guidelines. In addition, Thailand and New Zealand have adopted plain packaging regulations prohibiting the display of logos, images, or promotional text on cigarette packs, except for brand names displayed in certain ways. These two countries' policies and regulations also require cigarette packs to have a specific colour with mandatory warning texts and pictures displayed.

In mainland China, warning pictures have never been used on cigarette packs; only one simple and short warning sentence is placed at the bottom of the packet (Qin et al., 2011; for more details, please see Figure 1). According to the CNTC (29 November 2019), currently, there are four different warning sentences applied on tobacco packaging in China: (1) "Do not smoke in smoking-free places"; (2) "Discourage young people from smoking"; (3) "No smoking for primary and secondary school students"; (4) "Smoking is harmful to your health". The tobacco manufacturer only needs to ensure that the font size is at least 4.5mm in height and that the area occupied by the warning words should not be less than 35 per cent of the package's display space.



Fig. 1. An example of Chinese tobacco packaging design.

Thailand ratified the FCTC in 2003. It was the first Asian country to join FCTC and implement pictorial warnings on tobacco packs. Sinsuwarn and Sthapitanonda (2019) noted that as of 8 December 2019, all cigarettes sold in retail must be plain packaged: plain packaging prohibits all design features such as colours, artistic typefaces, images, logos, etc. (Cohen et al. 2020). Figure 2 is an example of the plain packaging. In Thailand, at least 85 per cent of the display space has to be used to illustrate visual health warnings on the front and rear of the pack. Misleading packaging and labelling are prohibited, including words and phrases like "light" and "low tar" (Tobacco-Free Kids, 2021).

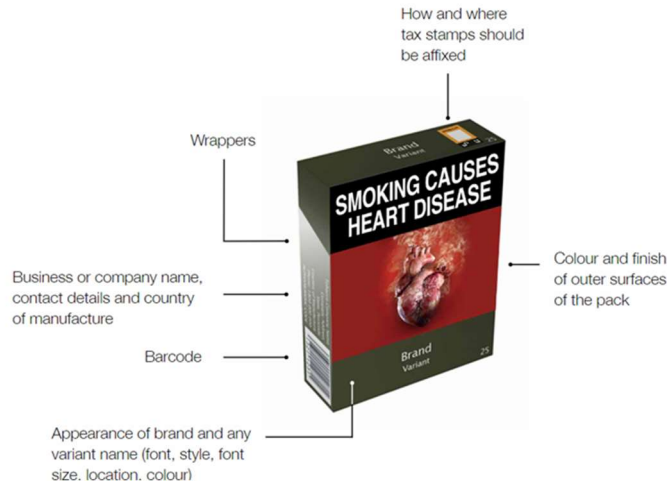


Fig. 2. Plain packaging (WHO 2018, 7).

In New Zealand, tobacco companies have been forced to feature pictorial health warnings on product packaging since 2008. Currently, the graphic warning should occupy at least 30 per cent of the front and 90 per cent of the back of all cigarette packs (Hoek et al., 2010). In 2016, the NZ government passed plain packaging legislation to reduce the smoking rate further, so all cigarette brands in the country are plain packaged (Figure 3). Furthermore, in this country, tobacco companies are required to rotate two sets of seven warnings every 12 months,² because it has been found that although health warnings have a powerful initial effect, smokers may develop a tolerance for paint-by-numbers warning images (Hoek et al., 2010; Borland et al., 2009). Considering the gradual decline in smoking prevalence in New Zealand, this raises queries about the actual visual content of these warnings.

² Retrieved from: tobaccolabels.ca/countries/new-zealand/ on 1 December 2021.



Fig. 3. Tobacco packaging design in New Zealand. **Source:** Ministry of Health NZ, 2021.

3.1. Materials and Methodology

As we have seen, in Thailand and New Zealand, tobacco packaging design is highly “standardised”. In the tobacco industry in Thailand, the market is dominated by TTM (70 per cent), which currently sells 16 brands; PMI is ranked second and occupies roughly 28 per cent of the total tobacco market (Tobaccofreekids, 2017). One recent survey conducted by Statista shows that there are currently 15 most consumed brands in Thailand.

In New Zealand, there are currently 19 mainstream cigarette brands in the market, and generally, each brand comes in two or more flavour/tobacco variations with a total of 91 choices. These “sub-brands” are often differentiated by colours, such as Marlboro Red, Bule, and Green (Discountvape, 2022). One survey by Statista Research Department recently observed the 14 most consumed brands in New Zealand.

According to cnxiangyangwang.com, China currently boasts 102 cigarette brands, but these brands are not merely stand-alone entities; they function as brand-holding companies that possess an extensive portfolio of sub-brands, totalling more than 900 brands.

Therefore, based on the published reports, I only collected some best-selling brands from Thailand and New Zealand. Since tobacco packaging is more elaborately designed in the Chinese market (Qin et al., 2011) and the CNTC offers a wide price range for cigarettes (generally, from ¥2 to ¥100; Li et al., 2015), I categorised the chosen Chinese brands into three different grades: low-priced, mid-priced, and high-priced brands. Table 1 gives the details of the price categorisation.

Brand levels	Price (¥)
Low-priced	2-25
Mid-priced	26-59
High-priced	70-100

Table 1. Price categorisation of cigarette brands in China.

In aggregate, 65 popular brands were selected in my research. Specifically, 15 most consumed brands were collected from Thailand (Statista Research Department, 2021a); 14 brands were collected from New Zealand (Statista Research Department, 2021b). As for the sample from China, *cnxiangyan.com* is one of China's best and largest news portals for tobacco products; this website lists about 100 popular cigarette brands in the current Chinese market. On the basis of the previously mentioned sampling criteria, I randomly selected the 36 most popular Chinese brands and divided them into three groups consisting of 12 brands each.

3.2. Coding

Building upon previous research on tobacco packaging (e.g. Stead et al., 2013; Hammond, 2010; Brown et al., 2019), I identified the following design elements: colour themes, typeface for the written brand name, logos/commercial-related visuals, textual warnings, and pictorial warnings. Two rounds of coding were conducted to analyse the above-mentioned executional text/visual elements on the cigarette box. Since I did not begin my study with a priori hypotheses and/or conjectures, grounded theory was applied to uncover ideological nuances, because this theory is especially appropriate for “discovering theories, concepts, hypotheses and propositions directly from data” (Taylor and Bogdan, 1989: 46).

4. Results

4.1. Colour themes

Since Thailand and New Zealand implement the plain packaging design, the colour themes of cigarette packs are onefold. In detail, Thai brands all use black packs, while the NZ brands apply dark brown/green (or dark greenish brown) packs. In China, most (40 per cent) of those chosen brands use gold as the subject colour, followed by red (20

per cent). Also, there is a tendency that the more expensive the brand, the more they tend to use gold to decorate their tobacco boxes: 98 per cent of the high-end brands (¥70-100) adopt gold colour. The mid-priced brands most often apply red colour (63 per cent).

4.2. Logos and commercial-related visuals

In Thailand and New Zealand, tobacco packs do not contain branding graphics like logos, trademarks, and other promotional visuals. The font size of the brand name's logotype is small and placed at the bottom or the top of the cigarette pack. By contrast, with Chinese cigarette brands, logos and brand names are placed at the pack's most prominent place, making them the most salient visual elements. Specifically, the chosen Chinese cigarette brands' logos usually resonate with their brand names. For example, a brand named 熊猫香烟 ('*Xiongmao Xiangyan*' in pin'yin; '*Panda Cigarette*' in English) uses the image of pandas as its logo (Figure 4). It has been found that these Chinese brands use the following elements as their logos or promotional visual elements: (1) traditional totems/motifs (36 per cent); (2) landmark buildings (24 per cent); plants (21 per cent); animals (14 per cent), landscapes (7 per cent).

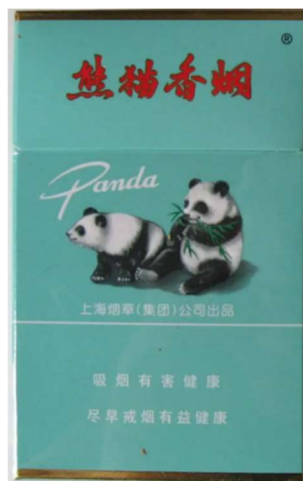


Fig. 4. Panda Cigarette.

4.3. Typefaces for the written brand names

Although the plain packaging legislation does not prohibit the brand name from appearing on cigarette boxes, it requires standardising the form in which the brand name is written. Hence, the chosen Thai and NZ brands all write their brand names in a standard or plain typeface and font. Conversely, although many Chinese brands were

selected, I have hardly identified any two brands that use the same or similar typefaces to write their brand names. The chosen Chinese brands use various artistic typefaces to display their brand names, but the written warning is highly standardised. See the following picture, which demonstrates some examples of Chinese cigarette brands.



Fig. 5. Chinese cigarette brands, from left to right: Huanghelou, Suyan, and Xiongmao.

4.4. Visual warnings

In Thailand and New Zealand, all the chosen cigarette brands display pictorial warnings. Thai brands tend to feature the following visual elements for the purpose of health communication: (1) diseased organ/body parts (66 per cent); (2) the patient's distressed or despairing facial expression (20 per cent); (3) sick kids/babies (7 per cent); (4) some visual metaphors that suggest illness (7 per cent). In New Zealand, the chosen brands apply similar themes of warning images as the Thai brands, but the symbolic visual element suggests illness was not observed. In detail, 58 per cent of the observed warning images are diseased organs and/or body parts; 14 per cent are the patient's distressed or despairing facial expression (14 per cent), and 28 per cent represent sick kids/babies. By contrast, the chosen Chinese brands do not use pictorial warnings at all.

4.5. Text warnings

Although Chinese cigarette brands do not use warning images, written warnings are applied to demonstrate the risk of tobacco use. In aggregate, "Smoking is harmful to your health" is the one used most frequently, accounting for 50 per cent. The use of the following two sentences, "Quitting can improve your health" and "No smoking in

public”, are used in similar proportions (25 per cent and 20 per cent, respectively). However, “smoking forbidden for junior students/No cigarettes sold to minors” only accounts for 5 per cent.

In Thailand, a substantial majority (94 per cent) of these selected brands tend to demonstrate what specific adverse effects smoking can have on people. They use the following fixed sentence to exhort smokers: “Smoking causes so-and-so [such as mouth-, lung-, eye-, etc.] illnesses/cancers”. The use of “Smoking harms your unborn babies” accounts for only 6 per cent.

Similarly, most New Zealand brands tend to advertise what diseases smoking can cause since “Smoking causes so-and-so illnesses/cancers” is used in 71 per cent of cases. Another 22 per cent of warnings do not tell people what diseases smoking can cause; they simply tell smokers that “smoking harms your so-and-so body parts”. Finally, the use of “Smoking harms your unborn babies” accounts for 7 per cent.

5. Discussion

In aggregate, the cigarette packaging design in Thailand and New Zealand is highly standardised or homogeneous, as the governments of the two nations have adopted plain packaging legislation. This demonstrates the two countries’ commitment to tobacco control because many previous studies consistently suggest that standardised or plain packaging can reduce the appeal of cigarettes (e.g. Drovandi et al., 2019; Hammond, 2010; Stead et al., 2013; White et al., 2019). By contrast, the packaging of Chinese tobacco brands is highly market-oriented because the tobacco business is one of the nation’s most significant revenue generators and a vital component of the economy (Leng and Mu, 2020). The presented study reflected that although countries with less developed economies are more dependent on the tobacco industry (Datte et al., 2018), some national tobacco control policies and trade bills can also have a massive impact on a country’s tobacco control effectiveness. For example, compared with Thailand, China is a developing country with higher GDP, but the smoking rate decreased more slowly than that in Thailand. When the tobacco market of Thailand was quite isolated, the country’s smoking rate was much higher than China’s. However, since the Thai tobacco market was compulsorily opened to the outside world due to GATT, it faced endless competition from foreign brands. Hence, Thailand implemented non-discriminatory tobacco control laws without violating the GATT (MacKenzie and

Collin, 2012). In addition to policy reasons, excessive consumer-oriented tobacco packaging has contributed to the perennial high smoking rate in China.

In detail, the chosen Chinese brands tend to use gold colour to decorate their packs; the more premium the brand, the more it tends to be packaged in gold. One possible reason is that visual communication theorists have suggested that yellow-gold is one of the most eye-catching colours (Han, 2013; Hall, 2021); since China does not ban the POS display, a more striking colour is more likely to attract the attention of consumers when they are in the physical shop. High-priced brands are often packed in gold because gold is a chief symbol of prestige and social status in China (Bunker, 1993); according to Li et al. (2015: 28), “most consumers of very expensive cigarettes may use them as a type of ‘status good’, that is, to signal that person’s economic and social status to others, rather than for normal everyday consumption”. Besides the gold colour, the red colour has also been widely applied by various Chinese cigarette brands because red is a festival colour in China (Zhang, 2022). Zhang’s (2022) interviewees indicated that red-coloured packs are suitable for many kinds of social occasions in China, especially for Spring festivals and weddings. Conversely, the colour themes of cigarette brands in Thailand and New Zealand are dull. The viewers widely read this design as uncool, unattractive, unpopular, unfashionable, etc. (Hoek et al., 2012; Moodie et al., 2011).

With regard to the warning and promoting visuals, all the selected Chinese brands use logos and place them in the most prominent positions, but none use warning images to display the risk of smoking. In China, tobacco brands tend to apply visuals with local cultural references. For example, traditional Chinese totems and local landmark buildings have been most frequently used (36 per cent and 24 per cent, respectively). Compared to Chinese cigarette packaging design, commercial visuals are not utilised on cigarette brands in Thailand and New Zealand. Instead, cigarette brands in the two countries all demonstrate visual warnings. This is because the FTC does not oblige all countries to use picture warnings, which provides flexibility for the tobacco packaging design in China.

The themes of these pictorial warnings are broadly similar in Thailand and New Zealand, with disgusting images showing the adverse effects of smoking on people’s health. Also, the written warnings comply with their visual warnings, mainly demonstrating the health risks that smoking poses to the smoker while ignoring the harm it causes to others. Despite these efforts, the gradual decline in smoking rates in

both countries over the past five or six years raises concerns about the diminishing efficacy of these warnings. Smokers, according to previous studies, are more motivated to quit when considering collective interests such as childbirth (e.g. Míguez and Pereira, 2021; Azagba et al., 2020; Kim and Park, 2022), marriage (Chung and Kim, 2015; Tillgre et al., 1996; Takagi et al., 2014), and the presence of children (Lin, 2010; Lin et al., 2020). This may imply that the effectiveness of warning messages on tobacco boxes could potentially benefit from a more comprehensive approach, expanding beyond health-centric warnings to include messages that resonate with smokers' intrinsic motivations related to family, relationships, and collective well-being. This insight highlights the potential for more effective anti-smoking packaging design that addresses a broader spectrum of individual and societal factors influencing smoking behaviour.

Similarly, in regard to the written warning, Chinese cigarette brands tended to highlight the risk of smoking to the individual, since the use of "Smoking is harmful to your health" (50 per cent) and "Quitting can improve your health" (25 per cent) occupied the major proportion. However, the negative impact of smoking on others was not significantly addressed, as the use of "No smoking in public" accounted for 20 per cent. The limited attention given to the adverse effects of smoking on others, as indicated by the relatively low usage of "No smoking in public", suggests that the communication strategy employed by Chinese cigarette brands may be predominantly centred on the personal health consequences of smoking. Therefore, this observed emphasis on individual health risks in written warnings on Chinese cigarette packaging implies a potential gap in addressing the broader societal impact of smoking. On the other hand, this may reflect that when Chinese tobacco manufacturers were permitted to employ four distinct cessation slogans under the supervision of the CNTC, they favoured emphasising warnings related to individual health rather than the broader consequences of smoking on others or the collective. It illustrates how Chinese tobacco manufacturers navigated the government's compulsory mandate to include a warning message, opting for cautions they deemed to have a lesser impact on their business while ensuring compliance. Also, the use of "smoking forbidden for junior students/No cigarettes sold to minors" accounted for merely 5 per cent. The dangers of cigarettes for young people were grossly overlooked. Zhang's (2022) qualitative research, indicating that the beautiful packaging of the China Tobacco brand has a massive appeal to children and adolescents, further accentuates the risks associated with the

current packaging design. Therefore, this oversight suggests a potential disconnect between regulatory efforts and the need to protect vulnerable populations, particularly adolescents and minors, from the harmful effects of smoking.

Tobacco packaging warnings, both visual and textual, in Thailand and New Zealand, focus primarily on the physical health risks associated with tobacco. This approach was indeed effective in promoting quitting in the early stages of its design, but data shows that smoking prevalence had declined slowly in the two nations over the last six years or so; there is a possibility that warning labels that tend to advertise health risks have lost their effectiveness for recalcitrant smokers. In China, smoking rates have declined very slowly over the past three decades, probably due to the country's excessively fine or overly decorated tobacco packaging and inefficient health risk warnings.

6. Conclusion

This comparative study examined cigarette packaging design in China, Thailand, and New Zealand. This research illustrates the complex interplay between economic interests, global/national policies, cultural symbolism, and visual communication in the realm of tobacco packaging and control. Recognising these dynamics is essential for developing nuanced and effective tobacco control strategies tailored to diverse socio-cultural and economic contexts.

The adoption of plain packaging laws in Thailand and New Zealand signifies a dedication to minimising the attractiveness of cigarettes, which is consistently supported by previous research. Conversely, the highly market-oriented packaging of Chinese tobacco brands highlights the country's reliance on the tobacco industry as a crucial source of revenue. The case of Thailand, opening its tobacco market due to GATT, illustrates the impact of global trade policies on a nation's tobacco control effectiveness. Thus, by comparing Thailand and China, this study indicates that while countries with less developed economies may depend more significantly on the tobacco industry, international trade agreements can substantially affect a country's capacity to regulate tobacco use.

Also, the study found that the overly decorative packaging has also contributed to China's perennially high smoking rate. The finding has shed light on the packaging design of Chinese cigarette brands and its possible reasons. The use of gold and red colours in Chinese tobacco packaging, driven by symbolic and cultural considerations, has implications for smoking rates. High-priced brands employing gold packaging as a

status symbol and red, a festival colour in China, has also been widely applied by various Chinese cigarette brands, suggesting that tobacco packaging serves as more than just a vessel for cigarettes. These results highlight that understanding the symbolic role of packaging in cultural contexts is vital for crafting targeted and effective tobacco control interventions in terms of tobacco packaging design. On the other hand, since Thailand and New Zealand adopted plain packaging laws, cigarette brands in these nations have been observed to use dull colours, which have been primarily perceived as unappealing by consumers. Future research could explore the effects of packaging design on smoking behaviour in different cultural contexts and evaluate the effectiveness of plain packaging laws in reducing smoking rates.

Additionally, this study has highlighted the differences in warning label design and promotion visuals of cigarette brands in China, Thailand, and New Zealand. Chinese cigarette brands primarily use logos and local cultural references in their packaging, but do not utilise warning images to convey the risks of smoking. This is due to the lack of specificity in the FCTC guidelines regarding warning labels on tobacco packages, and the corresponding packaging regulations introduced by CNTC align with this ambiguous framework, allowing for considerable flexibility. However, China's tobacco packaging deliberately selects packaging that is more inclined to promote tobacco use rather than discourage tobacco use, while having the flexibility to choose otherwise. This may reflect the fact that, at the national level, the government is currently supportive of the tobacco industry. In contrast, in response to plain packaging laws, cigarette brands in Thailand and New Zealand are highly standardised, which consistently display graphic images showing the harmful effects of smoking on people's health and comply with written warnings that emphasise the health risks to smokers. Nevertheless, given the slow decline in smoking rates in these two countries, there is a need for further research to examine the effectiveness of warning labels and explore new ways to promote smoking cessation. This research suggests that the current health-focused warnings, primarily centred on individual risks to the smoker, might be insufficient to further discourage tobacco use in these two nations. This study, therefore, underscores the interplay between governmental policies and industry practices, offering a nuanced understanding of the dynamics shaping tobacco packaging decisions. Future studies could also investigate the impact of different warning label designs on smokers' attitudes towards smoking and their willingness to quit in various cultural contexts.

Moreover, this study provided insight into the written warning labels of Chinese cigarette brands, revealing their focus on individual risks of smoking and the benefits of quitting whilst neglecting the negative impact of smoking on others. The use of “No smoking in public” may be an attempt to appeal to China’s collectivistic culture and promote awareness of collective interests, thereby reducing tobacco consumption. However, the dangers of cigarettes for young people are greatly overlooked, which is concerning given that Chinese cigarette packaging has a strong appeal to young people due to its visually attractive design. Consequently, there is a pressing need for further research into the impact of tobacco marketing on the younger generation and for greater promotion of the harms of smoking to others, particularly within families. Future studies could explore innovative approaches to warning label design that better target the harmful effects of smoking on individuals and society. Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on the impact of tobacco control policies and underscores the importance of promoting public health initiatives to reduce tobacco use.

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REVIEWS

Animating the Spirited: Journeys and Transformation **– Tze-yue G. HU, Masao YOKOTA & Gyongyi HORVATH (eds)**

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Introduction

Tze-yue G. Hu, Masao Yokota and Gyongyi Horvath edited an impressive anthology in 2020, *Animating the Spirited: Journeys and Transformations*, to examine the relationship between the concept of “the spirited” (or “the spiritual”) as part of our essence as humans and humanistic productions, especially all aspects of animation industries. T.-y. G. Hu is an independent educator and scholar-author based in Northern California with book publications such as *Culture and Image-Building* (University of Hong Kong Press, 2010). Her background in the healing arts programme provides a perspective for this book that explores the value of tapping into psychosocial healing with the spiritual dimension of animation. M. Yokota is a professor in the Department of Psychology, College of Humanities and Sciences, Nihon University, the current president of the Japanese Psychological Association, and the former president of the Japan Society for Animation Studies from 2004–2012. They were co-editors of *Japanese Animation: East Asian Perspectives* (University Press of Mississippi, 2013). As for Horvath, she holds a Master’s degree of Arts in communications, media and public relations from the University of Leicester. When editing this anthology, Horvath was working on her Master’s thesis about comics, violence and humanity.

Different from Yokota and Hu’s previous edited work, *Japanese Animation: East Asian Perspectives*, this anthology turns more to global perspectives rather than focussing on Japanese and East Asian animations. Centred around the core of “animating the spirited”, Hu, Yokota and Horvath collected 14 essays from contributors

of different vocations, covering educators, artists, filmmakers, animators, curators and scholars, which establishes a solid interdisciplinary background for this book.

The whole anthology is divided into five sections: “Mindful Practices, Creation, and the Spirited Process”, “Objects, Spirits, and Characters”, “Inspirations from the Spiritual-Cultural Real”, “Comics and Children’s Literature: Their Transformative Roles”, and “Buddhist Worldviews, Interactions, and Symbolism”. Each of these five sections discusses the “spirited/spiritual” theme within the field of animation and how it is “studied, researched, comprehended, expressed and consumed” (p. xvi).

Overview: A journey to the spirited through animation

Animating the Spirited: Journeys and Transformations is an interdisciplinary and trans-context animation essay collection whose contributors are from different geographic regions and cultural groups, such as the United Kingdom, Japan, Thailand and Singapore. The diversity of the contributors’ backgrounds provides the book with various perspectives to view the nature of “the spirited” and the animation. Along with the inquiry path of this anthology, even readers who have no background in animation studies can be led to explore the university of “the spirited” and have a taste of the related processes of the animation industry. One salient feature of this anthology is the multiplicity of the genres of the collected writings, containing academic essays, experiment reports, self-reflections, and director logs. Each of these essays of different genres separately demonstrates a bit of how “the spirited” is animated from their own perspectives; however, all of them are organically connected, constituting an incredible journey for anybody to explore the abstract concept of “the spirited”. The notion that the exploration of “the spirited” exists in everybody’s everyday life is a crucial idea of this anthology, which is primarily examined and explored in the field of animation.

The experience of reading this anthology is a Zen-like process, like the essence of the last essay involved, Yin Ker’s *Shadows of the Sun: Animating Buddhist Dharma for Art History*. In this essay, Ker puts forward a hypothetical animated film and game, *Shadows of the Sun*, to explore the potential of the dharma transmission in Buddhist “art” through the use of words, colours, and shapes. The animated or game-like narrative of *Shadows of the Sun* is similar to this anthology’s chapter organisation logic: the order of the essays demonstrates a tendency from the concrete to the abstract and from the micro to the macro. The anthology begins with Graham Barton and Birgitta Hosea’s *Mindful*

Animation for Learning Awareness, an academic essay exploring the relationship between mindfulness and animation making. It is the only essay in this collection that covers the specific animation-producing processes, and it discusses an issue of relevance to all in today's ever-changing social environment: how to deal with stress with mindfulness practice and animation production. Similar to the earthly beginning of Ker's hypothetical animation and game, Barton and Hosea's essay is an excellent introduction to "the spirited" in animation because of its practical concern on mindfulness, collaboration, stress control and emotional rehabilitation. Afterwards, the focus of the following sections is shifted to a broader level, where other factors influencing animation making, such as economics, politics and religion, are foregrounded.

This anthology spends one entire section and several chapters on the Buddhist sources of modern animation, especially Japanese animation, examining how an ancient belief can infuse society with spiritual power through the medium of animation. However, the inquiry perspective of this book is ever-elevating from ordinary people's spiritual practice to cultural production at the religious level; therefore, it is a pity that detailed processes of animation making and educational animation practice are not sufficiently included. One possible reason is that Yokota and Hu have accomplished such systematic and comprehensive work in their previous edited anthology, *Japanese Animation: East Asian Perspectives*, and their research interest seems to have shifted from holistic Japanese animation studies to a particular topic, "the spirited", but in a broader global perspective.

Section 1. Beginning of the Journey: What Can Animation Do with the Spirited?

Compared to the following sections discussing religious thoughts and historical reflection, the beginning section of this anthology is quite earthly and practical. Both Graham Barton and Birgitta Hosea's *Mindful Animation for Learning Awareness* and Eileen Anastasia Reynolds's *Transforming the Schizophrenic through Cinematic Therapy* focus on the relationship between mental health and the processes of animation/filmmaking. The anthology's editors comment on *Mindful Animation for Learning Awareness* in the introduction: "Though Buddhist meditation techniques are introduced, the context is purely pedagogical and secular, and the objectives are focused on teaching and learning both for the educator and for the student" (p. xvii). The choice of the beginning essay shows the editors' pedagogical concern, which can

also be reflected by Tze-yue G. Hu's *Frameworks of Teaching and Researching Japanese Animation* in her previous animation study anthology. According to Barton and Hosea, combining systematic mental education and animation-making is a valuable direction to unlock the potential of the medium of animation in modern society.

Reynolds's essay is a first-person director log for composing *Sea Fever* (2015), a film competing in the 48 Hour Film Project. In the process of creation, Reynolds recruited her aunt, Maureen, who was suffering from schizophrenia, as the heroine and found that her symptom was significantly relieved. Although Maureen's participation in animation/filmmaking was not the only influencing factor, Reynolds's practice is supportive of Barton and Hosea's conclusion that making animation, especially collaborating, can help with mental issues. These two essays focus on animation's practical values in improving people's mental health and demonstrate them through a degree of practice. Although these essays, even the whole anthology, did not go further in this direction to put forward a feasible framework that can be applied in educational or clinical fields, their values are more in inspiring other scholars to initiate relevant research. Such values correspond to the editors' self-evaluated meanings of this book: "encourage, inspire and support scholarship across the globe on other, less explored areas of animation studies and surely other related disciplinary studies as well, and contribute to our shared knowledge and ever-growing understanding of the creative human spirit and its manifestations" (pp. 277-278).

In *Transforming the Intangible into the Real: Reflections on My Selected Animation Works*, Kōji Yamamura reflects on the psychological aspects of his seven selected short animated films. When reviewing his own experience of making animation works, Yamamura questioned the Cartesian dualism that sets a strict boundary of skull and skin to separate matter and mind. Yamamura claims that it is difficult for him to tell whether the animation works or the inspirations come first because what animation creators pursue is to transform their thoughts, emotions and feelings into images, lights and movements. From this perspective, animation can be seen as an extension of animators' mental worlds where the boundary of matter and mind is blurred. This statement is in line with the "Extended mind" thesis proposed by cognitive philosophers Andy Clark and David Chalmers (1998), which involves inorganic equipment outside the body, such as paper and pencil, personal computers and smartphones, as a segment of cognitive activities. According to Yamamura, making animation can have him immersed and even

lost in the field of the subconscious, and his animation works can be “a memory trigger that can help recall and relive the emotional/mental state of mind that led to the creation of art itself” (p. 40). Thus, animation becomes a vessel of “the spirited” that can extend humans’ minds, connecting the worlds of reality and spirituality.

Sequentially, Barton and Hosea’s and Reynold’s essays are the first and third ones of this section, while Yamamura’s is in the middle. However, ending this section with Yamamura’s essay could have been better because the other two have similar foci and topics, while Yamamura’s work shares similar interests in at more abstract level of “the spirited” of animation with the following sections.

Section 2. Character Cultivating and Storytelling

According to the editors, the second section of this anthology, “Objects, Spirits and Characters”, explores “the uncanny and fantastic dimensions of storytelling” (p. xviii). In this section, there are three essays talking about the significance of animation’s characterisation and plotting, as well as some related classical paradigms.

The first work in this section is Akiko Sugawa-Shimada’s *Animating Artifact Spirits in the 2.5-Dimensional World: Personification and Performing Characters in ‘Token Ranbu’*, which analyses the success of the browser game *Token Ranbu-ONLINE-* and its derivative cultural products, such as musicals, plays, TV anime and manga. In this essay, Sugawa-Shimada focuses on the traditional Japanese *yōkai* (genie) concept *tsukumogami* (artefact spirits) and its unique values in enhancing characters’ appeal and influence. According to Sugawa-Shimada, *token danshi* (sword male warriors), the personified famous Japanese sword in *Token Ranbu-ONLINE-*, is a special kind of *tsukumogami* possessing the qualities of sanctity and restraint of evil spirits, while the rest of them are mostly harmful or hostile to humans. Although Sugawa-Shimada emphasises the importance of personification in 2.5-dimensional culture, the practices of cultural interaction between the virtual and the real, I think that the actual value reflected by the case of *Token Ranbu* lies in tapping into new directions of application of traditional culture in modern society. *Token Ranbu-ONLINE-*’s dual commercial and cultural success is a convincing example to demonstrate the feasibility of the media mix strategy, which involves franchises across multiple platforms, both online and in the material world. This model can be applied to the animation industry on a global scale, as the local traditional culture can provide a solid cultural foundation for the

implementation of such strategies. At the same time, “the spirited” elements of the local traditions and history can be explored in animation, contributing to the popularisation of traditional cultures among youths and the preservation of local cultural resources.

Raz Greenberg’s *Heaven and Earth: Traditional Sources of the Dual Identities of Anime Heroines* and Richard J. Leskosky’s *Metanoia in Anime: Rehabilitating Demons, Turning Foes into Allies* examine two classic types of animation characters: heavenly women and ex-villains who have gone through a special kind of character arc of metanoia (turning from evil to good). The commonality in the characterisation of these two types is the emphasis on contradictions and transformation. Besides, both Greenberg and Leskosky mention the religious sources of these characters and plots worldwide, such as Shintoism, Daoism, and Christianity. Characters’ transformation of self-identities between rival forces is the essence of such characterisation and plotting. Although Greenberg’s examples of heavenly women, Sheeta in *Tenku no shiro Laputa*, Kusanagi Motoko in *Kōkaku kidōtai*, and Fujiwara Chiyoko in *Sennen joyū*, are not typical examples of metanoia, they all have heavenly origins and attempt to fit within the earthly world, which reflects a desire to transform their identities.

The concept of “the spirited” in this section is rooted in traditional cultures and flourishes through modern cultural practices. However, the actual situations vary from region to region. For instance, according to Leskosky, the plot of metanoia is not as popular in the West, especially Hollywood animation, as it is in Japan. Therefore, one possible strategy for the animation industry is to focus on and draw from the local culture, for which the local markets generally have a stronger acceptance and preference.

Section 3. Religions, Cultures and Animation

Section 3 has the most ingenious arrangement of the essay. Entitled “Inspirations from the Spiritual-Cultural Realm”, it explores how cultural heritages, especially religions and politics, influence all aspects of animation-making.

M. Javad Khajavi’s *Animating with the Primordial Pen: Mystic and Sufi Inspirations in Calligraphic Animation*, Tze-yue G. Hu’s *Interpretations and Thoughts of the Animated Self in Cowherd’s Flute: Highlighting the Daoist Elements in Te Wei’s Watercolor-and-Ink Animation*, and Masao Yokota’s *Interpreting Buddhist Influences in Kawamoto’s Puppet Animation: A Psychologist’s Reflections and Readings of His Animation* share strong symmetrical correspondences. These three essays choose three nations with millenary

traditions, Iran, China and Japan, to explore the relationship between their special forms of animation and their representative religions: Islamism, Daoism and Buddhism.

According to the editors, published English papers on Central Asian and Islamic animation are very rare; therefore, Khajavi's essay is an excellent reflection of this anthology's global perspective. Khajavi examines the relationship between Iranian calligraphic animation and Sufism, an Islamic form of mysticism and claims that there is a threshold of religious background knowledge to appreciate this type of animation. Therefore, the promotion of calligraphic animation necessitates that scholars popularise the basics of Islamic mysticism and the symbolism of the letters to help the public understand the content of the animation. This exchange between the academic and artistic worlds through the medium of animation contributes to the preservation and development of this traditional Islamic culture in the new age.

Hu concentrates on Chinese animation director Te Wei and his watercolour-and-ink animation. This form of animation is profoundly influenced by the Chinese Daoist ideas of purity and nature. These Daoist ideas have been rooted in the Chinese's everyday life since ancient times, but the attitudes of the state apparatus towards them have fluctuated. The impact of the shift in the will of the state falling on individuals and humanistic works is immense and profound, which can be reflected by the destiny of Te Wei and his animated film *Cowherd's Flute*. Hu's essay turns to the example of Te Wei and Chinese watercolour-and-ink animation to demonstrate the vitality of Daoist thought under the influence of the state apparatus.

Yokota's essay is mainly about the famous Japanese puppet animator Kawamoto Kihachirō and his last work, *The Book of the Dead*, which focuses on "the embrace of repentance and the virtuous offering of compassionate acts and prayers" (p. xx). Although Buddhism is not a native religion of Japan, its influence in the country has grown tremendously throughout history. According to Yokota, Kawamoto's puppet animation reflects Buddhist beliefs in both its creation and completed form. As a clinical psychologist, Yokota focuses on Kawamoto's spiritual motives and intentions of understanding the essence of the Japanese people and cleansing the pain caused by World War II through creating animation. Under this circumstance, the animation is Kawamoto's way of exploring the spirit of the Japanese and the cure for psychological trauma caused by the war.

This section introduces the direct influence of three religions on their local particular forms of animation. Such an influence reflects the exploration of “the spirited” in religious beliefs through animation, which can impact both individual mental activities and public cultural tendencies. However, it is a pity that the essays of this section only cover Asian regions and religions, neglecting the rest of the world, which possesses quite diverse spiritual values in animation-making.

Section 4: Humanistic Productions and Practices for the Children

In this section, Gyongyi Horvath’s *“We Are All Humans”: Children’s Transformative Interpretation of a Comic on the Rwandan Genocide* suddenly moves away from the exploration of the spiritual realm in the previous sections to an extremely heavy-handed real tragedy. This essay shows the anthology’s concern for humanity and reality by researching a children’s comic about the Rwandan Genocide, *100 Days in the Land of the Thousand Hills* (2011) and children’s reactions to it. Horvath’s research explores the capability of comics to convey serious narratives, eliminate prejudices and humanise individual and collective tragedies. According to Horvath, the characteristics of comics can help children understand violent incidents, enhance the audience’s engagement and blur images unsuitable for children’s viewing. However, the form of comics might also lead to inaccurate understandings, denial and distortion of history to some extent. As a comparison, the previous sections’ essays represent a spiritual quest into the past, while this section focuses on improving and fertilising children’s spiritual world, which is the foundation of humans’ future.

The other essay in this section is Giryung Park’s *The “Spiritual” Role of the Media? Heidi, Girl of the Alps in Japan and Korea*, which examines the adaptation path of the novel *Heidi* from Swiss children’s literature to Japanese animation (1974) and later Korean animation. The current worldwide recognition of Heidi’s story proves the success of the animated adaptations in Japan and Korea, showing the aesthetic commonalities in humanistic products of consumers around the world. Most of the essays in this anthology emphasise the importance of exploring the potential of local cultures; however, Park’s essay fills the gap in adapting foreign cultures and cultural products, proposing the necessity and advantages of conducting intercultural communications of the spiritual dimension.

Section 5. Buddhism and Animation: An Asian Perspective

In Asia, Buddhism enjoys a very high status and reputation and has branched out into different schools in different regions, such as Mahayana Buddhism in East Asia and Theravada in Southeast Asia. Cultures of different Asian regions have been influenced by Buddhism to varying degrees. Naturally, their animation is also influenced, which is discussed in this section, “Buddhist Worldviews, Interactions, and Symbolism”.

Millie Young, in her essay *Understanding Thai Animation Narratives: The Presence of Buddhist Philosophy and Thai Cultural Ideology*, examines the influence of Buddhist thoughts and native Thai ideologies on Thai animation. Thai animation mixes up Western narratives, Buddhist philosophy and Thai traditions. According to Young, Thai animation narratives selectively borrow from American and Japanese references and involve unique Thai elements, such as the monarchy and Thai folklore. From the selected animated films, Young infers four key themes of Thai animation: “Thai folklore”, “Thai historical context/Thai love of the Monarchy”, “Buddhist spiritual belief”, and “The Thai-Thai, ไทยไทย spirit” (p. 217). These narratives constitute the unique voice of Thai animation, which is a mix of local and foreign ideologies, reality and fantasy. Through the example of Thailand's animation-making practices, the chapter explores the possibilities of animation as a cultural and ideological melting pot. Along these lines, scholars can study the ideology of cultural subjects through animation, while the state apparatus often wants to use animation as a propaganda tool to cultivate nationalism, which are both practices, in different ways, utilising the spirited values of animation.

Yuk Lan Ng's *Veiled Zen Journeys through Early Muromachi Flower-and-Bird Paintings* reviews the development of Zen Buddhist paintings, especially flower-and-bird paintings. Initially, this chapter seems a bit out of place because the anthology's focus is modern animation, while Zen paintings are an ancient form with decorative purpose and a philosophical background. However, the editors claim later, “We believe that the present only makes sense if we pay due attention to the past, including the continuum of knowledge and matters that concern the mind, spirit, and cultural environment” (p. xxii). From this perspective, Zen paintings are relevant because they are a source from which modern animation can draw inspiration. Such a point of view of the editors aligns with Young's idea that animation inevitably reflects its creators' ideologies, which come from their history. For instance, Thai animation usually has many elements highlighting Thai culture, such as Thai Kings, Buddhism, elephants and

Thai ghosts. These elements effectively show the local culture, enjoying high recognition among the locals and potentially attracting foreign audiences. Therefore, extracting the value of the “past”, whether this wealth is intangible, like religious ideas, or tangible, like Zen paintings, is crucial for the creation of animation.

The last chapter of this anthology is Yin Ker’s *Shadows of the Sun: Animating Buddhist Dharma for Art History*, which proposes a “film-and-game” hands-on educational project using elements such as sounds, colours, shapes, character figures and textures to guide the audience to experience the essence of Buddhist dharma. The hypothetical work *Shadows of the Sun* is based on a narrative in which a boy visited many Buddhist superior beings to look for a cap dropped by a Buddhist pilgrim. The long journey reflects the importance of the “experiential” as a core of Buddhist teachings, which can be effectively accomplished in the form of animation and games.

Conclusion

As an animation research anthology with a focus on “the spirited”, *Animating the Spirited* has the potential to engage with a wide range of readerships, including animation and religion scholars, communication and cultural industry practitioners, educators, mental therapists, and animation culture enthusiasts.

However, although this anthology covers several cultural groups, due to anthological space limitations, the diversity of the collected essays’ contents leads to a relatively limited exploration of the particular directions that each of its sections introduces. It is a pity, for example, that the anthology does not go further in areas such as animation-aided mental therapy and media-mix strategy.

Otherwise, *Animating the Spirited: Journeys and Transformations* is a well-organised anthology of excellent essays about “the spirited” of animation. What is included in the anthology is richly diverse in its contexts and covers various forms of humanistic products related to animation. While reading it, I felt like the boy in *Shadows of the Sun*, looking for clues to the intellectually “spirited” in each essay. After this spiritual journey, what I have learnt from it was that animation is just a vessel, and we need to fill our understanding of it with the spiritual footprint of past culture, matter, and knowledge. Indeed, as an illuminating collection about “the spirited” in animation, this book is an excellent work through which a reader can enjoin a mutually spiritual and intellectual exploration of the culturally-inflected animation modalities it observes.

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Okada Toshiki & Japanese Theatre
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Since emerging on the scene in the 1990s, influenced especially by the work of Hirata Oriza, playwright Okada Toshiki has written dozens of works, a selection of which have toured throughout the world. *Okada Toshiki & Japanese Theatre* tells the reader that “he is the only Japanese theatre artist of his generation to have a significant international career and his work is known widely in Europe, North America, Asia and Australia” (1). Okada’s work encompasses colloquial yet troubled language, slowed tempos coupled with abstract physical scores, rich visual and aural designs and collaborations, and close engagement with events such as the Iraq War, precarious employment, the 2011 disasters, and post-Anthropocene modes of dramatic exploration. The book “aims to explore this diversity of Okada’s work and its importance to the development of Japanese theatre and to contemporary performance around the world” (3). This is the first book in English dedicated entirely to Okada despite his familiarity to theatre circles around the world for quite a few years. Recognition of Okada’s contribution to drama in Japan and the world is well warranted, as is more visible and thorough examination of his work.

This book makes a significant contribution to that examination. The book stakes claims not so much to Okada’s stature within Japan, which is sometimes minimised, but especially to the importance and relatability of his works on the international stage. Overall, the argument is that Okada’s works are created and situated within a Japanese context, but that they also speak to global struggles with precarity in livelihoods, emotions, and relationships. Therefore, they can teach us both about the specifics of

Japan's present and future and about a larger human present and future. Okada is presented as an artist who evolves alongside the times, especially on international currents: the interviews show him as ready to change methods and alter his ways of thinking and working. He is also shown to be an artist who positions himself quite consciously as an international artist whose works are often conceived with an eye toward international reach.

Under a team of editors with rich qualifications in working on Okada specifically, this edited volume is accessibly written with short chapters that stand alone, but also build a complex and complementary view on Okada Toshiki and the works of the chelfitsch performance troupe. The book, beautifully enlivened with still photos from performances and installations, is well-placed to be of use to students and specialists alike, and might be very handy for teaching international/global theatre or Asian theatre as well as specifically Japanese theatre. The book features a broadly international group of contributors, with professional ties to Australia, Belgium, Canada, Germany, Japan, the UAE, and the US, a variety that reflects the reach of Okada's drama, though there is not necessarily a representative for every place Okada's works have toured.

The book is organised into three sections: "Section One: Okada's Dramaturgy" focuses on the aesthetics of Okada's narrative, direction and staging style, vision, and methods. "Section 2: Art, Society, and Globality" considers Okada's work in its contexts: the social contexts of the plays' narratives in Japan and the world, the context of Okada's place in international/global drama, and the ways in which Okada's works move through the world. Finally, "Section 3: Documents, Interview and Plays" features a new interview between Okada and Iwaki Kyōko, some of Okada's theory on drama, as well as Aya Ogawa's expert translations of three plays. Textually, the plays are short, which is not reflective of the works' typically longer running times when fully staged. This is a common situation for Okada's plays, which is why it is valuable to collect translations of his work along with scholarly examination and description. Two of the plays have been published in Ogawa's English translation elsewhere in the past, *Ground and Floor* being the new offering, but it is convenient to have several collected together along with the preceding analysis. The structure of the book is well-conceived; Cody Poulton's first chapter on "Okada Toshiki's Narrative Method" is an excellent introduction to Okada for readers who may be unfamiliar with his work, covering all

the crucial features of Okada's hallmark style in a short space. The reader is well-prepared to move forward to more granular examinations of specific plays, aspects, or approaches thereafter. Likewise, Section 2 first grounds the reader in urban space with Noda Manabu's "Seen From Close-up in the Distance: Shibuya as a Bubble Downtown" before broadening to global and international perspectives. Finally, section three offers Iwaki Kyōko's new and illuminating "Interview with Okada Toshiki" before proceeding to the playwright's own theory.

The book feels more aligned with theatre or performance studies than specialised Japan studies. Despite a tilt toward the "global," the specificities of Japan are not ignored, with Noda Manabu's aforementioned Chapter 7 centring on local Tokyo urban space and subcultures, Stanca Scholz-Cionca's Chapter 2, "The 'Hyper-Real' and the Shadow of Noh" taking note of resonances with Noh without oversimplifying difference, and Iwaki Kyōko's Chapter 5, "Fuzzy Boundaries, Foggy Pictures: Okada Toshiki's Poesies of Liminality" noting the specific impact of Japan's 2011 disasters and the Fukushima nuclear accident in particular. Iwaki's examination of the permeability of time and space in the context of disaster under capitalism is particularly incisive. Other chapters emphasise Okada's "international" qualities and mark the works' complex moves through European and Asian drama festivals, US Off-Broadway spaces, and beyond. Uchino Tadashi's Chapter 8, "Simultaneous Turns in Globality: Performative and Social Turns in the New Millennium, or Theorizing/Historicizing Okada Toshiki's Welcome to European Festival Cultures" puts the European festival reception of Okada Toshiki into perspective compared with the perception of Okada's troupe in Japan. Barbara Geilhorn's Chapter 9, "Reflections on Precarity and Emotional Fulfillment in Everyday Life in the Theatre of Okada Toshiki" thoughtfully examines how the local circumstances of increasing precarity in Japanese society have contact points that resonate strongly with international audiences. The thread of precarity is picked up elsewhere as well, such as in Carol Martin's Chapter 12, "Foreign Assembly: Okada's *Time's Journey through a Room* in the United States," which examines Okada's lingering connection to the "quiet theater" movement with the uncertainty of his generation and longer reverberations of disaster and crisis. Peter Eckersall's description of "melt" in his Chapter 11, "Okada Toshiki's Dramaturgy in the Post-global Condition" is an intriguing way of tying together the ambient and sometimes non-representative nature of Okada's performances with the playwright's increasing usage of non-human subjects

(from ghosts to objects), while thinking through Okada's position in the specificity of Japanese society as well as the generality of the "post-global condition."

The volume is nuanced overall in how it reads Okada's contribution to international theatre without presenting him as a de-localized and "universal" figure. His work is rightly shown to interact responsively with Japanese social and political events while maintaining a porousness that allows it to be inhabitable by performers, artists, and audiences from other places. There is perhaps some tension between the introduction's assertion that "...compared with other contemporary theatre artists in Japan, Okada uses no overt or classically recognizable Japanese aesthetics or tropes" (2) while at the same time Okada himself and several of the contributors comment on his recent, more direct experimentation with Noh concepts and aesthetics. At the same time, that tension is not untrue to the artist himself, who at times in his career has held overtly Japanese aesthetics at arm's length while at other times drawing them close. Scholz-Cionca deals most in depth with the "affinities" to Noh in Okada's work that has become more prominent over time, especially after the 2011 disasters (19).

Particular attention is given in the volume to translation and language. Andreas Regelsberger's Chapter 4, "Translating Okada Toshiki," speaks from his experience as an Okada translator to methods and choices for translation for the German stage, and asserts that translation is baked into most of Okada's works from the start, with subtitle provisions written into the stage directions. Several other essays also address Okada's characteristic "hyper real" linguistic style, such as Scholz-Cionca's Chapter 2 and Sara Jansen's Chapter 3, "Making Time Material: On Okada Toshiki's *Time's Journey Through a Room*." Scholz-Cionca notes the similarity of Okada's work to Noh in its attention to patterned text as well as patterned movement. Jansen's examination of temporality perceptively equates disjunctures in time with "disarticulation" of language and gesture (36). The final section includes direct translations, not only of plays but also of Okada's own thoughts, providing valuable resources to those who cannot access Okada's writings in Japanese. While the essays rarely delve deeply into close reading, language is at issue in quite a few of the chapters. Besides the topic of translation itself, the complexities of Okada's quirky, occasionally-repetitive or elliptical colloquial style are addressed, including its knots and dead ends.

The topic of language is somewhat counterbalanced by attention to movement in Okada's works, such as in Holger Hartung's Chapter 6, "Ruptures, Gravity, Dwelling.

Reflections on Okada Toshiki's Movement Aesthetic." However, given the peculiarity of the physical styling of most of Okada's plays, and the absence of their description from stage directions in the translated plays included in the final section, this reviewer feels that even more space might have been devoted to describing and analysing Okada's movement style, especially as some international productions feature different patterns of movement when directed by others besides Okada himself. While many of the chapters mention the chelfitsch movement style, the reader unfamiliar with Okada's productions might not fully appreciate the depth, distance, significance, and duration that movement adds to most of the texts in question. However, Hartung helpfully collects and contextualises concepts surrounding Okada's movement style, applying metaphors such as "noise" and "junk," as well as observations regarding gravity, weight, and displacement, bringing together the work of scholars such as Uchino Tadashi, Katherine Mezur, Cody Poulton and many others with his own observation and theory of "rupture." As the beautiful photographs throughout the book illustrate, movement and bodies are as crucial to Okada's works as are the words; therefore, Hartung's chapter will be essential for those who have not viewed Okada's works in practice themselves.

The final section deserves special recognition, as the translations expand access to Okada's own words for English-speakers. As Okada is indeed prominent on the international stage, it is appropriate that his thoughts on drama be made available to non-Japanese-speaking theatre artists and theorists. His "Reflux: A Protean Theatre Theory" offers a complex intersection of personal experience and thought with theatrical practice and theory, offering a vision of theatre as the potential to "threaten reality" (167) and a renewed consciousness of the intimate relationship between theatre and catastrophe following the 2011 disasters (169-170). "Sounding Like a Typical Post-Corona Theory of Theatre," also by Okada, brings these visions up to date and contends with the challenges COVID-19 has brought to theatre, challenging the special possibilities of "place" as many performances moved online. Iwaki Kyōko's interview is very welcome, both for its freshness and Iwaki's insights on subjects such as the transformations of *Five Days in March* across separate versions. The play translations also deserve mention. The texts provided are: *Hot Pepper*, *Air Conditioner*, and *the Farewell Speech*, *The Sonic Life of a Giant Tortoise*, and *Ground and Floor*. Aya Ogawa, Okada's primary English translator, translates all three with her characteristic

skill in conveying the nuance of the original Japanese and contending with the challenges of highly colloquial texts that run on, loop back on themselves, trail off, or self-interrupt. Ogawa's experience as a playwright and translator makes her translation as appropriate for speaking aloud as for reading. It is handy to have some of Okada's works gathered in this volume so that unfamiliar readers may have some frame of reference for the preceding essays.

Plays addressed in detail in the book include *Five Days in March*, *Enjoy*, the *Hot Pepper* trilogy, *The Sonic Life of a Giant Tortoise*, *Current Location*, *Ground and Floor*, *God Bless Baseball*, *Time's Journey Through a Room*, *NŌ THEATER*, *NO SEX*, and the *Eraser* series.

The book positions Okada as an international artist as much as, or more than, a Japanese artist. This is supported by his many tours and the many translations and multi-lingual versions of his work (catalogued usefully in the appendix), as well as by his own mode of self-positioning, and the demands of international drama festivals, shown convincingly by Yokobori Masahiko's Chapter 10, "Who Knows We Want to Be an *International Artist?* Producing Okada Toshiki's Theatre and the International Scene." Viewing Okada in this way implicitly demands attention from the international theatre community that may not always consciously centre Asian artists and drama originally written in languages other than English. Satomi's monologues in *Ground and Floor* suggest that linguistic and cultural marginalisation is a matter of concern for Okada as a playwright who works primarily in the Japanese language, so not only is it impactful that this volume frequently emphasises questions of translation and globalism with regard to Okada's work, it is also important that this volume insists upon the visibility of Okada's works to the Anglophone world and beyond. Some helpful theoretical concepts are introduced in this volume, as well. Explorations of precarity, rupture, temporality, poesy, the intercultural as well as the global span across multiple chapters, bringing cohesion to the work and coherence to the understanding of Okada's oeuvre. Certainly, the book is successful in positioning Okada as a crucial and complex figure in Japanese and global drama, whose writings and stagings continue to demand attention and make important impacts in Japan, Germany, the US, Canada, Australia, and many more places.

Few book-length studies have been devoted to Japanese playwrights, especially contemporary playwrights. It is the hope of this reviewer that this volume will

encourage the in-depth study of others as well, whether they are positioned as local or global artists. As Okada's case exemplifies through the thoughtful examinations presented in the book, theatre-makers in Japan are doing prolific work closely engaged with society and current events, making discoveries and revelations poised to resonate internationally, even when the local is not precisely interchangeable with the global. This book shows how precious such an author-focused volume can still be, gathering multiple aspects of criticism, commentary, and translation to make a critical playwright's work as legible as possible to a wide audience who may not yet be intimately familiar with him, while at the same time providing space for deeper theoretical engagement best served by thinking across a body of works.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Justine WIESINGER is an Assistant professor of Japanese at Bates, and earned her PhD in East Asian Languages and literatures by Yale University in 2018. She is a Fulbright scholar, and her areas of expertise include disaster, performance, horror, contemporary Japanese theatre, and modern Japanese culture. Wiesinger's dissertation examines intersections between disaster and performance in the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 as well as the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear accident of 2011. Her book project, *Performing Disaster*, focuses on the theatre and film that emerged from the latter events, and analyses the particular capabilities of performance to build claims to collective trauma in the aftermath of disaster.

