

Imagining Transcultural Fandom: Animation and Global Media Communities

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Introduction

The study of media globalisation is a constantly shifting terrain.¹ To write on “global media” is not to select a single, easily defined topic of research, but to enter a conceptual arena fractured along many lines of disciplinary orientation, regional and local scholarship styles, schools of thought, and political allegiance or dissension. Some, for instance, see in the globalisation of mass media the spread of a “culture industry” that is “infecting everything with sameness,”² in the tradition of the Frankfurt school of media criticism and of 1970s anti-colonial activism.³ In 2001, Todd Gitlin argued that “If there is a global village, it speaks American. It wears jeans, drinks Coke, eats at the golden arches, walks on swooshed shoes...recognizes Mickey Mouse...Bart Simpson, R2-D2, and Pamela Anderson.”⁴ Cultural globalisation theorist Lee Artz likewise condemned the dominance of American-style “corporate media hegemony”⁵

1 I would like to thank the organizers and attendees of the workshops on “Rethinking Trends—Transcultural Flows in Popular Spheres,” hosted in November of 2008 and 2009 by Heidelberg University’s “Asia and Europe in a Global Context: Shifting Asymmetries in Cultural Flows” Research Cluster. My particular gratitude to those who read and commented on earlier drafts of the paper, including Jennifer Althenger, Huang Xuelei, Dr. Diana Brydon, Dr. William Lee, and Dr. Gene Walz. I would also like to acknowledge the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, which provided funding for my thesis project. For the full thesis, which contains more detailed accounts of the case studies in this paper, please see <https://mspace.lib.umanitoba.ca/>

2 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno. “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception.” In *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002 [orig. pub. 1947]), 94.

3 See, for instance, Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart, *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic* (New York: International General, 1975) and Brenda Ayres, *The Emperor’s Old Groove: Decolonizing Disney’s Magic Kingdom* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003).

4 Quoted in Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 153.

5 Lee Artz, “Globalization, Media Hegemony, and Social Class,” in *The Globalization of Corporate Media Hegemony*, ed. Lee Artz and Yahya R. Kamalipour (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), 3–31.

and “Disney’s menu for global hierarchy”⁶ well into the first decade of the twenty-first century. As of 2009, critics from Daya K. Thussu⁷ to Ōtsuka Eiji and Ōsawa Nobuaki⁸ continue to cite the Disney Co. as a prime example of the aggressive, commercial, homogenizing face of American neo-imperialism, which maps global cultural dominance onto economic might.

If some critics see media globalisation as a form of corporate hegemony, however, there are others who resist the “Disneyfication” narrative by highlighting the creative potential of active audience appropriations of media. This strain of cultural studies, based on the 1960s work of the Birmingham school, focuses on “how media formed the means through which people... expressed their culture”⁹ by taking up and reworking texts as “active audiences” with their own “alternative social community.”¹⁰ The enthusiastic embrace of Japanese animation outside of Japan, from its underground trade in the 1970s to mass-media popularisation in the 1990s, is sometimes seen in this counter-Disney vein as a “strongly grassroots activity”¹¹ that promotes cross-cultural understanding among engaged viewers.

So, does media globalisation promote worldwide Disneyfication or grassroots fan communities? In this essay, I would ask rather: are these two binary choices—often framed as the “political economy” and “cultural studies” camps—the only options available? As co-productions and international collaborations flourish, and as new media open up new avenues for artists and viewers, it becomes less and less possible to look at any given film, viewer, or company in isolation from other global trends. Trends for different styles of animation, which circulate between cultures and nations, peoples and corporations, cut across the top-down hierarchy of the Disneyfication model, even as they complicate the untrammelled freedom attributed to active audiences.

6 Lee Artz, “Monarchs, Monsters, and Multiculturalism: Disney’s Menu for Global Hierarchy,” in *Rethinking Disney: Private Control, Public Dimensions*, ed. Mike Budd and Max H. Kirsch (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2005), 75–98.

7 Daya Kishan Thussu, ed. *Internationalizing Media Studies*. (London: Routledge, 2009.)

8 Ōtsuka Eiji and Ōsawa Nobuaki. *Why is “Japanimation” Failing?* [*“Japanimation” wa naze yabureru ka*]. (Kadokawa Shoten, 2005.)

9 Spigel, Lynn and Jan Olssen. *Television after TV: essays on a medium in transition*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 8.

10 Henry Jenkins. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 2.

11 Susan J. Napier. From *Impressionism to Anime: Japan as Fantasy and Fan Cult in the Mind of the West* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 150

Indeed, this kind of transcultural circulation, revealing the interdependencies of the global media environment, is a key feature of trends. A trend, to my mind, is a text or idea in passage: not yet an established classic in an unquestionable canon, but more than a disposable, forgettable fad. It may be generated by a single person or by a multinational marketing team, and it may continue to promote dominant ideologies and entrenched powers. But on a practical level, it cannot travel without being passed among people, a process that also results in it being changed by the needs, desires and fears of those who take it up. There is no single, final *effect* of a trend. Trends point to an ongoing *affective experience*¹²—in short, to what is emerging.

Such emerging transcultural trends in animation pose challenges to the received notions of media globalisation, both the pessimistically critical and the uncritically utopian. They prompt us to ask not whether animation is “bad” or “good” for viewers, but simply: “What can one *do* with animation?” For instance, if cartoons are merely a hegemonic tool for indoctrinating the young into global consumer culture, what about the children of the Gaza strip, who in 2006 protested against the murder of their friends in a drive-by shooting by brandishing images of the popular animated schoolgirl Haruhi Suzumiya?¹³ At the same time, how do we respond to the adults all over the world who derive hours of enjoyment from such complex, edgy programs as Watanabe Shinichirō’s *Cowboy Bebop* (1998), without making them into idealized icons of an uncomplicated agency? In short, how do we address the vibrant transcultural fan cultures—as well as the continuing instances of cultural imperialism—that have sprung up around animation?



Fig. 1: Youth protest against the drive-by shooting of three children in the Gaza Strip, Dec. 2006. Source: AFPBB News.

¹² I am using “affect” here both in the psychological sense of “emotion” or “feeling” and the philosophical sense of “an ability to affect and be affected” (Massumi, xvi), or a shift in the potential or capacity to act.

¹³ See, for instance, the article “Mounting tensions between Hamas and Fatah,” (ハマースとファタハ間の緊張高まる). AFPBB News. Dec. 15, 2006. <http://www.afpbb.com/article/1174867> (July 7, 2009.)

Similar questions, derived from a range of observations across cultural fields, have become a major focus in globalisation studies in the last ten years. My first step in addressing these questions will thus be to review some of the scholarly literature on globalisation, media, and fan culture currently available, and determine how it might apply to animation. I will then present three case studies of animated works, each of which was created in a different country, decade and medium. The broad scope of my examples, which include the 1935 American “Betty Boop” short film “A Language All My Own,” the 1998 Japanese television series *Cowboy Bebop*, and the 2008 South Korean Internet cartoon *There She Is!!*, is not intended to provide any sort of comprehensive coverage, or to map out a linear narrative of progressive development. Rather, my goal is to demonstrate that “animation” is not a single cohesive entity with the same nature and effects in all times and places. From the international films of the 1920s to the interactive web cartoons of the early twenty-first century, what we call “animation” varies according to many specific, historically-situated contexts, including economies of production, technologies of distribution and affective, imaginative experiences of reception.

The first case, that of Betty Boop, reveals that while there were impulses towards transcultural community in cinematic animation, animated film of this period often participated in a form of media globalisation I call “*imperial internationalism*.” This mode is based on the exchange of film images between nations “imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign,”¹⁴ drawing on the existing trade routes and bounded national imaginaries of Western imperialism. The second case, that of *Cowboy Bebop*, shows how trends shifted towards *postnational* modes of globalisation, based on promoting the free flow of images, technologies, and capital across national borders perceived to be porous or vanishing. These two examples provide the crucial historical and theoretical background necessary for my final case study, that of *There She Is!!* This web cartoon illustrates the ways in which *transcultural* fan communities today are formed not through a return to bounded national imaginaries, nor through a transcendence of all national and cultural identity, but by working through the frictions of global cultural exchange in mutual, if asymmetrical, collaborations. By paying attention to these shifts in the geopolitical, mediated, and social aspects of animation, I argue, it becomes possible to better understand what creates the linkages of transcultural fandom, and consider the long-term impacts such trends might have beyond the dualisms of corporate media hegemony vs. unqualified grassroots resistance.

14 Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. (London: Verso, 1991), 6.

Theorizing Global Animation

The attitude that animation and its audiences can be definitively described once and for all is quite common in film and cultural studies, perhaps because these subjects have only recently become the focus of scholarly inquiry. When establishing new subfields such as animation studies or fan studies, some have found it necessary to “discover” the essential features or universal practices of cartoons and their fans in order to justify studying them at all. While minimally functional as a definitional step, these approaches also establish systematic exclusions based on existing disciplinary concerns. Early Western reporting and scholarship on Japanese anime, for instance, has relied on comparisons with Disney in order to define anime’s formal properties, such as the use of less fluid “limited animation” techniques, and its thematic properties, such as a higher incidence of sex and violence. In the tradition of auteurist film studies, Walt Disney’s films—once simply trendy entertainment—have formed a canonical standard against which all animation is measured. But as Susan J. Napier argues, this strategy “minimizes the variety of the form”¹⁵ of anime by focusing only on highly polarized examples which are either like Disney animation (children’s cartoons) or radically unlike it (violent pornography), rather than exploring the many genres and styles that make up the diverse field of animation in Japan, from gentle domestic comedies to surreal, experimental art films.

Likewise, the ur-text of fan studies, Henry Jenkins’ 1992 *Textual Poachers*, has set certain baseline activities for fan audiences, including tactics such as generating a common “meta-text” or set of interpretive standards relating to a given film or TV series, and responding actively to a favoured text by creating fan fiction, art or videos. *Textual Poachers* has proved invaluable for granting fan studies a level of academic acceptability. As Matt Hills contends, however, once a model like this is established it becomes important for scholars to address the contradictions, absences and conflicts within it, in order to avoid creating “moral dualisms” which rely on identifying “‘good’ and ‘bad’ instances of popular culture” and dividing fans into the institutionally acceptable categories of “resistant” or “complicit” readers.¹⁶ In order to move beyond these dichotomising discourses on animation and its fans, we must find an approach that does not rely solely on dividing resistant from complicit texts or passive from active audiences, but recognizes the ways in which

¹⁵ Susan J. Napier, *Anime from Akira to Howl’s Moving Castle* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 6.

¹⁶ Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2002), xii.

“structure and agency are interrelated and mutually interdependent.”¹⁷ This is the approach I have tried to adopt.

The problem of how to frame animation and its consumers only grows more complex when media trends are considered on a global scale. Scholars widely recognize that new media technologies such as television and the Internet have played a crucial role in establishing the “complex connectivity”¹⁸ of globalisation. But as of yet, few can agree on whether the globalized mass media homogenize culture under a global “hegemony of consumerism,”¹⁹ or provide new ways for audiences to engage with other cultures across the world from their own locally embedded context. Some scholarly works, such as Koichi Iwabuchi’s *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*, have challenged the binary of global homogeneity and local heterogeneity, with its attendant oppositions of dominating Western commercialism versus resistant local traditions.²⁰ Iwabuchi is highly critical of the Americanisation thesis, pointing out that the “relative decline of American cultural power has brought about the capitalization of intraregional cultural flows, with the emergence of regional media centers such as Brazil, Egypt, Hong Kong and Japan.”²¹ But he hardly sees Japan as an innocent “Oriental” victim breaking free of the American stranglehold through subversive, hybrid reappropriations of media texts. Rather, he argues that “hybridism” is one of the strategies Japanese industries use to establish economic power in East and Southeast Asia, often by drawing upon ties remaining from their imperialist past. “Hybridism,” as a national discourse, is promoted in Japan as the nation’s unique ability to repackage American media products for its “less-developed” Asian neighbours, while simultaneously creating “culturally odourless” products that are easily consumed in America itself. When it comes to media, then, Japan is neither simply a borrower nor a lender, but both at once, complicating the distinction between victors and

17 David Buckingham and Julian Sefton-Green, “Structure, Agency, and Pedagogy in Children’s Media Culture,” in Tobin, 24.

18 John Tomlinson, *Globalization and culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 2.

19 Artz, “Globalization,” 24.

20 See also Gholam Khiabany’s article “Faultlines in the Agendas of Global Media Debates,” in which he criticizes Lee Artz for associating homogeneity with “the intercultural dominance of the Western model” and hybridity with non-Western “cultural artists and audiences.” As Khiabany points out on page 208, this merely reifies oppositions between the “commercial, rootless, banal and pre-packaged ‘Western’ products and the ‘authentic’, ‘organic’ and deeply rooted culture of the ‘East.’”

21 Koichi Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 48.

victims in the global culture wars. The case of Japanese relations with both the West and East Asia thus demonstrates the shifting asymmetries of transcultural flow.

As welcome as this more nuanced portrait of intraregional, “recentered” globalisation is, Iwabuchi’s emphasis on consumerism as the driving factor of cultural exchange sometimes leads him to overlook fan agency, and to create the kinds of “moral dualisms” that Hills criticizes in studies of fan audiences. For instance, Iwabuchi is quick to consider fans as “cultural dupes,”²² and very particular about what constitutes an acceptable reaction in a fan. Western anime fans hardly figure in this picture, except as “excessively devoted”²³ eccentrics, mere fodder for self-congratulating Japanese newspapers. When he speaks positively of Korean and Taiwanese fans’ consumption of Japanese pop culture, it is to emphasize that they are appropriating that material to build their own local identities, as when he claims that “Japanese TV dramas offer for their fans a concrete and accessible model of what it is like to be modern in East Asia.”²⁴ A positive Japanese fan of Korean dramas, however, is one who uses East Asian media *not* to build a sense of modern personal/national identity or even to engage with Korean culture, but to “become more critically aware of Japan’s... imperialist history.”²⁵ Of course, there is value in these practices of identity-formation and critique. But the national audiences still being evoked here—the constructive Korean, the critically-aware Japanese—suggest that Iwabuchi’s own criteria of laudable fan behaviour are still subtly shaped by the very moral dualisms of resistant locals/dominant multinationals he tried to avoid in his critique of Americanisation. Before making such distinctions in (inter)national reception styles, we must ask: what is being lost in the drive to establish acceptable practices of fan consumption based on interpretive standards that the fans themselves may not recognize or agree with?²⁶

22 *Ibid.*, 188.

23 *Ibid.*, 31.

24 *Ibid.*, 156.

25 *Ibid.*, 194.

26 In fact, Iwabuchi has drawn on fan studies approaches to address the more positive affective connections Japanese fans form through their interest in Hong Kong idol singers in his essay “Nostalgia for a (Different) Asian Modernity: Media Consumption of ‘Asia’ in Japan.” His later work on animation, however, continues to rely on a top-down, producer-directed model of distribution and consumption. See for instance “How ‘Japanese’ Is Pokémon?” in Tobin (op. cit.), in which he describes how “In Japan, media industry leaders decided that computer games and animation would be the main features” of a global “supersystem of entertainment” (63, my emphasis). Even his most nuanced and sophisticated assessment of anime fan culture to date, published in 2010, ends by stressing “how the persisting dominance of the neoliberal and (inter-)national framework [of media globalization] has limited the development of transnational dialogues” (94). While this kind of critical caution is laudable, the emphasis

At issue here is the concept of fan communities. While Iwabuchi interviewed individual fans, he primarily considers them as consumers, and so does not see them as possessing much significant sense of collective belonging beyond that granted by economic exchange. Arjun Appadurai, however, provides a more flexible basis for thinking about media and globalisation not only as the spread of multinational capitalism, but also as a process of forming affective relationships among people through multiple sites of engagement beyond national economies or allegiances. In *Modernity at Large*, Appadurai argues that there are a number of intersecting dimensions of cultural flows or “-scapes,” including financescapes of capitalism (Iwabuchi’s major concern), ethnoscapes of immigration and diaspora, and mediascapes of information and imagery, among others. We enter these flows through physical practices such as travel and through acts of *imagination*. Indeed, imagination, Appadurai says, has itself become “a social practice,” “a form of work...and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility.”²⁷

Global media such as television play a key role in the social practice of imagination by generating many kinds of connection across distance. The most interesting for my purposes is the “community of sentiment,” in which “a group begins to imagine and feel things together,”²⁸ thus creating their own “imagined worlds.” In this way, groups like fan clubs become able to “contest and sometimes even subvert the imagined worlds of the official mind and the entrepreneurial mentality that surround them.”²⁹ Appadurai thus describes a postnational “global order in which the nation-state has become obsolete and other formations for allegiance and identity have taken its place.”³⁰ Aptly, scholars of Japanese popular culture have also found these theories useful. Napier has even proposed another term inspired by Appadurai’s “-scapes” called the “fantasyscape.” She describes fantasyscapes as sites of play, “temporary alternative lifestyles that exist parallel to the mundane, which people enter and exit as they please.”³¹ Anime for Napier is a perfect example of a transcultural fantasyscape because it constitutes not merely escapism, but a site of productive imaginary engagement between people in different cultures.

on attending mainly to domination over constructive alternatives to that domination recalls Lee Artz’ “corporate media hegemony,” simply “recentering” on Japan rather than America.

27 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1996), 31.

28 Ibid., 8.

29 Ibid., 33.

30 Ibid., 196.

31 Susan J. Napier. *From Impressionism to Anime: Japan as Fantasy and Fan Cult in the Mind of the West* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 11.

Still, critics such as Imre Szeman are sceptical of Appadurai's vision, pointing out that "nowhere does he suggest where the line between [commercialised] fantasy and the potentially productive aspects of the imagination occurs, or how individuals are able to maintain these boundaries and so be 'agents' as opposed to dreamers of the collective fantasy of late capitalism."³² We might also ask just *who* really is free to enter and exit fantasyscapes "as they please," and how they do it. After all, fandom does require a certain amount of capital outlay for media equipment and texts. And with the globalisation of media corporations, that outlay is increasing, as major conglomerates in both Japan and North America develop canny transmedia marketing strategies that extend narratives across multiple platforms and products, playing on the ways in which fans accumulate "cultural capital"³³ among their peers. When full comprehension of a text requires access to many different technologies and commodities, even the practice of collecting and sharing information—a cornerstone of fan culture—can be beyond the reach of those in poorer regions, particularly in the global South. Following trends certainly involves affective experience, as I have argued, but that does not mean we should lose sight entirely of the other practical, material aspects of trend circulation. We cannot grant agency to "fans" in general without considering how they are differently positioned in the structural asymmetries of global media circulation.

Of course, Appadurai is fully aware of asymmetries in global flows, and of the commercialisation of imagination, as is evident in his brilliant discussion of nostalgia and consumption in *Modernity at Large*. Furthermore, in his 2006 long essay *Fear of Small Numbers*, Appadurai directly addresses critiques of his optimistic tone by looking at the negative effects of globalisation, including terrorism and genocide. Even here, however, his focus is decidedly postnational. If in *Modernity at Large* agency crosses borders, in *Fear of Small Numbers*, "warfare has escaped the context of the nation-state"³⁴ and terrorism is eminently mobile. While I do not contest his findings, I believe that it is just as important to address the points where global culture does not flow and the nation-state remains influential in order to gain a fuller understanding of animation fandom. At this point, then, it is necessary to find some way

32 Imre Szeman, [Review of *Modernity at large*]. *Cultural Logic* 1.1 (1997): n.p. <http://clogic.eserver.org/1-1/szeman.html>

33 For more on cultural capital, see John Fiske, "The Cultural Economy of Fandom," in *The Adoring Audience*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis, (London: Routledge, 1992), 30–49. For more on transmedia, which also has its positive aspects, see Henry Jenkins, "Searching for the Origami Unicorn: The Matrix and Transmedia Storytelling," in *Convergence Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 93–130.

34 Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers: an Essay on the Geography of Anger* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 15.

between the restrictive economic structures of Iwabuchi's international critique on the one hand, and the free-flowing agency (and horrors) of Appadurai's postnationalism on the other hand.

In my understanding, another way of conceptualizing national identity, media trends and fandom may be possible through a careful consideration of fan culture as *transnational*. Transnationalism is not simply another word for postnationalism, or the flow of information and people across the fading borders of a globalised world, just as a transcultural fan community is not necessarily a blissfully multicultural group where people of all origins are (supposedly) united in equality. Rather, transnationalism takes into account the friction that Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing describes as a key feature of globalisation. Looking at Japan's economic influence in Southeast Asia, Tsing describes friction as "the awkward, unequal, unstable and creative qualities of interconnection across difference."³⁵ In her view, globalisation is often economically and socially oppressive, but there is still hope for contestation in and through the very sites of inequality. For instance, even those who are very differently or unequally positioned may form coalitions or collaborations, as international environmental activists, regime bureaucrats and forest-dwelling villagers in Indonesia did when they protested against deforestation by Japanese *sōgō shōsha* (general trading companies) in the 1990s. Lest this sound too much like the dualistic "us vs. them" approach of uniting disparate groups to resist a common enemy, Tsing states that with collaboration, "There is no reason to assume that collaborators share common goals. In transnational collaborations, overlapping but discrepant forms of cosmopolitanism may inform contributors, allowing them to converse—but across difference."³⁶ Collaboration, like the passage of trends, is also a process involving many intentions and affects. Tsing's concept of collaborative friction thus adds a dimension of productive contestation, or "cross-talk,"³⁷ to Appadurai's communities of sentiment and Jenkins' earlier, more idealistic, models of fandom, without falling into the overly divisive structures of domination Iwabuchi relies on.

Collaboration as a conversation across difference, I would argue, is precisely the mode that animation fans on the Internet work in today, particularly when they interact through the "collaborative-community format" of online forums, such as the multilingual bulletin board dedicated to the Korean animation team

35 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), 4.

36 *Ibid.*, 13.

37 Diana Brydon, "Cross-Talk, Postcolonial Pedagogy, and Transnational Literacy." *Situation Analysis* 4 (2004): 70.

SamBakZa discussed later in this paper. This is because online transcultural animation fan communities like SamBakZa's allow participants with diverse perspectives, who may not be equals in terms of language ability or social status in a given collaboration, to exchange views on media works they enjoy in a many-to-many forum of communication. A "transcultural animation fan community" can thus be defined as a group in which people from many national, cultural, ethnic, gendered, and other personal backgrounds find a sense of connection across difference, engaging with each other through a shared interest while negotiating the frictions that result from their differing social and historical contexts. In this light, animation fandom is (to paraphrase Jenkins) more than just a marketing concept, but less than a utopian semiotic democracy. Rather, it is a way for people to negotiate the opportunities and challenges of the global media environment that is emerging today.

Cartoon cases

From these theoretical speculations, I will turn to my three case studies, which illustrate the changing modes of animation production, distribution and consumption in more grounded historical contexts. My first example comes from America in the 1930s. As leading animation historians Leonard Maltin and Michael Barrier have described, the 1930s were Walt Disney's Golden Years. Disney's immense popularity and his growing (and later, much decried) global influence in this period make him the obvious leading man in any good animation story. I would like, however, to cut across this standard narrative and take a detour into a more minor work, a Betty Boop short called "A Language All My Own." This black-and-white sound cartoon was produced in 1935 by the Polish-born, New York-based brothers Max and Dave Fleischer. It represents an unusually direct effort to appeal to an international market, an effort born of a confluence of economic necessity and cross-cultural interest not seen in Disney's more successful (and Eurocentric) *Silly Symphonies*. In its unique approach, however, "A Language All My Own" also reveals the workings of a more general discourse that linked national identity, international film production and imperial ideology in the early part of the twentieth century.

Betty Boop made her screen debut as a supporting character in 1930, and by 1932, she was a trendy cartoon star with her own series. Early on, the *Betty Boop* series appealed to adults as much as children with its sexy heroine, surreal plots and knowing allusions to the lower-class urban underworld of booze and jazz. As the Depression deepened and the social climate grew harsher, however, Betty became subject to a growing moral panic surrounding

the depiction of sexuality and vice in Hollywood film (not to mention the lives of Hollywood film stars.) This panic culminated in the creation of the “Hays Code,” a motion picture production code designed to censor anything that might “stimulate the lower and baser element”³⁸ in audiences. By 1934 the Code was regularly enforced, so that within four years of her debut, Betty’s flapper days came to an end, and the Fleischers were forced to seek ways to recover their star from the necessity of covering her up.

One of these ways was to turn more to the international market. According to animator Myron Waldman, the Fleischers became aware that Betty Boop was popular in Japan, and decided to create a short film “designed to appeal to the Japanese market.”³⁹ This was “A Language All My Own.” It features Betty Boop (redesigned with more modest hemlines) performing the title song, all about how her catchy tune brings people around the world together. After singing to a cheering New York audience, Betty sets off in her plane for the Land of the Rising Sun, depicted literally as such with an emblematic sunrise over Mt. Fuji. While the opening seems like a perfect set-up for the sort of racial-caricature comedy common in cartoons of the period, in this instance, the Fleischers were deeply concerned about not offending their Japanese fans. As a result, when Betty arrives to sing for her cheering Japanese fans, the audience members are not depicted as the usual cymbal-hatted pan-Asian grotesques, but as more proportionate adult figures with detailed kimono and hairstyles—albeit still rather bucktoothed and hardly individualized. Even more surprising, Betty sings not only in English but also in Japanese. Waldman recounts how staff consulted Japanese exchange students in America on the lyrics, and also on Betty’s dance to be certain her body language and gestures would not be considered inappropriate in Japan. Rather than confirming Artz’s hypothesis that American animation necessarily imposes a coherent, monolithic American ideology on other countries, this work demonstrates a concerted attempt to localize a film by taking into account other languages, customs and cultures, producing a fascinatingly hybrid work designed to travel, to play on the circulation of international trends.

And yet, as Iwabuchi would say, even this sort of “hybridism” may be nothing more than a selling point that reaffirms the (inter)national power of the producer. Looking closer at Betty’s performance, it is interesting to note how she physically enacts national differences while still remaining the same old

38 “The Motion Picture Production Code of 1930 (Hays Code).” *ArtsReformation.com*, 12 April, 2006. <http://www.artsreformation.com/a001/hays-code.html> (July 7, 2009).

39 Mike Dobbs, “Myron Waldman 1908-2006,” in *Cartoon Brew*, February 5, 2006. <http://www.cartoonbrew.com/?s=Betty+Boop+%22Language+All+My+Own%22> (July 7, 2009)

New York cutie. When she sings the line “If you’re near or far / doesn’t matter where you are,” her melody takes up a few bars of the song “The Streets of Cairo”⁴⁰ as she sways, loose and sinuous, to a bongo beat. When she declares that “Song’s in ev’ry land o’er the ocean,” however, she stands at attention and salutes to an American march. The combination of music, images and words connotes that to be “far” is to be embodied as a languorous “Oriental,” while the universality of song is uprightly Western. What’s more, it is the catchphrase that made her famous in the United States, her “boop-boop-a-doop,” that is “known in every foreign home.” Betty has the Japanese audience repeat this line just as she sings it (see fig. 2).

Just as “A Language All My Own” used Orientalist imagery to depict Japan as a land full of compliant Betty fans, the film’s distributors attempted to build their overseas markets along existing imperial trade routes. These routes facilitated the import of Western films to countries around the world, but prevented those countries from entering into film trade as producers. In 1930s Japan, Fleischer Studios products were sold by Paramount for 500 yen per one-reel film—half the price of works by local Japanese animators. In this way, Paramount flooded the market and made it very difficult for small-scale Japanese animators to sell their works domestically, much less export them.⁴¹ Though Betty Boop had Japanese fans (some of whom were quite active in producing their own films), there could be no Western fans of Japanese animation in a system of distribution which largely ran from West to East. In both content and distribution, then, this film does not constitute a mutual transcultural exchange. Rather, it reveals the Orientalist conceptions of bounded national identity on which the cartoon’s attempts to form international relations and international film distribution were founded. In drawing on the imaginaries and trade routes of Western-dominated global flows, “A Language All My Own” represents an effort towards transcultural engagement that finally remains embedded in imperial internationalism.

40 This tune was written for the highly sensationalized performance of belly dancer “Little Egypt” at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair, and has since come to signify “the Orient” in the American popular consciousness. As an audio cue in early animation, it signals exoticized femininity and eroticism, commonly accompanying images of shapely silhouettes and dancing girls from a range of Middle Eastern and Asian countries. For more on the history of the song, see Donna Carlton, *Looking for Little Egypt*. Bloomington: IDD Books, 2002.

41 Yamaguchi Katsunori and Watanabe Yasushi. *Japanese Film Animation History*. (日本アニメーション映画史) (Osaka: Yūbunsha, 1997), 26.



Fig. 2: Betty listens to the Japanese audience “boop” in “A Language All My Own.” Image copyright 2011 King Features Syndicate, Inc./Fleischer Studios, Inc. TM Hearst Holdings, Inc./Fleischer Studios, Inc. Used with permission.

The necessity (and difficulty) of forming cross-cultural connections through media demonstrated in the Fleischer’s work has only grown more pronounced in the latter half of the century, as distant places are ever more intertwined in our daily lives through new communications technologies, and internationally mobile trends become the rule more than the exception. As John Tomlinson says, in this era, “increasingly homes are open to the world: our sitting rooms places ‘where the global meets the local.’”⁴² The advent of television and of personal recording technologies such as the VCR and DVD, especially, enabled direct exchanges between American and Japanese animation fans on a scale impossible to imagine in earlier top-down economies of the global film trade. The transformations of televised society are evident in the 1998 anime series *Cowboy Bebop*, directed by Watanabe Shinichirō. Rather than starting from fixed national standpoints, *Cowboy Bebop* represents a shift towards postnationalism, speculating on how community can be created in a world where “Like kites without strings, everyone has lost a sense of where they belong.”⁴³ As in Appadurai’s work, the struggle in this series is to imagine new ways of belonging in a universe of flows.

42 Tomlinson, 54.

43 Quoted in Napier, *Anime*, 117.

Cowboy Bebop, like so much post-war anime, is set in the decades following a near-apocalyptic technological disaster: the explosion of a hyperspace gate in orbit above the Earth has showered the planet with meteors. The planet's surface is mostly destroyed, and nation-states no longer exist. As a result, much of humanity has migrated into space, creating a "confusing conglomeration of independent governments, alliances and spheres of influence"⁴⁴ spread across the solar system. Public safety is only barely maintained by freelance bounty hunters like our protagonists, a mismatched group of quirky, damaged nomads trying to eke out a living aboard the spaceship *Bebop*. These include the coolly impetuous martial artist Spike Spiegel, tough-but-tender-hearted cyborg Jet Black, *femme fatale* Faye Valentine, and the cute-kid-and-dog duo Ed and Ein. From this premise, Watanabe, along with episode writers Satō Dai and Nobumoto Keiko, creates a series of sophisticated, unpredictable and entertaining stories that parody everything from American Westerns and 1970s Blaxploitation flicks to Hong Kong martial arts films. Both the show's setting and form thus suggest a mediated environment of diasporic cultural mixing in which power is dispersed and decentralized.

This Japanese repackaging of pop culture icons for a global audience may sound like a textbook example of Iwabuchi's corporate hybridism, and indeed, there is evidence to suggest that the program's "culturally odourless," easily translatable quality may be the reason for its international success.⁴⁵ For instance, when an English-language dub of *Cowboy Bebop* aired in America on the Cartoon Network's late-night "Adult Swim" programming block, it became an instant "fan favourite,"⁴⁶ praised even by those who usually prefer Japanese audio tracks with subtitles. Reviewer Robert Baigent, too, attributes the show's popularity to its stateless or *mukokuseki* (無国籍) quality, claiming that "*Cowboy Bebop* exists in a stateless other place where Western and Japanese audiences can appreciate it equally."⁴⁷ Contrary to the

44 Fred Patten, *Watching Anime, Reading Manga: 25 Years of Essays and Reviews* (Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge Press, 2004), 357.

45 As Petra Thiel has demonstrated, similar arguments have also been made about the global distribution of children's literature, a market in which culturally-specific plot points are often altered or removed in the translation process. See Thiel's article in this issue.

46 Patten, 58.

47 Robert Baigent, "Review of *Cowboy Bebop*." *Graduate Journal of Asia-Pacific Studies* 2.1 (2004): 92–94. In fact, the Japanese distribution/reception history of *Cowboy Bebop* recounted by Patten (358–9) is not quite "equal" to the American, and is actually rather complicated. While most niche anime titles air late at night on satellite stations, *Cowboy Bebop* was shown on TV Tokyo during primetime, in a 6:00 PM Friday timeslot starting April 3, 1998. However, due to its depictions of adult themes such as drug use and homosexuality, only 13 of the original 26 episodes were permitted to air in the first run. The full series was not shown until the autumn 1998–99 season at 1:00AM on the WOWOW satellite network.

Fleischer's efforts at localization, then, Baigent would suggest that *Cowboy Bebop* transcends the concept of national audiences entirely to become a truly global trend.

While there is something to be said for this argument, I think we must be more careful in applying the Japanese term *mukokuseki*. Iwabuchi defines *mukokuseki* as “‘something or someone lacking any nationality,’ but also implying the erasure of racial or ethnic characteristics.”⁴⁸ He finds ethnic erasure characteristic of anime intended for the global market. Many anime creators have openly taken the same stance, including such influential figures as the founder of the *Mobile Suit Gundam* dynasty, Tomino Yoshiyuki, who, according to author Peter Carey, insists that he “always tried to make his characters as standard and as universal as possible by not giving them local colour or national colour or ethnic colour.”⁴⁹

Upon closer inspection, however, *Cowboy Bebop* marks a shift away from universalising distribution strategies, and poses a challenge to Iwabuchi's image of globally popular anime as “culturally odourless” and racially neutral. Rather than erasing ethnicity, *Cowboy Bebop* self-consciously depicts a diverse society composed of African American, Italian, Chinese and Moroccan-descended characters, to name just a few. Far from avoiding the cultural context of its production, the show hints ironically at its Japanese origins when it depicts the spaceship's owner, a gruff cyborg named Jet, engaging in markedly “Japanese” cultural practices such as tending bonsai or bringing back *omiyage* (souvenirs) of a cute local food called *piyoko* (even in the English dub) from a short trip to Earth. And neither does a globalised—or, interstellar—mass medium contribute to linguistic homogenisation. Self-reflexively, the characters in the show often watch television programmes that are, according to the riders, “being broadcasted in twelve different languages.” If this series is “stateless,” then, it is not in Iwabuchi's sense of erasing ethnicity, but in Appadurai's sense of postnational diaspora: hybridity, not corporate hybridism. While nation-states have ceased to exist, ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity has flourished and flows through the new channels of ethnoscaping and mediascaping.

Despite this, *Bebop* won awards at the Kobe Animation Festival and the Japan National Science Fiction Convention in 2000, and was popular enough among viewers to warrant a theatrical feature film in 2001. Manga (comics) and video games were also released, creating a transmedia trend that drew Japanese (and eventually global) audiences with ever more pieces of same story in different media.

48 Iwabuchi, *Recentering*, 28.

49 Peter Carey, *Wrong about Japan: a Father's Journey with His Son*. (New York: Random House, 2005), 98.

For Appadurai, as I have mentioned, mediascapes provide not only a way for diasporic travellers to maintain connections with their homelands, but also a way for diverse audiences to form communities of sentiment based around a common feeling, interest or goal. I would like to say that *Cowboy Bebop* depicts the formation of just such a community of sentiment, and that these imaginative depictions of mediated bonding provide equally far-flung and diverse audiences with a model for the formation of their own communities. And yet, the behaviour of the Bebop crew as an audience sometimes works against such optimistic readings. They rarely all watch television together or use it as a way to connect. A typical scene of television watching from episode 9 finds Jet pruning his bonsai in front of the screen as Faye, seated on a nearby stairway, casually files her nails. Spike half-listens to the broadcast in another room while he scrubs down his personal fighter ship. Even the dog Ein yawns in front of his own little screen. They are hardly a cohesive audience. Rather, each character clearly places his or her own interests foremost, leading to fights and competition as often as cooperation between them. Though they drift together for a time as they wander, finally, each of them is so committed to recovering some long-lost source of personal identity—an absent lover, a missing parent, a long-lost home—that they are pulled apart by their different trajectories. By the end, most of the crew members have either left the *Bebop* or died. Their momentary collaboration, then, is more striking for the tensions that result from their different histories and goals than for any easy relationship born of sharing in the flows of mediascapes. In this way, *Cowboy Bebop* goes beyond televised postnationalism to suggest the fraught and partial connections across difference that are characteristic of online animation and its transnational fan communities.

A more fully developed example of computer-mediated transcultural fandom can be found in the case of *There she is!!*. This popular series of five short web-cartoons was created between 2003-2008 by Amalloc, a member of the three-person South Korean amateur animation team SamBakZa.⁵⁰ As part of a growing trend towards digital imaging and online distribution in animation, SamBakZa points to the beginnings of a more participatory but also more unstable way of forming communities of sentiment based on mutual yet asymmetrical mediated exchange.

One benefit that Internet distribution has for SamBakZa's fan community is the more mutual relationship it enables between producers and consumers. Since anyone with computer access, the right software and enough determination can now create a cartoon and distribute it worldwide by themselves, the kinds of economic motives that lead American and Japanese animation studios to

⁵⁰ All cartoons discussed in this section may be viewed at <http://www.sambakza.net/>.

create nationally localized or odourless texts (for example, the need to recover investments on large-scale productions by cornering national film markets, or to secure the best broadcast timeslots) are no longer quite so driving. Of course, that is not to say SamBakZa's work exists entirely apart from the world economy. The last three episodes of *There she is!!* were funded by the Gyeonggi Digital Contents Agency, an organization formed to promote and develop South Korea's growing digital contents industry using explicitly business-oriented models.⁵¹ But *There she is!!* itself is not a commodity in the typical sense. Copies of the cartoons can be downloaded for free, and to date the site does not sell merchandise or DVDs based on the works (though pop-up ads are increasingly in evidence.) Fans are not encouraged to buy anything in order to participate in the series. Rather, they are asked to add to the site themselves. They may personally contact the producer, Amalloc, on the site's bulletin board to discuss their opinions of the shorts. They may also send in fan art, comics and links to their own videos, which are posted by the animators on the "Fan Page" gallery on their main site. The creation of Flash animation thus becomes a more collaborative process of dialogue between fans and artists, with the bulletin board acting as a (web)site of transcultural engagement.

Before we become too celebratory, however, it is important to note that the Internet is not quite a fully equitable, utopian "public sphere," as many theorists of the 1990s seemed to feel. Mark Poster, for instance, has claimed that the Internet outdoes Jürgen Habermas' theorization of the public sphere in being less hierarchical, and so more democratic and equitable, than the public spheres of Habermas' famous coffee houses. The "salient characteristic of Internet community," he contends, "is the diminution of prevailing hierarchies of race, class and especially gender. What appears in the embodied world as irreducible hierarchy plays a lesser role in...cyberspace."⁵² Even Appadurai tends somewhat toward this attitude when he says that the "virtual neighbourhoods" enabled by new communications technologies are "no longer bounded by territory, passports, taxes, elections and other conventional political diacritics, but by access to both the software and hardware that are required to connect to these large international computer networks."⁵³ Appadurai is more realistic than Poster in that he mentions technological requirements as a potential structure of exclusion. But still, we cannot underestimate the influence of political, geographical and especially linguistic boundaries that uphold

51 GDCA Gyeonggi Digital Contents Agency. N.d. <http://www.gdca.or.kr/eng/index1.asp> (July 7, 2009).

52 Mark Poster, "Cyberdemocracy: The Internet and the Public Sphere," in *Internet Culture*, ed. David Porter (New York: Routledge, 1997), 201–18.

53 Appadurai, *Modernity*, 195.

existing asymmetries online. Extending Tsing's concept of friction to media, I contend that online interaction is not separable from the "embodied world" or "conventional political diacritics"; rather, it is shot through with conflicts that cross over between physical and virtual communities.

There she is!! is a perfect case for addressing these issues because the series itself takes on very real problems of prejudice and social conflict. It uses images and music to tell the story of a girl rabbit named Doki who falls in love with a boy cat named Nabi in a world where love between cats and rabbits is forbidden (fig. 3). Doki is brashly unconcerned with the signs posted everywhere banning cat-rabbit relations, and pursues Nabi by popping up comically everywhere he goes. Nabi is at first frightened and embarrassed by the rabbit's attentions, but the more he sees how much Doki cares for him, the more he begins to like her as well. The first episode (or, "Step," as they are called) ends with a small gesture of mutual acceptance: Nabi tries a glassful of Doki's favourite carrot-juice, while Doki gulps down a fishy drink. It is a sweet, hopeful ending almost reminiscent of "A Language All My Own," which hoped for an easy reconciliation of differences through the cinematic unification of images and song.



Fig. 3: Nabi and Doki walk by a sign outlawing their relationship in *There she is!!*. Used with the artist's permission.

As Doki and Nabi begin to date in successive episodes, however, they face increasing discrimination. Nabi is thrown out of a cafe and later jailed because he has been dating a rabbit, while Doki is attacked and wounded by crowds of anti-miscegenation protesters. In the classic fashion of a moral panic, the people polarize into two groups: those who support the couple and those who condemn them. In this setting, life seems impossible for Doki and Nabi, and Doki contemplates escaping on an airplane with a ticket marked "Paradise."

The final “Step” of the series, however, offers neither a gleaming vision of global harmony, as in “A Language All My Own,” nor a conclusive tragedy, as in *Cowboy Bebop*. The lovers do not get to leave for Paradise and never find complete social acceptance, but they do opt to maintain their commitment to each other as they work within their community for change. The final shot of the series sees them cleaning anti-miscegenation graffiti off of the drink machines where their relationship began.

Clearly these conflicts go beyond dreams of disembodied equality. Rather, they point to the affective dimension of transcultural trends, in which the travel of texts is motivated by complex interactions of desire, refusal, fear and longing grounded in lived national, regional and transnational experiences. *There she is!!* fans recognized this dimension when they argued that the shorts are an allegory for the difficult but hopeful national relations between Korea and Japan—an intriguing theory, given the often bitter history of Japanese colonial influence on Korean film and animation.⁵⁴ Furthermore, the fans themselves must face issues of linguistic and cultural friction on the bulletin board. Comments on this board are posted in English, Korean, Japanese, Spanish, and a number of other languages, in that order of frequency.⁵⁵ As a result, the fans here are highly attuned to differences of nationality and language, and the conflicts they cause. For instance, Amalloc has mentioned in posts to the board that his English is not fluent, and he tends to answer Korean and Japanese comments more readily than English ones. So when he posted a message in English on August 27, 2008 explaining that he is unable to answer all of the comments and questions he receives in English, one poster replied with an angry “flame,” demanding “SPEAK PROPER ENGLISH FUCKING AMALLOC.”⁵⁶ As fans began to fire back insults, however, another poster, going under the handle “dqle,” responded

54 See John Lent and Kie-Un Yu, “Korean Animation: A Short but Robust Life,” in *Animation in Asia and the Pacific*, ed. John A. Lent (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 89–100 and Eungjun Min, “Political and Sociocultural Implications of Hollywood Hegemony in the Korean Film Industry: Resistance, Assimilation, and Articulation,” in *Artz and Kamalipour*, 245–61.

55 As of November 12, 2010, the languages used out of 2142 original posts (OPs) are: English: 1039 OPs (48.5%); Korean: 899 (42.0%); Japanese 121 (5.6%); Spanish: 24 (1.1 %); posts in other languages/two or more languages: 59 (2.8%). Chinese, Polish, and Russian are represented in smaller numbers. It is also interesting to note that in the first half of its life, Korean was more prevalent than English: the board has gradually become more Anglophone as *There she is!!* climbed the rankings on popular English hosting sites such as Newgrounds and Albino Blacksheep.

56 The thread has since been removed from the main site’s bulletin board by Amalloc. As of July 2009 it could still be found by entering the exact phrase into a search engine, but unfortunately the majority of comments to this board were lost in a site upgrade in May 2010. As a result, the thread no longer appears either on Google or on archiving sites such as the Wayback Machine. It has, however, been archived by Heidelberg University’s “Asia and Europe in a Global Context” research cluster as part of the trends project. Records are available upon request.

by opening a discussion as to why a cartoon might generate such strong emotion. He then explicitly related the contentious remarks about language brewing on the board to the depictions of anger and discrimination in the darkest instalment of *There she is!!*, writing “Doesn’t this remind you of Step 4...?” In this way, SamBakZa’s fans are engaged, if not in a stable community, then at least in a collaborative attempt at interpretation “across difference,” working in and through the ongoing frictions of the global circulation of animation trends.

Conclusion

The cases of “A Language All My Own,” *Cowboy Bebop* and *There She Is!!* each demonstrate a different mode of cross-cultural exchange. In “A Language All My Own,” the Fleischer Brothers created an international film that attempted to act as a bridge between the United States and Japan by depicting Betty Boop as a mobile, hybrid figure able to cross between nations, languages and customs. This kind of cinematic engagement, however, still relied on bounded conceptions of national and cultural difference and on existing international trade routes, so that Betty’s performance of “Japanese-ness” ultimately reveals the Orientalist imaginaries of Western imperialism that persisted into the early twentieth century. The case of Watanabe Shinichirō’s anime series *Cowboy Bebop*, by contrast, grew out of the postnational, televisual mode of exchange that arose in the late twentieth century, in which bodies, images and technologies were thought to flow across the fading borders of nation-states. On the one hand, *Cowboy Bebop* can be seen as a “stateless” or “culturally odourless” commodity created by corporate media globalisation, as Iwabuchi argues. But on the other hand, it also demonstrates new ways of imagining diversity, even as it reveals some of the difficulties of maintaining a community that arise from diasporic mixing. Finally, the web cartoon *There She Is!!* exemplifies the workings of fan communities that form at a transnational and transcultural level through the Internet. The kinds of global flows involved in transcultural communities are often asymmetrical, as participants do not always have equal access or equal linguistic abilities in a given exchange. This asymmetry may even give rise to frictions between members, revealing cultural chauvinisms or expressions of privilege. But frictions can also prove productive, as they open up opportunities for media fans to reflexively discuss the ongoing social issues that pervade online media through the very channels of communication those media themselves open up.

So, while each of these works demonstrates a different socially-, technologically- and historically-contingent mode of animated globalisation, all three of them point to certain trends in animation toward cross-cultural and even transcultural

exchange. That is not to say that animation is a fully liberatory or revolutionary medium, or that all fan movements are acts of pure grassroots empowerment. Much animation, as Iwabuchi argues, still flows through corporate channels of distribution. And even works such as the Fleischers' cartoons and the SamBakZa message boards can allow creators and consumers to reaffirm existing dominant discourses. But as examples of transcultural trends, the animated texts I discuss also point to what is emerging: to aspirations (however unfulfilled) for more mutual exchange between those living in the West and East Asia, for the expression of cultural and ethnic diversity, and for strategies to work through asymmetries in global flow by acknowledging ongoing social frictions. In that way, these cases serve as examples of the broader changes taking place in the contemporary media environment, encouraging us to remain alert to both the risks and possible rewards of media globalization. I hope that the models of international, postnational and transnational exchange and the three studies of animation outlined here will provide a useful starting point for all of those who wish to collaborate further on imagining transcultural fandom.

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