

Western Japanese-ness

Intercultural Translations of Japan in Western Media

Edited by

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Series in Critical Media Studies



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Western Japaneseness: An Introduction

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Do you remember *The Simpsons* episode in which Japanese yakuza are shown interfering in a local conflict between Marge and her former associates about the selling of pretzels in Springfield?¹ They were introduced as “the poison fists of the Pacific Rim”² and nothing much else needed to be said, as the audience immediately realized that it was yakuza that were being shown in this scene. Homer had previously hired the Italian mob to secure Marge’s business, but the response by her former business associates was not a retreat from but an internationalization of the involvement of organized crime. This little episode already shows that references to Japanese (popular) culture are often easily integrated into Western popular media and do not need a lot of introduction. Very often, the common stereotypes refer to sushi, *manga*, Ghibli *anime*,³ the

¹ The Simpsons, season 8, episode 11, “The Twisted World of Marge Simpson,” directed by Chuck Sheetz, written by Jennifer Crittenden, aired January 19, 1997.

² Hugo Dobson, “Mister Sparkle Meets the Yakuza: Depictions of Japan in The Simpsons,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 39, no. 1 (2006): 44-68.

³ After the success of Miyazaki Hayao’s *Kaze no Tani no Naushika* (*Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*) in 1984, the studio was founded one year later and has created tremendously popular animation films (*anime*) ever since, including *Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi* (*Spirited Away*, 2001) that received an Academy Award for Best Animated Feature. On the success story of anime in Japan in general, see Ian Condry, *The Soul of Anime: Collaborative Creativity and Japan’s Media Success Story* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013). On the visual practices *manga* and *anime* refer to within the context of Japanese narrative traditions, see Stephan Köhn, *Traditionen visuellen Erzählens in Japan: Eine paradigmatische Untersuchung der Entwicklungslinien vom Faltschirmbild zum narrativen Manga* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005).

yakuza, Godzilla,⁴ *Takeshi's Castle*,⁵ cosplay,⁶ or Japan's office workers. Regardless of their consistent appearance, the images that are supposedly Japanese in origin are very often just based on Western mainstream stereotypes about Japan and rarely deeply relate to accurate knowledge about the Far Eastern country's culture. What is displayed, and what the present volume intends to discuss in more detail, is a kind of Western Japaneseness. That means Western imaginations about Japan are displayed, especially in popular media, which address the preassumptions of the consumers rather than the cultural realities as they exist in Japan. What is consequently achieved is a construction of Japaneseness that is solely based on stereotypes and prejudices. It has to be highlighted here as well that being Japanese, like being Italian, German, etc., is imagined because many elements of Japanese culture have been imported from other Asian regions, especially from China. Nevertheless, there is a "cultural conglomerate," based on a set of values, traditions, self-perceptions, as well as identifications of Japaneseness by foreigners that creates the identity that is usually brought in connection with Japan. In a foreign and often Western context, what is supposed to be Japanese is similarly imagined, yet is considered, to refer to the present topic once more, by those who consume things, e.g., popular media, as something particularly Japanese.

The famous French semiotician Roland Barthes (1915-1980) visited Japan in the 1960s, and he would later describe his experiences in his *Empire of Signs*⁷ in which the bodies of the Japanese create a larger union, a community that is very much defined by the signs that surround individuals.⁸ The semiotics of Japan seemed to be quite different from those in the Western world, with other

⁴ On Godzilla as a global icon of Japanese descent, see Frank Jacob, "From Tokyo's Destroyer to International Icon: Godzilla and Japanese Monstrosity in the Postwar Age," in *All Around Monstrous: Monster Media in Their Historical Contexts*, ed. Verena Bernardi and Frank Jacob (Wilmington, DE: Vernon Press, 2019), 211-244.

⁵ *Fūun! Takeshi-jō* (*Takeshi's Castle*) was a popular game show broadcast in Japan between 1986 and 1989, hosted by Takeshi Kitano.

⁶ A Japanese fan practice in which people dress up as characters from famous anime or manga. This cultural practice has also gained popularity in Europe and North America in the last two decades. Theresa Winge, "Costuming the Imagination: Origins of Anime and Manga Cosplay," *Mechademia* 1 (2006): 65-76.

⁷ Roland Barthes, *L'Empire des signes* (Paris: Flammarion, 1966). For a discussion of Barthes' intercultural experiences in Japan, Antje Landmann, *Zeichenleere: Roland Barthes' interkultureller Dialog in Japan* (Munich: Iudicium, 2003) is recommended. On Barthes' theoretical concepts, see also Gianfranco Marrone, *Roland Barthes: Parole Chiave* (Rome: Carocci, 2016).

⁸ Barthes, *L'Empire*, 133.

forms of traditional symbolism at work. An image of Mt. Fuji⁹ evokes quite different feelings than it would for a Western spectator, appearing similar to a wave (Fig. X.1), as do other famous images like the “Dream of the Fisherman’s Wife” (ca. 1814, Fig. X.2), depicted in an *ukiyo-e*¹⁰ by Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849).¹¹ The latter image reminds people of the famous Edo-period story about Princess Tamatori, a semiotic message or encoding that could only work in a Japanese context. In the West, an octopus raping a woman was and probably still would be considered some kind of perversion that originated in an artist’s mind.

Fig. X.1: Hokusai: The Great Wave off Kanagawa



⁹ Jocelyn Bouquillard, ed., *Hokusai: 36 Ansichten des Berges Fuji*, trans. Matthias Wolf (Munich: Schirmer Mosel, 2007).

¹⁰ On Japanese woodblock prints (*ukiyo-e*) see, among others, Renée Violet, *Japanische Farbholzschnitte*, 2nd ed. (Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 1984); Museen der Stadt Regensburg, eds. *Ukiyo-E: Bilder der vergänglichen Welt* (Regensburg: Museen der Stadt Regensburg, 1990); Hans-Günther Schwarz, Geraldine Gutiérrez de Wienken, and Frieder Hepp, eds. *Schiffbrüche und Idyllen: Mensch, Natur und die vergängliche, fließende Welt (ukiyo-e) in Ost und West* (Munich: Iudicium, 2014).

¹¹ On Hokusai’s life and work, see Nagata Seiji, *Hokusai* (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1984); Edmond De Goncourt, *Hokusai* (New York: Parkstone International, 2014).

Fig. X.2: Hokusai: The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife.



Of course, the import of Japanese artworks, like the famous woodblock prints displayed during the first World Exhibition in Paris in 1855,¹² created a wave of influence from abroad, and a so-called “Japonisme” was reflected in Western and especially French art in the second half of the 19th century as well.¹³ This was not the first time that images and stories were told about Japan, as they became more well-known due to the opening of the Asian country in 1853 by an American expedition, and the first diplomatic missions’ reports provided many stories and determined stereotypes about the nation in the decades to come.¹⁴ Already in the medieval age, stories about the island were spread in the

¹² Charles Robin, *Histoire illustrée de l'Exposition universelle* (Paris: Furne, 1855).

¹³ Gabriel P. Weisberg et al., eds. *Japonisme: Japanese Influence on French Art, 1854-1910* (Cleveland, OH: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1975); Siegfried Wichmann, *Japonisme: The Japanese Influence on Western Art since 1858* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2007). On the influence of erotic woodblock prints (*shunga*) on Western art, see Ricard Bru, *Erotic Japonisme: The Influence of Japanese Sexual Imagery on Western Art* (Leiden: Hotei Publishing, 2014).

¹⁴ On the Prussian expedition and the stereotypes it would later report with regard to Japan, Frank Jacob, “Die Eulenburg-Expedition — Preußische Direktheit trifft Japanische Zurückhaltung,” in *Fremdbilder — Selbstbilder: Paradigmen japanisch-deutscher Wahrnehmung (1861-2011)*, ed. Stephan Köhn (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2013), 25-40 is

report given by Marco Polo (1254-1324), who had supposedly been in China where he had heard a lot about Japan.¹⁵ Another wave of knowledge was provided by Portuguese traders and Jesuit missionaries¹⁶ who had visited the East Asian region before Japan was eventually almost totally secluded from Western influence by Tokugawa Ieyasu in the early 1600s.¹⁷

When Japanese art and, later, popular media reached the West, it usually had some impact, similar to that which Western art or literature would have in the years following the opening of Japan as well.¹⁸ Like the imports from abroad, Japanese exports also needed to be adjusted to the semiotic context and environment of Europe and North America. Famous films by Kurosawa Akira (1910-1998) would therefore be reproduced in a more suitable, i.e., sellable, fashion. *Seven Samurai* (1954) turned into the *Magnificent Seven* (1960), and Mifune Toshirō (1920-1997) in *Yojimbo* (1961)¹⁹ turned into Clint Eastwood in *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964).²⁰

When Japanese figures actually appeared in Western popular media throughout the 20th century, they often served to deliver a specific stereotype

recommended. Many early Western visitors would later publish their impressions of the Asian country as well. See, for example, Gustav Spiess, *Die preussische Expedition nach Ostasien während der Jahre 1860-1862. Reise-Skizzen aus Japan, China, Siam und der indischen Inselwelt* (Berlin: Otto Spamer, 1864).

¹⁵ John Larner, *Marco Polo and the Discovery of the World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).

¹⁶ St. Francis Xavier, "Letter from Japan, to the Society of Jesus in Europe, 1552." Accessed March 22, 2020. <https://my.tlu.edu/ICS/icsfs/EurosinAsiaSources9pg.pdf?target=f95413e2-209d-4e7f-a324-456e70da7a3d>.

¹⁷ Trade control and the prevention of an influx of Christian ideas were measures Tokugawa Ieyasu took to protect and strengthen his family's rule over Japan. For a more detailed discussion of these measures, see Frank Jacob, "Tokugawa Ieyasu, Reichseiniger, Shōgun oder Japans Diktator?" in *Diktaturen ohne Gewalt? Wie Diktatoren ihre Macht behaupten*, ed. Frank Jacob (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2013), 79-102.

¹⁸ For a detailed discussion of modern Japanese literature and the impact of Western knowledge and literature see the chapters in Frank Jacob, ed., *Critical Insights: Modern Japanese Literature* (Ipswich, MA: Salem Press, 2017).

¹⁹ Charles Silver, "Akira Kurosawa's *Yojimbo*," *Inside/Out, a MOMA Blog*, September 10, 2013,

https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2013/09/10/akira-kurosawas-yojimbo/

²⁰ For a detailed analysis of the adaptations from Japanese cinema within the American Western genre, see Kyle Keough, "Cowboys and Shoguns: The American Western, Japanese Jidaigeki, and Cross-Cultural Exchange," accessed March 20, 2020, <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1109&context=srhonorspr> og

related to Japan. What was thereby collectively created was what we refer to in the present volume as “Western Japaneseness.” The chapters in this volume will highlight how images of Japan were constructed and used in modern Western popular media and give an insight into how far the entertainment industry is still using such artificial images when talking about presenting a foreign otherness.

The Contributions

Bruno Surace’s chapter opens the volume by investigating the myth of Japan – a country visited every year by several million tourists, a number that is also constantly growing – as it is conveyed by the Western media, and then exploring the points of contact between an aesthetic of Japaneseness and various types of Western media products: cartoons, cinema forms, digital content, etc. The chapter highlights the mutual influences between the two contexts, often such as to generate real interpolations, which are heightened in the globalized world and its imaginaries.

Giacomo Calorio’s chapter proceeds with an in-depth analysis dedicated to Japanese cinema. Nevertheless, the goal is not to present another history of Japanese cinema, but to develop a study on how Japanese cinema is received in the West in a cultural key. In this way, the processes of the dislocation and relocation of a distant cinema are explored in terms of their aesthetic mutations and shifts from one receptive context to another. These pages also take into account how the “J-pop” imaginary and the halo of *otherness* that is associated with it not only reverberate in contexts of close textual production, but also in a whole universe of urban life practices, treating the exchange of aesthetics from Japan to the West not only as being pertinent to films, books, and comics, but also as being capable of reconfiguring some ways of reading reality.

The reflection on cinema continues in the chapter by Remo Gramigna, which centers on Jim Jarmusch’s film *Ghost Dog* (1999). Gramigna studies Jarmusch’s film from a semiotic perspective as the fruit of a multifaceted syncretism: of inspiration, of genre, of form. The film thus becomes a laboratory for the author to verify a particular postmodern and transnational declination of the ancient code of the Samurai. The textual analysis provides meaningful data not only about the film, but also about a more general transcoding system from Japan to the West and back.

The chapter by Mattia Thibault is also configured in this direction, again starting from cinematographic cases, namely the animated film *Big Hero 6* (Don Hall and Chris Williams, 2014) and the television series *The Man in the*

High Castle (Frank Spotnitz, 2015-2019). The author specifically focuses on the representation in both these cases of a San Francisco imbued with Japaneseness, to the point of it being renamed San Fransokyo. The author's analysis extrapolates from the useful indicator texts in terms of real urban semiotics and culture, capable of accounting for the meaning of increasingly multicultural cities, where the dominant isotope is that of a fusion, a hybridization made of constant references to a Japanese aesthetic. The city therefore stands as a place for writing and reading relationships between distant cultures.

Frank Jacob's chapter continues the discourse on audiovisual media, focusing specifically on the 1980s television series *The Master* (Michael Sloan, 1984). This series is in fact the result of the era of the massive advent of Japanese characters in Western television and cinema, and the chapter detects stereotyping processes that the author identifies by focusing on the figure of the ninja as the result of a radical resemanticization in the transition from the Japanese context to the Western one.

Gianmarco Thierry Giuliana shifts the perspective further by focusing on *anime* and *manga*. For several decades, Japanese cartoons and comics have been, in an increasingly pervasive way, objects of Western fetishism, around which vast markets and imaginaries revolve. Giuliana thus proposes a rich exploration of the processes of contamination that underlie the production of *anime*, often already originally characterized by more or less immediately identifiable Western elements. The chapter is therefore configured as a complex work on the dynamics of intercultural translations from Japan to the West and vice versa, starting from the increasingly popular texts shared by both contexts.

Finally, the chapter by Juan Manuel Montoro extends the media overview by investigating the video game sphere using the case study of *Super Mario*, one of the most famous video game series in history. Montoro begins by providing a detailed definition of Japaneseness, which he then uses to study a relevant case of a product of Japanese origins with strong Western connotations (Mario is in fact an Italian plumber), and continues by studying the worldbuilding processes that have contributed to making it so iconic. The series and the brands that derive from it are analyzed in detail, with attention being paid at the same time to the internal mechanisms of the construction of the character and the world it inhabits and its forms of transmedia outsourcing.

A journey through various forms of media – cinema, TV, comics, video games, and digital media – and texts is thus proposed in this volume through a plurality of voices and approaches that share a vocation for the analysis of specific texts

and, at the same time, a willingness to make these texts speak as bearers of values, imaginaries, and ideologies, deriving from their primary structure of intercultural translations what we have called “Western Japaneseness.”

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Chapter 1

Big in Japan:
**The Myth of Japan in
Western Audiovisual Media**

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Abstract

This chapter will take a closer look at the global spread of “Japaneseness” through anime and manga, but also leading to the global phenomenon of Pokémon, which has been on the crest of a wave for over twenty years, able to span various generations, pervasive, and crossmedial. The example of Pokémon will be useful for understanding a mixed imaginary, totally hybridized, in which components specifically drawn from the aesthetics of Japanese manga are fused with elements coming from other semiospheres. The chapter will then also take a look at the growing value of Japanese cinema in the West, concentrating initially on the direct relationship between the works of Yasujiro Ozu (1903-1963) and classic American cinema, and then on the importance of the “J-horror” genre in the definition of a globalized aesthetics of terror, and on the growing appreciation of the Japanese cinematographic context in the rest of the world.

Keywords: Pokémon, Japanese horror film, Yasujiro Ozu.

* * *

The Birth of a Myth

In 2017, as recorded by the UNWTO (United Nations World Tourism Organization), almost 30 million tourists visited Japan. This is an amazing amount of people, considering that Japan has approximately 127 million inhabitants and, above all, that only five years before there were around 20 million fewer tourists. Japan has become a mythical country, a land whose

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