Japanese Fantasy and the East-West Dialectic

Frans Mäyrä
University of Tampere

Globalisation in culture?

The aim of this short article is to open up potential directions for further analysis: I am looking into points of contact where certain kinds of dialectic relationships between the fantasy traditions in the West and in Japan can be observed. While considering various examples, four distinctive dialectics will be identified, but by no means thoroughly discussed. Hopefully there will be continuing and more thorough analyses into the role of fantasy in the globalisation of culture in the future.

When discussed in a cultural context, globalisation can mean great many things. To quote some notable approaches, Stuart Hall (1997a & 1997b) has emphasised the potential for resistance at the face of a process he sees primarily as homogenizing global flows of people, money, machines, images, and ideas. Somewhat on same lines, John Tomlinson (1999, 2) has written about the 'complex connectivity' that he sees as the primary condition of globalization. The 'empirical reality' where we are now living is characterised by 'multivalent connections' that tie together the practices, experiences, and the political, economic and environmental conditions of life across the globe. In his influential work, Arjun Appadurai (1996, 4) has characterised cultural globalisation in terms of imagination working within the two major forces, those of mass migration and electronic mediation. Appadurai is critical towards the views of Frankfurt School and many modernisation theorists who have interpreted the modern world as growing into an 'iron cage', imagination stunted by the forces of commoditization, leading supposedly to less capacity to play, and increasingly inhibited spontaneity at every level of culture. Appadurai himself rather prefers to points towards the growing evidence on how the consumption of mass media often provokes resistance, selectivity and, in general, agency. (Ibid., 6-7.) Thus, we are currently witnessing the emergence of new ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes and ideoscapes, as Appadurai calls these new cultural and societal spaces (ibid., 35 *et passim*).

Cultural globalisation is often, in somewhat unproblematic way, equated with the unidirectional spread of American or Western influences. While the dominating flow of Western products and influences has to be recognised, the opposite directions in cultural exchanges often receive less attention. Yet, a case can be made for 'recentering' (or decentering) globalisation and here it is helpful to look closer into the case of Japanese fantasy. The impact of Japanese culture on other cultures has been so notable particularly in Asia, that some scholars have taken a fresh look at the concept of 'Japanization' (which itself is loaded with its associations from the expansionist period of imperial Japan). Koichi Iwabuchi (2002), who is one of these academics, has paid attention to the potential threat which distinctively Japanese cultural exports would present (particularly considering the legacy of Japanese imperialism in Asia), and argues that contemporary Japanese cultural exports can be characterised as 'culturally odorless'. The 'three C's' – Japanese consumer technologies; comics and cartoons; computer and video games – are all successful as exemplars of the process whereby the cultural features of the country of origin have managed to gain positive connotations through their virtual omission. (Ibid., 27.)

Iwabuchi aims to localize 'Japan' in the booming Asian audiovisual markets in the 1990s, and he looks

closely such examples as the role of Japanese television dramas in Taiwan (ibid., 85). A bit differently framed, but nevertheless powerful case can nevertheless be made for a much wider, global impact of Japanese popular culture.

Case: game culture

The particular case I use here as my starting point is the impact of Japanese culture on the field of digital gaming. The first computer and video games that were designed and implemented were Western. These include examples such as *Spacewar!*, which was an early space shooter game designed by a group of hackers working in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the early 1960s, and the simple table-tennis game *PONG*, which turned out to become the first commercially successful arcade video game, when published and distributed by Atari, Inc. in 1972. The art of designing games does not, however, necessarily exist only as co-located with the original centres of innovative engineering. There were Japanese companies like Nintendo, who had a long history of designing and manufacturing playing cards and other forms of amusement. When faced with the new era of electronic entertainment, these institutions were quick to catch on.

Already in the late 1970s many of the globally best-selling digital games were Japanese, including such genre-defining classics as *Space Invaders* (Taito, 1978), *Galaxian* (Namco, 1979), *Pac-Man* (Namco, 1980), *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo, 1981), *Mario Bros.* (Nintendo, 1983), as well as its more famous sequel, *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo, 1985). One of the most detailed accounts of this process can be read from David Sheff's book with a humorously symptomatic title: *Game Over: How Nintendo Zapped an American Industry, Captured Your Dollars, and Enslaved Your Children* (Sheff 1993). In perhaps more neutral terms, it can be said that in 1983 the US game industry crashed, and the import of Japanese games played a crucial role in the (re)birth of modern game culture. The use of metaphors of military invasion is relatively common, when particularly American authors discuss the influence Japanese culture has had, also on other fields in addition to game cultures. Roland Kelts' work *Japanamerica: How Japanese Pop Culture Has Invaded the U.S.* (2006) carries a title that participates in the same militaristic discourse, but Kelts' analyses are also helpful in delineating what he calls a 'third wave in Japanophilia' – outsider's infatuation with Japan's cultural character. Kelts recounts the European artists' discovery of the Japanese aesthetics in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and beatniks' affinity with Japan's ascetic spiritual traditions in the late 1950s and 1960s. The third wave, however, is not primarily focused on Japan's classic traditions and culture, but on such 'futuristic' forms of popular culture as anime, manga and digital games. (Ibid., 5-6.) And in all those pop-cultural forms, a 'recirculation' of Western media and technology (within Japan, as well as back to the West) in re-imagined forms can be observed. The reinvention of Western video games in Japan is just one example.

Visual dialectic

It is worth taking this discussion of cultural dialogue into a slightly more detailed level by naming its different dialectical aspects or moments. The concept of 'dialectic' itself has got various meanings in the histories of different philosophies, but here it is used to point towards the dynamic, transitional and interdependent character of cultures as systems of signification (on the non-coinciding character of cultural subjectivity, see: Mäyrä 1999, 53-80).

Discussing cultural globalisation, it is not easy to pass upon Disney, which has grown into one of the early truly global cultural industries, and is often used as the emblem of cultural globalisation in its sense of American cultural imperialism. For example, while discussing globalisation process Thomas Friedman (2000, 268) writes how everything starts to look the same, 'with the same Taco Bells, KFC's, and Marriotts, with the same malls, MTV and Disney characters.' In this context, it is interesting to compare with each other two visual characters, Mickey Mouse (Figure 1), the famous symbol of American entrepreneurial energy and optimism, and Osamu Tezuka's Astro Boy (Figure 2). It is easy to see certain similarities, and to point out, for example, how Astro Boy's large eyes and friendly, round shapes are indebted to Mickey Mouse's similar characteristics. To say this does not, however, mean that Osamu Tezuka's cartoon (originally run in years 1952-68), or the manga and anime traditions it helped to start, would just be 'more of the same' when compared and contrasted with Disney and its cartoon characters. The visual dialectical relationship between Tezuka and Disney should be seen as just one thread in a complex tapestry of various, intermingled and multidirectional cultural influences, including also such cultural motives as anthropomorphism, (re)animation of inanimate objects, the Pinocchio motif, and the particular life that toys are capable of gaining, to mention just a few (cf. Kuznets 1994).

Mickey Mouse, copyright Disney.
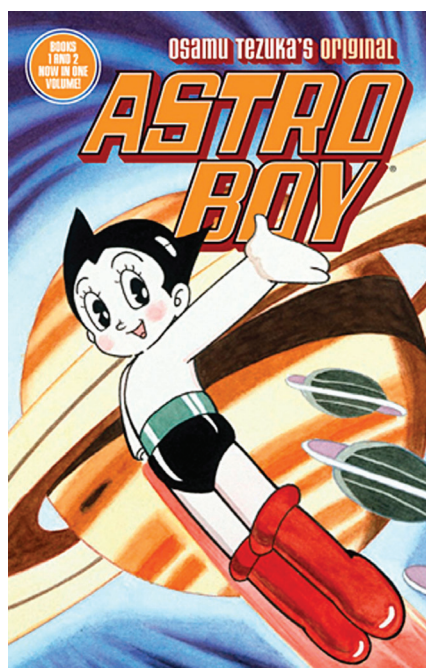
Astro Boy, copyright Osamu Tezuka & Dark Horse Comics.

Gameplay dialectic

Games are an interesting field for analysis, since they make full use of the growing, interactive potentials of digital technologies. As hybrids of digital media and ludic interaction (or 'gameplay'), games can be conceived as a cultural form with a fundamentally dual character (Mäyrä 2008, 18). This duality also translates into further complexities and dimensions when analysed within an inter-cultural dialectics. To give again one quick example, *Super Mario Bros* (1985) was influential as it popularised the 'side-scrolling platformer' video game genre, and it also has been notable in showing how the interactivity in games can leave behind the boundaries of traditionally small gaming boards or fields and be developed further into extensive 'virtual fantasy worlds'. One notable moment in this colourful history is embodied in the playable demonstration called 'Dangerous Dave in Copyright Infringement', programmed in September 1990. The feat accomplished in this demo was that it managed to produce for PC, then an emerging gaming environment, the smoothly scrolling playing field familiar from *Super Mario Bros. 3* (1988). The road was then open for its creators, a group of young game designers, to move forward to establish their company, id Software, and create games like *Doom* (1993) and *Quake* (1996), and thereby move gameplay in popular digital games firmly into the era of three-dimensional spatiality. (For a journalistic account of this process, see: Kushner 2003.)

Thematic dialectic

The third inter-cultural dialectic I want to introduce in this paper is centred on themes and milieu. In the broad-ranging field of fantasy, particularly one sub-genre of science fiction, known as cyberpunk, has been a fertile field for the West to look closely at Japan – and the other way around. The 'original cyberpunk novel' *Neuromancer* (1984) by William Gibson took much of its milieu and aesthetics from Japan, then the 'perceived future' for the late modernity. While Gibson can be seen to produce a mimicry of hyper-urban Japan, also cyberpunk themes within the Japanese popular culture can be related to 'mimetic desire' and the 'cyborgian identity' or hybrid construction of postwar selves in Japan, as discussed by Takayuki Tatsumi (2006). Tatsumi has provided an illustrative account of the politically loaded character of inter-cultural mimesis, while pointing out the background for why themes of cyberpunk became so popular in Japan. An entire generation grow immersed in cyberpunk novels and watching movies like *Blade Runner* (1982; see Figure 3), gaining insight into a radically science-fictional 'Japan' (ibid., 173). The postmodern themes of *Neuromancer* or *Blade Runner*, with their self-reflexively artificial and constructed, hybrid characters and realities, became then reinterpreted in popular works of manga and anime, like *Ghost in*

the Shell (1995; Figure 4). Tatsumi sees that by the late 1990s, a new phase of interactions between American and Japanese cultures has started. A 'creative clash' had taken place between these different cultures, leading into a kind of postmodern crystallisation of popular themes to be established on a global scale. Tatsumi calls this 'a globalist theme park built by the nuclear imagination'. (Ibid., 176-77.)
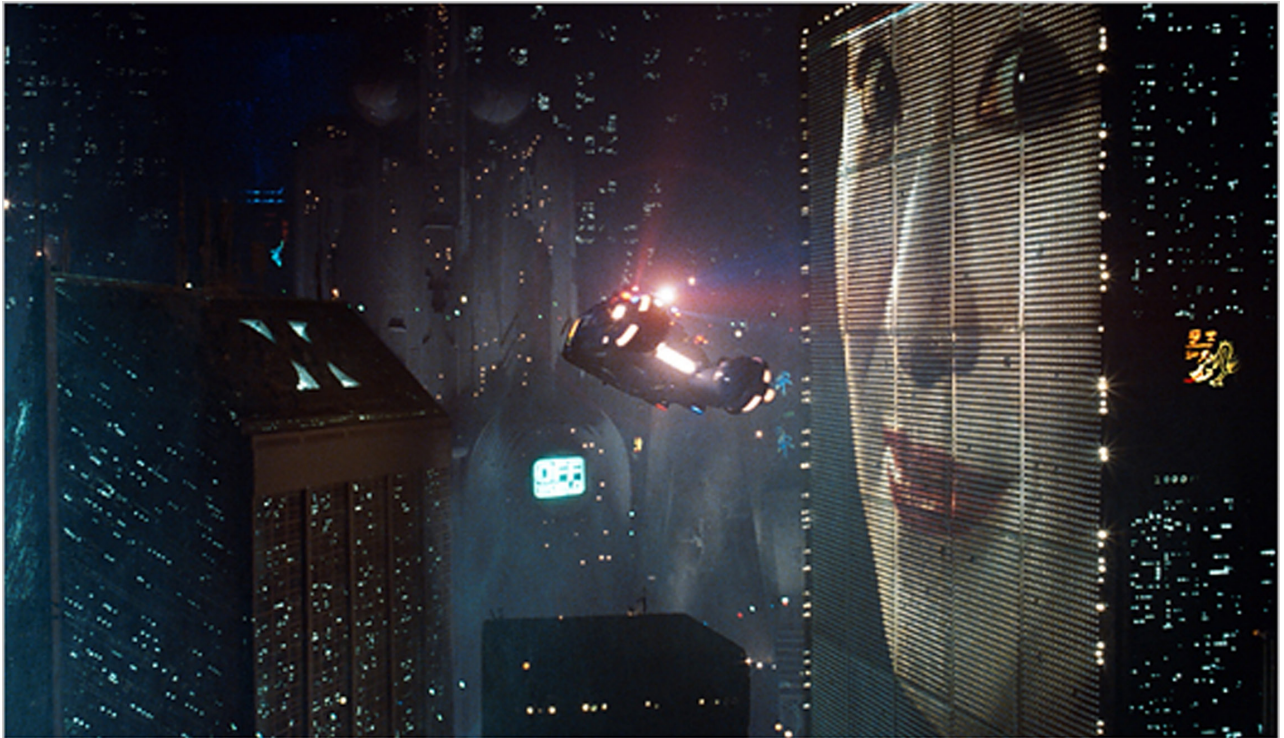
A scene from *Blade Runner*; copyright Warner Bros.

Ghost in the Shell movie poster, copyright Manga Entertainment.

Towards a cultural dialectic?

As certain kind of visual and theme based language has now been established in popular fantasy, and also implemented in interactive media on a global scale, there is potential for a deepening dialogue that is based on shared cultural codes. Where this will eventually lead us, remains to be seen. What I will here set up as the fourth 'moment' or dialectic, is the question of cultural dialectic. This means adopting a perspective in our analyses of cultural globalisation that deals with the values, goals and motivations that are underlying any cultural expression and practice. Personally I see much room for such an approach in all of the examples I have quoted in this text, starting from the manga characters like Astro Boy, and definitive game designs like those of the *Super Mario* games, leading into more explicitly philosophical moments in cyberpunk (and post-cyberpunk) works that deal with questions like personal identity, memory or the changing fundamentals of human condition.

It is in this context important to consider the role of Japanese fantasy that is also popular among children and young people, like the works of Studio Ghibli and anime director Hayao Miyazaki. Originally popular only in Japan, movies like *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988), *Princess Mononoke* (1997) or *Spirited Away* (2001) have in recent years gained box office distribution and success also in the West, and are now widely available as home DVDs. Religious as well as media scholars have paid attention to the traces of Shintoism in the pacifistic, animistic and polytheistic character of Miyazaki's fantasy (see e.g. Boyd & Nishimura 2004). At the same time, such concerns for peace and survival of the planet are not limited to any single world-view, but are rather contemporary global concerns and thereby readily available as a cultural dialectic for the future.

Conclusions

To summarise the central argument of this paper, there is no unidirectional cultural flow or contact, but cultural influences are always travelling both ways, even under a colonialist or post-colonialist conditions. For a cultural critic, approaching such processes is an interesting challenge. It is also useful to gain some distance from any simplistic notion of 'borrowing' or 'imitating' in cultural production; drawing inspiration from the study of life systems in various natural disciplines, it is valuable also in a cultural context to be reminded by how the positive idea of 'evolution' is fundamentally related to the 'errors introduced to the code during copying process.' Further lessons can be provided by philosophers like Jacques Derrida (there is 'no original trace') and Jean Baudrillard (the 'simulacrum' precedes the original). An element that is 'borrowed' from the East to the West, or vice versa, does not stay still, or remain within the logic of imitation. Rather, while considering the increasingly productive flows of globalisation, we need to pay close attention to the inevitable and often surprising workings of distance and difference, and how they are empowering our ongoing cultural dialogues.

Bibliography

Appadurai, Arjun (1996), *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Boyd, James W. and Tetsuya Nishimura (2004), 'Shinto Perspectives in Miyazaki's Anime Film "Spirited Away"', *The Journal of Religion and Film*, 8(2), October 2004, online:
http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/Vol8No2/boydShinto.htm. Accessed: January 3, 2009.
Friedman, Thomas L. (1999), *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux.
Hall, Stuart (1997a), 'The Local and the Global', in King, A. (ed.), *Culture, Globalization and the World System*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 19-40.
Hall, Stuart (1997b), 'Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities', in King, A. (ed.), *Culture, Globalization and the World System*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 41-68.
Iwabuchi, Koichi (2002) *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Kushner, David (2003), *Masters of Doom: How Two Guys Created an Empire and Transformed Pop Culture*, New York: Random House.
Kuznets, Lois R. (1994), *When Toys Come Alive: Narratives of Animation, Metamorphosis, and Development*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
Mäyrä, Frans Ilkka (1999), *Demonic Texts and Textual Demons: The Demonic Tradition, the Self, and Popular Fiction*, Tampere: Tampere University Press. Online: http://www.uta.fi/~frans.mayra/Demon_2005/. Accessed: January 3, 2009.
Mäyrä, Frans (2008), *An Introduction to Game Studies: Games in Culture*, London & New York: Sage Publications.
Sheff, David (1993), *Game Over: How Nintendo Zapped an American Industry, Captured Your Dollars, and Enslaved Your Children*, New York: Random House.
Tatsumi, Takayuki (2006), *Full Metal Apache: Transactions Between Cyberpunk Japan and Avant-Pop America*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Tomlinson, John (1999), *Globalization and Culture*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.