Brigham Young University

BYU ScholarsArchive

2020-03-01

"Descending into Eeriness": Navigating "the Uncanny Valley" Present in Hollywood Adaptations of Japanese Narratives

Megan Jo Finley
Brigham Young University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

"Descending into Eeriness": Navigating "the Uncanny Valley" Present in

Hollywood Adaptations of Japanese Narratives

Megan Jo Ann Finley

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Dennis R. Cutchins, Chair
Dennis Ralph Perry
Marc T. Yamada

Department of English

Brigham Young University

ABSTRACT

"Descending into Eeriness": Navigating "the Uncanny Valley" Present in
Hollywood Adaptations of Japanese Narratives

Megan Jo Ann Finley
Department of English, BYU
Master of Arts

Hollywood adaptations of Japanese stories derived from manga have failed to connect with a Western audience, and not for a lack of fan interest. Instead, the core issues one encounters are matters of mistranslation, which construct the fatal flaws of American adaptations of manga. In my research, I identify three major errors in adaptation typically present in these narratives. First, I discuss mistranslations of story via analysis of Netflix's 2017 adaptation of *Death Note*, which includes plot reduction for the sake of time and budget restraints, as well as conflict rearrangement to fit the traditional Hollywood mold. Next, I discuss mistranslations of cultural values, as successful adaptations of Japanese manga that are accessible in an American context require a trans-cultural fluency American studios seem to lack; I use Paramount Pictures' *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) to illustrate this point. Finally, mistranslations of form are present in these failed adaptations. In order to bring the spirit of a manga to life on-screen, many directors have tried to replicate the style of this apparatus to film, often with unsuccessful results due to its jarring deviation from the Western norm. Spike Lee's *Oldboy* (2013) becomes case-in-point in this section as I contrast the apparatus of anime to film. Ultimately, I conclude that successful adaptations are quite possible; one merely needs to select the right story and cater it to what American fans of manga find fascinating about the genre—its cultural authenticity and wholly original (and decidedly non-American) ideas.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to extend my appreciation for all of those who assisted me during the course of my graduate work. First, to my committee, whose feedback was invaluable in the process of refining my research. A special thanks to my chair, Dennis Cutchins—a guru of all things adaptation-related and a wise counselor—without whom I undoubtedly would not have finished a single draft of this project. A round of applause is also granted to my wonderful friends, especially those who have laughed and cried with me over the last two crazy years. Gracias y besitos to mi familia, here and in heaven, who never stopped believing I could create this, even when I left teardrops on the pages. And finally, to Fai and to Yasha, my guardian angels, who wrote me as I wrote this.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

"Descending into Eeriness": Navigating "the Uncanny Valley" Present in

Hollywood Adaptations of Japanese Narratives

When Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori first put forward the theory of the "uncanny

valley" in 1970, *Mighty Atom*—also known as *Astro Boy,* one of the most successful

international manga franchises of all time—had just finished its 16-year serialization in *Weekly*

Shonen Magazine. Its narrative thread follows an android who is created by scientist Dr. Tenma

soon after the death of his son. Astro Boy, though human in form and in emotional capacity, is

unable to grow older or appreciate the organic over the mechanical. His "uncanny," jarringly

artificial resemblance to Dr. Tenma's son ultimately leads the scientist to reject his creation.

Although Astro Boy is saved by his own ingenuity and by the kindness of others, Mori's theory

seems to echo ominously throughout the narrative: humans innately recoil when made aware of

inauthenticity in disguise.

Akin to the dilemma surrounding this fictional android, adaptations in film and literature

can read as disingenuous and contrived, "descend[ing] into eeriness" and creating a disconnect—

even a repulsion—between the text and its intended audience (Mori 98). Mori's theory describes

the imaginary threshold between technology and the human, and (though perhaps not

intentionally) may also define the relationship of some film adaptations to their source material.

Much as Dr. Tenma refuses to embrace Astro Boy as fully human, audiences often cannot

embrace adaptations when the interpreted material is *almost* faithful, but not quite.

Such may be the "eerie" case surrounding live-action Hollywood adaptations of Japanese

manga and anime narratives. Adapting these Japanese stories for American audiences

complicates the already precarious concept of adaptation. In most cases, these Japanese texts are

not just translated, but also reimagined, in order to bridge contextual differences between

audiences. Unfortunately, reinterpreting anime and manga requires a trans-cultural fluency that American adaptors seem to lack. The stories created by "the anime machine," a term Thomas LaMarre coined to refer to the imaging process essential to the creation of a manga/anime franchise, are often complex in nature and reflect the values and fears of a distinctly Japanese audience (LaMarre 9). Hollywood's failure to recognize this fact, and the subsequent neglect of the elements that make the stories from anime and manga inherently special, often causes American adaptations to fall into a kind of cultural and artistic "uncanny valley"—where just because it looks like anime and sounds like anime, doesn't mean it *is* anime. Faulty adaptation becomes especially evident as patterns of identifiable cultural and artistic mistranslation begin to emerge. Plot deviation, cultural misinterpretation, and formal errors are each present within these unsuccessful Hollywood films, and to recognize these faults is to spark a dialogue that may finally pull American adaptations of anime and manga out of eeriness and allow them a chance to succeed as adaptations.

Recent years have seen an undeniable positive shift in American reception to Japanese anime, made most tangible by an ever-expanding, passionate fan participatory culture. Fanboys and fangirls, creators, media outlets, and merchandise distributors alike gather each year at anime conventions like Anime Matsuri and Otakon, united by the love of Japanese stories. Advances in streaming technology like YouTube and Funimation have propelled anime to the media forefront. It is no longer a niche interest. The numbers speak for themselves: in July 2018, I took my place at Anime Expo alongside 110,000 anime fans from over 70 countries, whose presence generated nearly $100 million in revenue for the anime industry in just four days (Anime Expo). The sheer amount of audience-produced content, which includes anything from anime music videos (AMVs) to cosplay masquerades, is illustrative of the flourishing community that theorist

Henry Jenkins identifies as the driving force behind "convergence culture." These conventions have become a playing field where fans shape the industries they support (Jenkins 2). Now located in Los Angeles, Anime Expo has positioned itself—both physically and fiscally—in a place that can truly pique the interest of Hollywood. There is no doubt that the American film industry should benefit from the voracious US and international fandom surrounding Japanese narratives, especially when fans are starved for content.

And yet, Hollywood-produced films based on Japanese anime and manga have historically and consistently failed to connect with American audiences in the way their source texts do. American consumers are more interested in reading translated manga and watching relatively low-budget, subtitled, Japanese-produced anime than they are in watching big-budget Hollywood-produced films based on these same texts. This suggests that fans of anime feel the isconnect between the page and the screen on a visceral level. Box office numbers support this notion: big-name flops such as 20th Century Fox's *Dragonball Z: Evolution* (2009) and Paramount Pictures' *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) should inspire questions as to how these films could fail when such a content-hungry audience exists. *Ghost in the Shell'*s manga and anime, in particular, has attained world-wide admiration, cultivating a fanbase nearly 30-years strong. For Hollywood to sink $110 million into its live-action production of the sci-fi franchise is telling of the industry's initial confidence in the project. But the 2017 release of the film was not received warmly by any audience, old or new. The American adaptation grossed a measly $40.5 million at the U.S. box office, nowhere near the film's gargantuan (and hubristic) budget (Barder). Hollywood's ongoing manufacturing of live-action anime flops has left fans jaded, as each failed attempt alienates the audience they are trying to reach.

High-profile failures like *Ghost in the Shell* suggest that adaptation, particularly in the

context of cross-cultural transfer, is not a simple act; it requires an understanding of the source material that reaches beyond a knowledge of the breadth of its fanbase. This is especially important when it comes to literal translation. Lawrence Venuti, an authority in the realm of translation studies, describes the translator's duty to convey the "spirit of the language," in the hopes that "readers of a foreignizing translation [can] 'understand'… the 'spirit of the language' which was the author's own and are able to see his particular way of thinking and feeling" (112). Similarly, in Linda Hutcheon's *Theory of Adaptation,* she asserts that the process of adaptation is also fundamentally more than a mimetic act. To adapt does not mean to churn out a scribbled, cheap copy, but to create an homage and a testament to the original texts' ingenuity. Ideally, then, the first iteration of a text should not be treated as sacred or authoritative, and the second "neither secondary or inferior" (XIII, Hutcheon). Yet while Hutcheon makes a compelling case for the value of adaptive works as purposefully different from their "origin" texts, her examples pull most heavily from titles that have an ability to pass through the cross-cultural sieve with ease.

Manga and anime, so thoroughly enmeshed with long-standing Japanese literary tradition, do not make such an easy transfer. Indeed, 'the anime machine' is merely a vehicle that allows for the expression of narratives that are designed to resonate with a Japanese audience. From this perspective, the translation and adaptation of manga and anime should be considered a meeting point of American and Japanese culture. Katja Krebs quickly nails down this point in the introduction to *Translation and Adaptation in Theater and Film*, proclaiming that "both translation and adaptation—as (creative) process, as product or artefact, and as academic discipline—are interdisciplinary by their very nature; both discuss phenomena of constructing cultures through acts of rewriting, and… are concerned with the collaborative nature of such

acts[…]"(3). When considering anime, one must consider how a text's cultural values are being translated—what "sameness" is retained—and what must be adapted in order to become more accessible to a different cultural mindset. In a cross-examination between manga and Hollywood narratives, these differences are significant; but as anime continues to grow in popularity on both sides of the Pacific, the deeply-rooted issues with Hollywood adaptations become clear: American versions of Japanese narratives should seek to *adapt* these narratives in the truest sense, and not simply appropriate them.

Narrative mistranslation—as I'll continue to refer to it—is a two-fold error. It embodies the refusal of American studios to respect the formula of the Japanese narrative—forgoing its unique attributes such as its broad-reaching interests in preference for a formula more immediately recognizable to a Western audience—as well as the inclination to condense plot and characterization in an attempt to fit this mold. The American film production company Netflix no doubt took a hint from Crunchyroll, an anime-exclusive streaming service, and has become a major player in manga and anime adaptations. In 2016, Netflix produced anime of its own, finding relative success with manga-derived series such as *Devilman Crybaby* and *Ajin: Demi-Human.* However, its live-action films based on anime, much like traditional Hollywood productions, have met an icy reception: *Death Note* (2017), *Fullmetal Alchemist* (2017), and *Bleach* (2018) have each found their respective responses lukewarm at best. Despite this, there are plans to produce more films, including a reinvention of the long-standing anime classic *Cowboy Bebop*. Each of these films adaptations has its share of rookie mistakes, but narrative mistranslation is a key component of their collective failure.

While assimilating texts to a Hollywood formula provides the first central component of narrative mistranslation, the second concerns itself with plot condensation. Story condensation is

to some extent necessitated by the serialized nature of Japanese source texts, a dilemma both Japanese and American directors encounter when creating adaptations. The manga *Bleach,* for instance, spans some 74 volumes, as well as 366 television episodes. That kind of long form narrative is not unusual in manga and anime franchises. A film adaptation of *Bleach*, inhibited by both time and monetary constraints, cannot hope to contain the same plot detail as the original text; but it can abridge the narrative arc to the best of its ability. Yet even a satisfying abridgement has not been consistently achieved. In a desire to accommodate a condensed time frame and ensure profit domestically, Hollywood producers domesticate the sprawling, long-form Japanese texts to fit the recognizable, American media mold: the two-hour feature film. The ensuing difficulties are obvious.

Take *Death Note*, for example, Netflix's first manga/anime remake. On the surface, reinventing this text was a good idea. The plot of the manga centers on 17-year-old Light Yagami, a university student with genius-level intellect and a perpetual sense of ennui, whose fate is sealed when a *shinigami* (death god) drops a notebook in his path. This notebook—known as the Death Note—is imbued with the power to cause the death of anyone whose name is written in its pages. For Light, whose moral compass is dictated by a legalistic sense of self-righteousness, this becomes his chance to rid the world of evil. Light becomes Kira, a mastermind of vigilante justice. Meanwhile, L, a super-detective of matching intellect, is assigned to the case, and thus a thrilling game of cat-and-mouse begins. The major themes of the narrative tug at fears deeply palpable in Japanese society: the complexities of apocalyptic religion, the arbitrariness of man-made justice, the difficulties of police ethics, and the role of existentialism in contemporary society (Frohlich 143). Any one of these thematic centers could form the basis for a two-hour movie, but each was treated in some depth in the 12 volumes of the

manga and the 37 episodes of the anime.

  Created by writer-illustrator dream-team Tsugumi Ohba and Takeshi Obata, the first serialization of the manga appeared in *Weekly Shonen Jump* from December 2003 to May 2006, and instantly became a favorite among readers. Naturally, its popularity led to adaptations galore: the Japanese anime TV series premiered in 2006; two live-action films were produced; a musical was written; and a J-drama style TV series aired in 2015. Despite the differences in content, each project was informed in some way by the manga, and the original creators themselves gave every project their permission and blessing to proceed. Each adaptation tweaks the plot in some way, a vital aspect of the process of adaptation. These tweaks allow audiences old and new alike to enjoy related content. Of course, not all of these texts were created equal: the manga and 2006 anime remain the most overwhelmingly popular of the series' iterations, even prompting a special one-shot *Death Note* comic to be released this year, some 16 years after the manga's debut (Sherman). And while there are no plans to revive the Japanese TV series, Frank Wildhorn's *Death Note the Musical* opened for its third run on the Tokyo mainstage in January 2020, catering to the demand for well-written, well-adapted narratives. Perhaps these adaptations are in such demand because they pay attention to the critical factors behind the story's long-standing acclaim. It is unfortunate that the American Netflix series has not done the same; in fact, the opposite has happened. The Netflix series brought a renewed sense of distaste for Hollywood's penchant for altering and oversimplifying Japanese narratives.

  While Netflix's *Death Note* necessitated plot deviance in order to set itself apart from the story's past incarnations, narrative misinterpretation sets the film up for certain failure. With the string of box-office bombs in mind, fan anticipation for Netflix's adaptation had many believing that anime would finally enjoy the high-concept execution Hollywood is capable of offering.

However, right out of the gate, the show fails by removing all Japanese context. Instead of taking place in Japan, the Netflix version is set against the backdrop of an American high school. Nat Wolff stars as Light Turner, the troubled, emotional owner of the Death Note, whose core motivation stems from a desire to use the notebook's power to crush "bullies" and retain the affections of his girlfriend and co-conspirator, Mia. Instead of cool, composed, and calculating, Light is made out to be the "underdog," a victim of a *shinigami* whose good intentions have been warped by outside influences. In contrast, Light Yagami of the original series is definitively *not* a pawn in the *shinigami's* game. His manipulative prowess is equivalent to the supernatural elements around him, and certainly to that of his nemesis L. The Japanese narrative does not advocate for the success of the belittled, but rather pulls from its own literary traditions: the triumph of the god rather than the victory of the underdog, a theme profoundly in opposition to the American dream preferred by Hollywood. Light Yagami is equipped with everything he needs to be Kira as soon as he is given the Death Note, unlike Light Turner, who can only fall victim to its power. Netflix's decision to alter Light's character in such a fundamental way is already indicative of a fundamental misunderstanding of the source material's appeal. This character deviation instantly deflates the central conflict and tension of the story: L and Light's ever-intensifying battle of wits.

Conflict reinvention is not inherently an error in adaptation, but in this case it certainly exemplifies Hollywood's willingness to force unique Japanese narratives and motifs to fit the formula of 'traditional' American films. By taking the central conflict from the two characters and riding instead on the innovative notion of the Death Note itself, Hollywood demonstrates its tendency to simplify the conflict to a black-or-white, good-versus-evil binary, which was precisely opposed to the concerns of the original creators. A battle between good and evil is

something the original creators were largely unconcerned with, as Japanese narratives tend to forgo the polarizing and more familiar (at least to American audiences) "God versus Satan" conflict. Instead, Ohba and Obata contend that "[it] is not very important to debate whether Light's actions are right or wrong" (Frohlich 143). That kind of thinking seems antithetical to an American sensibility, as it resonates with the post-humanistic perspective common in Japanese narratives: Light Yagami is not the hero of the anime story, but merely an actor in a world much larger than himself. While the story may be told through his experiences, he is not the sole owner of the narrative Instead of conducting a study in morality, the anime situates the viewer above a conflict that Hollywood has yet to embrace: that between man and himself.

Netflix's treatment of *Death Note* not only refocuses the narrative, but also drastically alters its final implications. By characterizing Light Turner as an ordinary teenager whose emotions thwart his ability to handle ownership of the Death Note, the conflict becomes a more familiar, humanistic man-versus-the-supernatural tale. Light Yagami, on the other hand, is not acted upon, but acts continuously, driving the man-versus-himself plot to its ultimate denouement. Matched against L, the pitting of two super-egos against each other (two men vs. self-conflicts) gives the plot its drive forward, and lends the two central characters their undeniable edge.

Critic Scott Mendelson of *Forbes* calls Netflix's adaptation "a bad movie, regardless of its source fidelity[…] ending up the kind of bungled and compromised adaptation we'd come to see from a major studio" (Mendleson). While the right to tease out and remove aspects of the source material is integral to effective adaptation, nothing that Netflix adds to the film—namely, a love interest, amped up gore, moral angst, and a car chase, to boot—serves the narrative in any fashion. Instead, these additions reduce the aspects of the manga and anime that made them

unique, and assimilates them into what Venuti calls a "domestic" translation, in which the source

material is made to fit an Anglo-American standard (Venuti 203). Domestication proves

problematic here, as the inherently Japanese motifs are integral to the narrative.

I do not believe that all American remakes seek to domesticate Japanese plotlines; in fact,

Erased (2017), a manga/anime-inspired live action drama also created by Netflix, stands as a

solid example to the contrary. Perhaps it is because this adaptation preserves both the longer

format and distinctly Japanese quality of the original. The plot stays true to the linear narrative of

the original anime, partly because it is provided the opportunity to do so. Instead of trying to

condense a 12-episode anime into a two hour film[1], plot and character development are given

time to unfold. The Netflix adaptation also does the original eight-volume series justice by

retaining the tension of the original while deepening emotional moments—such as Satoru and

Kayo's first date, and its climatic ending scene, in which Satoru must face a killer. There is an

observable balance between rising action and narrative rest; character progression moves at a

steady pace; and Netflix's plot additions only serve to strengthen it, rather than simply fill it.

Perhaps most importantly, the plot does not twist itself to accommodate a domestic translation;

instead, it remains stubbornly Japanese, letting audiences attach themselves to the narrative's

both foreign and universal elements. This preservation of the text's foreign elements is key to the

success of *Erased*.

Katja Krebs describes the tension between translation and adaptation perfectly:

Popular, and some academic, western discourse tends to view adaptation as a creative

---

[1] *Erased* (known in Japan as *Boku Dake ga Inai Machi*, or 'The Town Without Me') is no stranger to adaptation, either. A Japanese film directed by Hirakawa Yuichiro released in 2016, to mixed reviews. Critics of the film praised the strength of the cast and innovative concept, but found the film rushed and anti-climactic due to its story alterations (Eisenbeis). While the 'uncanny valley' may not be present in a Japanese adaptation of a Japanese narrative, this still stands out as proof that story alteration can vastly affect reception with a pre-established audience.

version of, rewriting of, or commentary on a source text, as opposed to translation, which, it is assumed, offers sameness and strives for equivalence. Thus, a binary is constructed around these two acts of rewriting: creative freedom versus linguistic confinement, or piracy versus trustworthiness and faithfulness, depending on what side of the fence you sit on (3).

Hollywood productions of Japanese narratives are not required to appeal to ultra-passionate, pre-existing fandoms. However, in order not to alienate those same people, American producers need to understand what exactly fans are connecting with when they watch anime. Character and conflict, for instance, breathe life into a story; when an 8-volume manga serialization and a 16-episode season of an animated series are adapted into a 2-hour movie, there may be a necessity to cut corners, but not to water down what truly matters. If American adaptations cease to half-translate Japanese content to fit a Hollywood formula, they are sure to cultivate their own audience while pleasing those who already familiar with the source material.

A second vital translation error is cultural mistranslation. Netflix's *Death Note* adaptation not only reassigns the central conflict but also exemplifies the desperate desire of U.S. studios to cling to the Western tradition of humanist film. Building bridges between cultural values may be attempted, but—more often than not—these bridges are left uncrossed.

Humanist narratives thrive in Western popular culture. Classical Hollywood cinema (CHC) has long since aimed to relate the world from an interested and embodied perspective. James Zborowski, author of *Classical Hollywood Cinema: Point of View and Communication,* notes the technical methods by which Western films embody a singular consciousness, and make this consciousness the guiding touchstone of a narrative: optical POV shots, object shots, and reaction shots were each developed out of the inclination to represent the field of vision of a

central character (14). In this way, CHC deliberately orients the viewers' experience with story, emphasizing anthropocentric narratives by simulating "alignment[s] characterized by an identical limitation of knowledge, by [emphasizing] what is withheld rather than what is given" (Zborowski 20). Modern U.S. films capitalize on the qualities that American audiences consider and expect from a quality cinematic experience: a rooted narrative that celebrates individualism over all, placing the human experience upon its pedestal as the innately superior worldview. Japanese animation, in contrast, does not make such assumptions. This is due in part to posthuman nuances that inevitably feel distinctively foreign to American film. As Stevie Suan suggests in *The Anime Paradox: Patterns and Practices through the Lens of Japanese Theater*, "[…]anime—as a form with particular conventions—exhibits a similar structure of equally related, inseparable parts that weave together certain patterns through the juxtaposition of various images […] producing a larger meaning and depiction of the human (and post-human) condition" (41). Instead of idealizing an individualistic human experience, anime tends to decenter it, and instead provide a wholly different view of and interaction with the world. War, environmentalism, technology, and progress are tropes commonly explored in Japanese animation. This is because the animation medium tends to navigate the imaginative and impossible in a way that feels much more natural (or perhaps, more expected) than through live-action film. Anime boasts a wide range of central protagonists; quite often, they are nonhuman or supernaturally enhanced, suggesting that humanity is not limited to an anthropocentric experience. This, combined with a distinct lack of point of view shots, encourages viewers to consider the interconnectedness of character and environment. While these posthuman concepts do not necessarily negate the humanist ideals found in CHC, they certainly challenge the assumptions offered by them. To subvert the worldview of the source text one is adapting is to

forgo what Venuti identifies as a foreignizing translation, and thus lose what ultimately makes it recognizable and attractive to readers and viewers.

A sample case of this—which happens to be one of most criticized attempts in anime adaptation in recent years—is Rupert Sanders' misguided *Ghost in the Shell* (2017). The narrative is one derivative of Masamune Shinrow's ultra-popular manga and its 1995 anime film adaptation. As the story of a human being with cybernetic enhancements, the beating heart of *Ghost in the Shell* is, in part, mechanical. Yet, the real significance of inhabiting an augmented body differs depending on which of the narrative's multiple iterations one chooses to indulge. Mamoru Oshii's celebrated 1995 animated film follows protagonist Major Makoto Kusunagi, a government agent tasked with tracking down and apprehending an enigmatic hacker known only as "The Puppet Master." In this projected futuristic world where human reliance on technology has reached the point of inseparability, Kusunagi is just one of many cyborg-human hybrids, all of whom possess 'cyberbrains' susceptible to external hacking. The film's progression forces Kusunagi not only to confront The Puppet Master's mysterious ability to invade and modify the identity of others, but also to reflect on her own identity as a cybernetically enhanced being. Oshii's narrative complicates the notion of what it means to be human—a comment on technology's ever evolving reach and the rise of a post-human reality. Much of the film's praise focuses on the story's quieter moments that reveal Kusunagi's complex internality; her questions about what divides the organic from the inorganic resonate with the viewer, and ultimately cultivate the film's sober, philosophical tone.

Compare this to Rupert Sanders' live-action remake. First, there are very few quieter, more philosophical moments in the Hollywood film. While it is clearly derivative of Oshii's original vision, it represents a problematic tonal shift that reinforces a formulaic Hollywood

narrative. Like *Death Note*, the struggle of a compressed time-frame and issues of domestication are most apparent in the films' lack of character development. Aesthetically, the movie shines, even going so far as to replicate certain iconic shots from its source text; but no visual spectacle, however beautiful, can make up for the fact that the movie fails philosophically. Perhaps most telling difference between Sanders' adaptation and Oshii's is the parallel sequence in which the Major is given the choice to merge with a digital other. While she does ultimately merge with Kuze in the anime portrayal, her refusal in Sanders' live-action adaptation ignores the philosophical inclinations of Japanese film and is indicative of Hollywood's re-casting of the cyborg as a vehicle to explore a humanistic, rather than a post humanistic, narrative.

The animation medium is another component of Oshii's success. In its animated form, *Ghost in the Shell* is constantly foreshadowing the eventual connection between Kusanagi and the Puppetmaster. Oshii explored in depth the implications of a world entrenched with cybernetics, where the line between human and technology is blurred. Cybernetic takeover and technological control shape the world around the Major, as the environment, which is often depicted via extreme long shots of the sprawling cityscape alive with impossible technology, illustrates the melding of the inorganic with the organic. Humans with enhanced features (such as Batou's all-seeing eyes) stand amongst androids such as Kusanagi, their bodies crafted with enough care to make them emotive, hardly standing out among their flesh-and-blood counterparts. Perhaps the most evocative depiction of the marriage between the mechanical and the mortal is found in one of the very first scenes. Viewers are shown a step-by-step, stirringly human breakdown of Kusanagi's mechanical birth. Images reminiscent of the human birth process— Kusanagi's descent into a long canal, her emergence into newly formed flesh before being dropped in the fetal position—are juxtaposed with flashing green and black numerical

code. Programming and creation are one and the same. From the onset, the animated film is post

human, and Kusanagi's body representative of a new computer, *en tabula rasa*.

In the 1995 film's penultimate scene, Kusanagi is given the choice to merge with the

Puppetmaster. Body broken and code hacked, the Major lays side by side with the vessel which

once contained the Puppetmaster's consciousness. Although gendered male through voice, the

abandoned body next to her is female, already establishing a sense of connection, a hair away

from "oneness." His ability to speak through the female body (which, due to the medium of

anime's utilization of voice acting, becomes terrifying and jarring, rather than gimmicky)

signifies a step further into their eventual unity, bringing the question to mind: where does the

"ghost" of the cyborg reside if bodies are but momentary vessels for their being? In the ruins of a

man-made building, the Puppetmaster acknowledges Kusanagi's ambivalence to her own body,

demonstrated by her habit of reckless scuba diving, —and suggests that a desire to attach ones'

consciousness (cyborg, A.I., or otherwise) to a physical body is simply a symptom of what is still

"human" in society: fear. Human evolution, as demonstrated by the high angle panning shot of

an ancestral tree etched into the wall, is characterized by creation and death (see figs. 1 and 2)[2].

Fig. 1. (Left) Ancestral tree etched in the wall from *Ghost in the Shell* (Oshii).

Fig. 2. (Right) A close shot of the ancestral tree, showing creation and death (Oshii).

---

[2] Kusanagi's confrontation with the Puppetmaster takes place in the ruins of a man-made building; the contrast between the human condition and that of the cybernetically enhanced is made especially apparent by the emphasis on the life cycle.

Bodies and consciousness are depicted as quite separate, and the 'human element' not simply reserved for flesh-and-blood human beings. A postmodern narrative lets these questions linger long after Kusanagi's ghost is absorbed; the audience is left to grapple with questions of what makes up consciousness, and how technology may disprove society's assumption that humans are innately superior to the machines they create.

Despite the transferability of *Ghost in the Shell's* aesthetics to the silver screen, adaptation of this narrative requires an act of Hollywood translation. In this case, deviation from the source material warps its ultimate message with a humanist slant. Major Mira Killian, Kusanagi's Hollywood counterpart, is not simply an artificial intelligence birthed from binary. Instead, she is the first successful brain transfer from a human body to a synthetic vessel, though her memories have been wiped clean. In this way, she is Oshii's *tabula rasa*, but very quickly characterized as yearning for a sense of identity. Her experiences in quieter moments—which include tracing a human woman's lips, asking how it feels in the hopes she may remember— perpetuate her disdain for her enhanced body, but not on the basis that it is limiting; rather, the problem is that her body is new, foreign, and lacks what she believes to be the "human essence." Unlike Major Kusanagi, Major Killian's desire to claim a "self," a true name and character to attribute to her ghost, is the driving force for the film. Thus, the enhanced environment in the 2016 film is a synthetic jungle to get lost in, rather than a new world to embrace.

It is in finding Kuze—the live action films' substitute for the Puppetmaster, a man whom she knew and loved from her past—that the Major is able to remember and reclaim her identity. Given the same decision to upload with her digital counterpart, her decision not to join with him grounds the narrative in humanism. The similarities to the anime's climax are stark, as the two cyborgs (each in similar states of disrepair) lay next to one another in the same frame, in the

same fashion as Kusanagi and the empty vessel. It is the plea that is different, as Kuze suggests "Come with me. There is no place for us here" (1:30:15). When the Major refuses, asserting that there is still work to be done, she looks in his direction, emphasizing the bodily divide and emotional connection present. It is a jarringly human viewpoint. Unlike the anime's clinical logic, Sanders' version of the film—which, in Hollywood fashion, is set with the backdrop of dramatic destruction, rather than the cold, crumbling slab that Kusanagi finds herself upon in the end—is simpler, less concerned with the bigger questions at play, and adjusted to reflect Killian's internal struggle. In the end, Major Killian's "ghosts" are still exorcised. She is able to embrace the present, settling back into her past life and readjusting to the world.

In Sanders' version, Major Killian's decision to join Kuze is rationalized aloud as she claims that her "ghost survived to remind [society] that humanity is our virtue" (1:37:08). The humanistic narrative is largely concerned with the centricity of human beings to society. While this is not necessarily a poorer narrative as a result, Oshii's *Ghost in the Shell* opens up a larger discussion, rather than usurping technology to further a pre-existing Hollywood formula for success. Anime, in defiance of expectation, does not have to cater to a widespread audience in order to ensure box office revenue. It has an intrinsic ability to dissect the implications of a posthumanist world in a way that Hollywood cannot, and when attempts are made, glimpses of 'the uncanny valley' are seen. The misinterpretation of worldview is a damning one, ultimately leaving too much lost in translation.

The last, and perhaps most deadly, mistake present in adaptations of Japanese narratives is a fundamental misinterpretation of form—a direct result of the misunderstanding of what sets anime apart from film. While changing form is a fundamental characteristic of adaptation, in the case of Japanese-to-American adaptations, this change is often problematic. Hollywood

filmmakers fail to recognize that they are not only adapting content, but also form. When producers refuse to take into account what makes anime different from cinema—and what is therefore non-transferable to live-action—a story can be lost, even if studios ensure the sanctity of a manga's plot and cultural nuances. I do not claim that American cinematic directors must have an expert knowledge of the medium of animation, as Hollywood adaptations naturally must deviate from the pacing of manga's format. However, American films must seek to understand what aspects of anime are most suitable for transfer. In doing so, they allow a cohesion of two worlds that works on every level, enough to satisfy audiences both old and new.

In order to fully delve into discussions of form mistranslation, it is first crucial to understand the divide between cinematism and animatism. In *The Anime Machine*, Thomas LaMarre begins his dissection of animation's multiplanar images by making this clear distinction. Cinematism is the method by which film moves into the depth of a represented image. LaMarre argues that, for an audience, the purpose behind this added dimension is two-fold: "(1) to give the viewer a sense of standing over and above the world and thus controlling it, and (2) to collapse the distance between viewer and target, in the manner of the ballistic logic of instant strike" (5). Film is highly conscious of the viewer being the eyes looking into the world, and thus catering to the investigative imagination. It assumes a kind of curiosity on the part of the viewer that is inherently humanistic, pulling the camera angles to the places where the mind naturally wants to go. Animatism, on the other hand, does not concern itself so heavily with the desires of the individual spectator. Instead, animation glosses over images separated into multiple planes, moving across the surface of a world, favoring motion across rather than motion into, and surface over depth. Where film's depth image moves forward into the represented world, animation inherently lacks this ability. Perhaps this is where Japanese animation gets its

reputation for appearing 'weightless'; the gaps between layers make characters seem ungrounded in the world they inhabit. Below is an example of the contrast between cinematism and animatism, specifically the visual distinctions between the Hollywood depth image and the animated multiplaner image (see figures 3 and 4)[3].

Fig. 3. (Left) A hallway shot from Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (Kubrik).

Fig. 4. (Right) Kiki flying on a broom from *Kiki's Delivery Service* (Miyazaki).

Translation from manga to anime, according to LaMarre, is one that can be understood "in the broader sense of *trans-lation* that comprises movement, the interaction of manga and anime [being] a matter of *difference in motion*" (xviii). In the case of manga and anime, transference of content into cinematic form will always lack some of the animatism of the original, as it removes itself from the perspective of characters who move the world around them as they move through layers. Instead, the camera is allowed to bring the characters into depth, showcasing the world around them. LaMarre expands "apparatus theory"—the way that camera angles are manipulated to situate a viewer in reality—by applying it to the way audiences interpret animation (xix). Consequently, apparatus theory becomes a helpful method of animation analysis. Combined with adaptation theory, it allows for a more complete discussion

---

[3] Contrasted here is an example of cinematism vs. animatism, selected to demonstrate the visual distinctions between the Hollywood depth image versus the anime multiplaner image.

on the interpretation of form, one that is not limited to mere analysis of narrative structure or trans-cultural implications.

As anime and film continue to converge visually, comprehending the compatibilities between the two mediums has its value; while film provided the medium for this practice to evolve, anime has certainly embraced it in such a way that it feels organic and particular to the medium—just one way that anime traverses both traditional animation and cinema. With anime becoming more like film, Marshall McLuhan's "the medium is the message" finds its place among the cogs at work in the anime machine. He asserts that the way that we send and receive information is often more important than the information itself (McLuhan). What I propose is a variant on this message: the form that Japanese narratives can often supersede the messages that are delivered. This fact invites those who wish to correct adaptation errors.

Spike Lee's 2013 adaptation of *Oldboy* is a particularly interesting take on form. While it certainly borrows central plot threads from the source manga, it largely ignores the pacing of the manga in favor of its own cinematic vision.[4] *Oldboy's* two-year serialization as a manga from 1996 to 1998 found immediate praise as a stirring drama, even winning an Eisner award in 2007 in the category of "Best International Material- Japan" (*Anime News Network*). Written by Garon Tsuchiya and illustrated by Nobuaki Minegishi, the series follows protagonist Shinichi Gotō, a man who, after a decade of incarceration in a private prison, is suddenly freed. After his release, Gotō must find his captors and discover the true reason for his confinement. The manga is a stirring psychological thriller that brings its audience a surprisingly non-violent revenge narrative: it is not that Gotō wishes to kill the people who imprisoned him, but rather he is

---

[4] Although certainly derivative of the original manga, as I continue to explain here, much of the inspiration for Spike Lee's adaptation was extracted from the 2003 Korean adaptation *Oldboy*, directed by Park Chan-wook. While Lee's rendition of the film was certainly designed as more of an adaptation of its more successful predecessor than the original manga, I find that this analysis still holds value in its ability to demonstrate the pacing cues granted by the comic that were noted by Chan-wook's film, yet ignored by the Hollywood-produced version.

propelled by a straightforward, burning need to know why he was chosen to be freed. This results in a narrative that takes its time developing characters, maintaining suspense as it tracks Gotō's readjustment to life outside prison.
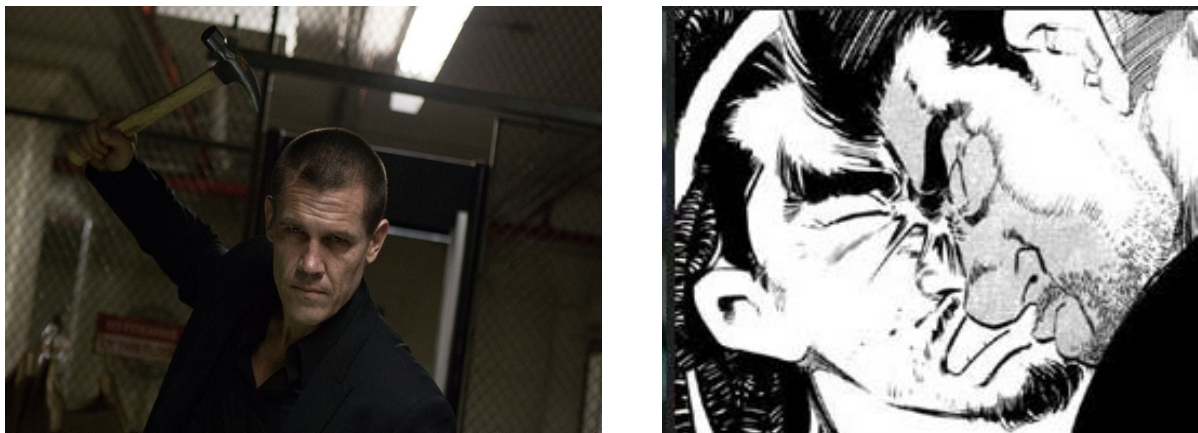

Fig. 5. (Top) Josh Brolin as Joe Doucett in Spike Lee's adaptation of *Oldboy.*

Fig. 6. (Bottom) A panel from Garon Tsuchiya and Nobuaki Minegishi's comic, *Oldboy.*

Lee's film takes liberties with the plot (protagonist Joe Doucett is held captive for 20 years instead of 10, and finds himself thirsting after bloody revenge), and largely ignores the manga form from which it's pulling. While this isn't inherently a fault, it certainly contributes to the film's non-sensical hybrid vision between the story and the way that it is directed, as many of the scenes that once played on subtlety have been pumped-up with gratuitous violence and commotion. While the panels of the manga are moderately paced and layered with suspense, there is no such withholding hand at play in the film. Instead, there is only the desire to convert the form to a fast-paced (and ultimately, repetitive) revenge narrative. While the Korean adaptation was lauded for its intense, wildly thrilling "hammer scene"—a fight scene that Lee attempts to recreate in this rendition—there is no such fury behind the paneling of the manga, even in its most violent moments (see figure 5 and 6 above)[5]. The action scenes that mark the

---

[5] For cross-comparison: The left image features Joe Doucett, his hammer raised in fury against someone he believes will lead him to his captor. In contrast, the manga offers a far less visually striking portrayal of violence.

turning points of Lee's movie are bloody and unrelenting. Alternatively, hand to hand combat is as vicious as it gets in the *Oldboy* manga, usually taking the form of some hand-to-hand combat to subdue whoever Gotō is interrogating, which often lead him to the heated conversations that push the story forward. Lee's protagonist, Joe Doucett, certainly utilizes methods that are much faster and much more final—he simply leaves those connected with his imprisonment dead on impact. This is an expensive trade-off, however. In the end, Gotō remains the more compelling, nuanced character between the two, as the pacing of the manga format allows for moments of introspection that allow the reader to truly understand, and eventually firmly root for, Gotō's cause.

Of course, the pacing of a manga is determinate on the reader. Read right to left, panels can utilize negative space and scenery shots in order to slow down the plot progression and grant the comic its sense of rhythm. Cinematic pacing quite obviously does not match up quite so well. For example, lingering shots of Tokyo's seedy night life may not be as integral to establish environment in the film as it is in the comic. However, while *Oldboy* provides some insight as to how form can diverge to the point of unrecognizability from the source text, particularly as we see Gotō's psychological struggle become a more overly physical one in Lee's adaptation, one can also see how this works to speed up the narrative a Western audience has come to expect from an action film. The cinematic pacing—rather than one based on panel by panel replication—helps to accelerate an internal struggle that could lend itself to slowness. However, Lee's adaptation falls short because of its inability to take a cue from its preceding text and slow down to do what manga and anime do best—flesh out character. Manga's form takes one by the hand and walks the reader through the narrative, where cinematic vision can struggle from the desire to strap the viewer in on a metaphorical bullet train, speeding them through eight volumes

of graphic content in the matter of just two hours.

Form is indivisible from the recognition and success of the final product; while absolute faith to the source material is not required of an adaption by any means, there must still be an increase in the understanding as to how the source material sits comfortably in its niche, capitalizing on animistic prowess. *Akira* (1988) is quite possibly one of the most famous animated films of all time, its content originating from a Japanese manga series written and illustrated by Katsuhiro Otomo. While the original work (which debuted in 1982) was hugely popular, it is the release of the anime film (also entitled *Akira*) in 1988 that truly put Japanese cinematic anime on the map in an international sense. The film, which is touted as the most expensive anime film of all time with a budget of 9 million dollars, is still regarded as one of the greatest animated films of all time, as its legacy prompted the increase of anime movies in the US and has retained a large sphere of cross-cultural influence (Bolton 29). The form of the original film—which involved the hand-drawn creation of over 160,000 animated cels to create the detailed scenes and fluid movement it has been praised for—is a classic example of what animation is in its purest form. The layering process (which has largely been replaced in more recent films by CGI animation) is a detailed and time-consuming process that has since largely fallen out of practice; the inability to reproduce this form in such a way that matches the original has been debated since the rights to a live-action Hollywood remake were first acquired by Warner Bros. in 2002. Since then, it has been passed along from director to director. The most recent talks to reboot the famed animated movie have followed us into 2019, as Taika Waititi is set to begin working on an adapted version this year.

Thus far, an adaptation for *Akira* has proven to be a tricky feat and may continue to do so due to issues of form. Legacy aside, its long-praised style and rendering has brought with it an

inability to be properly replicated. LaMarre identifies this issue with cel animation: its form

contends with a difficulty with forward movement, "making it difficult to do precisely what

many consider to be the hallmark of the cinema: a sense of movement into the world of its

image, into its depth" (xxv). Innovative as animation has become, in order to more fully mimic

the cinematic image (CGI), anime has adopted a signature form due to the multiplaner image. In

his book *Interpreting Anime*, Christopher Bolton cleverly identifies the issue at hand, finding that

the movie's lack of environmental cinematism is exactly what makes the film so uniquely

innovative, saying "[f]or technical reasons, the anime cannot give *Akira*'s city the kind of

volume or depth the manga can…[N]o matter how far or in what direction the characters [travel]

in that opening scene, the buildings do not get any nearer or farther way, but exist as a kind of

looming backdrop, impossibly large and impossibly distant, like mountains" (51). Characterizing

the city as sentinel, Bolton's ultimate claim is that the layered landscapes of *Akira* become

metaphoric, seeming to evoke the political claustrophobia present in the story, creating a world

that the characters must try to build or locate themselves in. Animatism's instinct is therefore to

"characterize" everything; the very world becomes representative. To transfer the medium is

ergo to change the messages being given, leading one to consider exactly what themes must be

sacrificed in the name of creating live-action adaptations.

And so the long debated question presents itself: if anime adaptations require special

attention to their plot, cultural implications, and form, are Hollywood adaptations truly

necessary? The reasoning behind adaptation covers a wide range of motivating factors—maybe it

is a form of creative bankruptcy, a lack of safe, money-making ideas in Hollywood's shark tank,

that incentivizes trans-cultural borrowing. Ironically, this seems like the safe bet. In the case of

manga and anime, it has also been suggested that live-action adaptations could inspire interest in

the original medium, as Western audiences that are more familiar with live-action entertainment and are thus more receptive to the stories contained therein. Anime itself is often produced for the sole aim to bolster manga sales. However, the ties between anime and manga remain tighter than that of Japanese narratives and their Hollywood counterparts; for one, they are both drawn. Their similar tone and style appeal to similar audiences. They are also Japanese in origin, situating them in a shared cultural context. To hypothesize that live-action should turn the masses to the source material, stimulating the franchise as a whole, is not a totally far-fetched idea, but seems to assume some fundamental similarity between live-action and animated mediums. It would seem that the best method to get foreign audiences interested in Japanese narratives should be apparent, being the catalyst for the rise of live-action adaptations in the first place; instead of adapting, simply continue to expand access to properly translated anime and manga abroad, and the content will find its audience.

Mistranslation, rather than true adaptation, remains the downfall of Hollywood reimaginings of Japanese narratives, dipping them into the territory of the uncanny. Anime and manga continue to provide engaging stories with endearing characters at their forefront, fueling their international appeal, and as the global fan participatory culture surrounding them continues to grow, the greater the demand for more. To uphold the success of popularized anime and manga, adaptation seems like a logical next step; however, it is one that Hollywood has not yet perfected. The fact of the matter remains that the American film industry has yet to score a home run in the area of anime adaptation due to its lack of understanding of what connects followers of Japanese narratives to these stories. As with *Death Note,* fidelity to the plot of a source text is not entirely determinate of an adaptation's success, but one must consider what is lost and gained through plot revision; to resituate a foreign texts' worldview to a Western standard has also

proven problematic in execution. Lastly, failure to consider the influence that form carries for Japanese narratives continues to undermine the advancement of live-action adaptations of anime and manga, leaving anime devotees wanting.

So perhaps it is not necessity that prompts the adaptation of Japanese narratives, but the fact remains that these films will continue to be produced, providing anime fans remain insatiable in their desire for content. And, with consumption of these narratives only on the rise due to streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu, and Crunchyroll, it does not look like demand will cease any time soon. To neglect this fact is to continue to let Hollywood capitalize on Japanese narratives in a way that disrespects the connection that audiences have to the source material, and to cut off new audiences from seeking out anime in new forms. Adaptation correction *can* be simple: it begins with a willingness to recognize and rectify the flaws that have inhibited past iterations of Japanese narratives in American cinema and ends with the satisfaction of both creator and consumer. No doubt, the implications for trans-Pacific exchange are as much monetary as they are political, particularly as Hollywood pulls away from their Neo-Orientalist view of Japan and grants these narratives proper development.

Works Cited

"Anime Expo 2018 Continues to Thrill Fans as They Celebrate Japanese Pop Culture." *Anime Expo*, 10 July 2018, www.anime-expo.org/2018/07/10/anime-expo-2018-continues-thrill-fans-celebrate-japanese-pop-culture/.

"Anime Industry Report Shows Continued Growth in Overseas Market." *Association of Japanese Animation*, 2017, www.animenewsnetwork.com/news/2018-04-30/anime-industry-report-shows-continued-growth-in-overseas-market/.130302.

Azuma, Hiroki. *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*. U of Minnesota P, 2009.

Barder, Ollie. "The Live-Action 'Ghost In The Shell' Movie Failed Because It Did Not Understand Its Source Material." *Forbes*, Forbes Magazine, 8 Apr. 2017, www.forbes.com/sites/olliebarder/2017/04/08/the-live-action-ghost-in-the-shell-movie-failed-because-it-did-not-understand-its-source-material/#63de10976857.

Bolton, Christopher. *Interpreting Anime*. U of Minnesota P, 2018.

Chan-wook, Park, director. *Oldboy*. Show East, 2003.

Colebrook, Claire. "Cinema: Perception, Time, and Becoming." *Gilles Delueze*, Routledge, 2002, pp. 29–54.

Cutchins, Dennis, and Dennis Perry. "The Frankenstein Complex: When the Text Is More Than a Text." *Adapting Frankenstein.* Manchester UP, 2018.

Eisenbeis, Richard. "The Erased Live-Action Movie Is Plagued by a Nonsensical Ending." *Kotaku*, Kotaku.com, 22 Mar. 2016, kotaku.com/the-erased-live-action-movie-is-plagued-by-a-nonsensica-1766287402.

Frohlich, Dennis Owen. "Evil Must Be Punished: Apocalyptic Religion in the Television Series *Death Note*." *Journal of Media and Religion*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2012, pp. 141–155,

doi:10.1080/15348423.2012.706158.

Hutcheon, Linda. *Theory of Adaptation*. Taylor and Francis, 2014.

Jenkins, Henry. *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*. New York UP, 2006.

Krebs, Katja. *Translation and Adaptation in Theatre and Film*. Routledge, 2013.

Kubrick, Stanley, director. *The Shining.* Warner Bros, 1980.

LaMarre, Thomas. *The Anime Machine: A Media Theory of Animation*. U of Minnesota P, 2009.

Lee, Spike, director. *Oldboy*. FilmDistrict, 2013.

Macdonald, Christopher. "Old Boy Wins Eisner Award." *Anime News Network*, 2007, www.animenewsnetwork.com/news/2007-07-29/old-boy-wins-eisner-award.

Miyazaki, Hayao, director. *Kiki's Delivery Service.* Toei Company, 1989.

McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. McGraw-Hill, 1964.

Mendelson, Scott. "'Death Note' Is A Terrible Film, For Reasons That Are Problematic For Netflix." *Forbes*, Forbes Magazine, 31 Aug. 2017, www.forbes.com/sites/scottmendelson/2017/08/31/death-note-is-a-terrible-film-for-reasons-that-are-problematic-for-netflix/#de5e7d45a912.

Mori, Masahiro. "The Uncanny Valley." *IEEE Robotics & Automation Magazine*, translated by Karl F. MacDorman and Norri Kageki, vol. 19, no. 2, June 2012, pp. 98–100.

Oshii, Mamoru, director. *Ghost in the Shell*. Manga Entertainment, 1995.

Otomo, Kastuhiro, director. *Akira*. Tokyo Movie Shinsha, 1988.

---. *Akira*. Kondansha, 1982.

Sanders, Rupert, director. *Ghost in the Shell*. Paramount Pictures, 2017.

Sherman, Jennifer. "Takeshi Obata Draws New Death Note 1-Shot Manga." *Anime News*

Network, 1 May 2019, www.animenewsnetwork.com/news/2019-05-01/takeshi-obata-draws-new-death-note-1-shot-manga/.146310.

Solomon, Charles. "Mainstream Call of Anime." *Los Angeles Times*, 1 July 2003.

Suan, Stevie. *The Anime Paradox: Patterns and Practices Through the Lens of Traditional Japanese Theather*. Global Oriental, 2013.

Tsuchiya, Garon, and Nobuaki Minegishi. *Oldboy*. Dark Horse, 2007.

Zborowski, James. *Classical Hollywood Cinema: Point of View and Communication*. Manchester UP, 2016. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt18dzr4h.