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Building Their Own Ghost in the Shell: A Critical Extended Film Review of American Live-Action Anime Remakes

By Sara Haden

With the advent of online streaming services in the years 2006 through 2009 making Japanese cartoons, popularly known as anime, more popular and easily accessible, the American market for anime has grown immensely. It was no longer the case where only a handful of shows would find their way across the sea into late-night or early morning cartoon blocks on American television, as it had been in the “Japanimation Era.” Anime was readily available at the click of a button, and streaming services such as Funimation, Crunchyroll, Netflix, and Hulu had anime series available in multitudes. It is no wonder that the boom in popularity of the genre would catch the eyes of film companies looking for fresh new stories to bring to the big screen. Over the past few years, there has been a slew of Hollywood live-action adaptations of popular anime such as *Ghost in the Shell*, *Death Note*, *Battle Angel* and *Your Name*. Though these films are objectively well-made live action versions of their animated counterparts, with the exception of *Alita: Battle Angel*, many of the changes made to the stories, characters, and messages can be seen as culturally imperialistic because American ideologies are being superimposed over the original Japanese ones.

Edward Said is the leading scholar on cultural imperialism. Said’s definition of imperialism is “the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory.” In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said asks if imperialism needs to be culturally accepted to function, and these films are an example of this at work. In 2020, imperialism in its most direct definition is the furthest it’s been from being accepted, and Japan was never colonized by the United States, yet American

ideologies are still being superimposed over Japanese stories in film, and arguably weakening them. Through a process of carefully comparing both the American remakes and original Japanese properties and identifying the changes made, this review will cast judgement on the works by focusing on three major questions: do the heart and soul of the original stories survive to the end of their American remakes? Do the lessons and morals of the stories translate through, or were they changed beyond recognition? Are the Japanese ideologies making the cut, or being changed to American ones? It is important to pay attention to the way our media treats the creative work of other countries. Changing characters, story, or the messages that the original author was trying to communicate to the audience is almost a form of eraser of history, like painting a frown over the Mona Lisa's smile. The real tragedy is the fact that many American consumers may not realize it is happening.

***Ghost in the Shell* (2017)**

Paramount Pictures' remake of the 1995 animated masterpiece *Ghost in the Shell* is a science fiction action film that makes liberal use of computer-generated imagery (CGI) to bring Mamoru Oshii's vision of Neo Tokyo to life and does so beautifully. Sporting nearly shot-by-shot remakes of several scenes from its forerunner, the film's face value points to it being a faithful remake of its source material. However, to the dismay of fans of the pivotal cyberpunk film, Rupert Sanders' 2017 live action *Ghost in the Shell* is a complete betrayal to its source material's optimistic outlook on a potential future of technology, twisting it into a cautionary tale against it.

The story of *Ghost in the Shell* takes place in a future Japan, where technology has advanced to a point of making cybernetically enhanced bodies possible. In this world where man and machine have become hybrid, a person's consciousness is referred to as their "ghost." The story follows the Major who is a full body-cyborg. The first deviation Rupert's remake takes from

its source material is that the Major is the only full body cyborg in existence, she is special, and that makes her feel incredibly isolated from the world. In the original version, not only is the Major not special, her cybernetic body is a mass-produced model that she sees everywhere. In both cases, however, what makes the major “herself” – whether she is the only one of her kind, or one of many of her kind, is her consciousness, or her “ghost.” In both versions, the Major's ultimate conflict is one of identity: is she the person she thinks she is and are her memories real? Rupert's version uses the Major's “identity crisis” to shoehorn one of the film's main themes that “it is not your memories that define you, it is your actions” – a very American ideology about individualized identity. However, the original *Ghost in the Shell* utilizes this ideology to ask a more thought-provoking questions when an AI, an artificial “ghost” called The Puppet Master shows up: what makes us human in this world where technology is intertwined with human parts? Is it memories, even though the Puppet Master has proven those to be susceptible to alteration? Is it the ability to be born, and not just be a perfect genetic copy? The Puppet Master explains to the Major, named Motoko Kusanagi, that because the human condition is ever changing, so there is never one “yourself” or “myself,” and searching for it will only limit one's potential. Motoko realizes that all this time she has been only restricting herself by questioning her humanity, and she ends up merging her mind with the AI, throwing away any sense of individuality she may or may not have had.

Rupert's film takes a completely different approach to this problem. The Major questions her identity because she feels alone, because there is no one else like her to confirm that her identity is real. She believes that she is Mira Killian, the sole survivor of a cyberterrorist attack, saved by Hanka Robotics and turned into a weapon to fight against cybercrime. She questions but accepts this until she meets Kuze – who replaces the Puppet Master in this film – who tells her that she is not Mira Killian. Her name is Matoko Kusanagi, she was a Japanese teenager picked up off the street and turned into a weapon against her will by Hanka Robotics. She had

her identity, memories, and even her ethnicity stolen from her. From there, the film follows the typical “betrayed super soldier” trope as Matoko seeks revenge against those who stole her identity from her. In the end, she succeeds but lays dying in the street with Kuze. Kuze urges her to merge with him to save herself, but she declines – saying she would rather die than risk losing herself again. This is the complete opposite from the conclusion of the original film, where Matoko merges with the Puppet Master to save herself, acknowledging that identity is just a construct and preservation of life is what matters most. It is not surprising that a remake made in America, a culture that values and celebrates individuality, would reject a message that argues for its trivialness as the original film does. Because of this, 2017’s *Ghost in the Shell*’s message can come across as culturally imperialistic in its portrayal of a classic anime film.

Death Note (2017)

Following the release of Rupert’s complete reimagining of *Ghost in the Shell*, Netflix put out its own live action adaptation of another well-loved anime series *Death Note* in Summer of 2017. The anime *Death Note* is an occult fiction mystery series about a high school student by the name of Light Yagami who comes into possession of a “death note,” a supernatural notebook that will cause the death of any human whose name is written in it. The death note belongs to a Shinigami named Ryuk, who is bored with his realm and decides to bring the book to the human world to “see what will happen.” Light decides to see if the mystical notebook works by writing the name of a man who the news is reporting has taken students and teachers of a nursery school hostage and on live news the culprit falls dead. After this, Light begins to see the death note as a gift and goes to work, conducting his own form of justice by writing down the names of criminals both on the run and in custody. This is significant because Japan does not have a death sentence, which Light openly disagrees with. Light quickly begins to develop a sort of a god complex, which is exacerbated as the

public begins to realize that it is a person who is causing these deaths and begins to worship him. They call him “Kira,” the Romanization of the Japanese word for “killer.” This phenomenon, obviously, catches the eye of the Japanese Government and the series turns into a detective thriller as the detective known only as the letter L – which conceals his identity, preventing Light from being able to retaliate with the death note – begins his hunt for Kira. The series makes heavy use of religious imagery. One of which is an apple, the “forbidden fruit” from the book of Genesis, which caused the “fall” of Adam and Eve from Eden. The apple is the favorite food of Ryuk, who is causing the fall of Light and those around him. The death note itself is a forbidden fruit and Ryuk’s actions in bringing it to the human realm prove that it is too much of a responsibility for man to bear. It also struggles to answer the question of what is Justice? Is Light the just one in his killing of criminals? Are the detectives just in their manhunt for Kira? It is a question that the series leaves open ended, for the viewer to decide. The series is thought provoking, smart and nuanced in its themes. Every viewer can come out of the show with a different opinion on who the “hero” is.

Netflix’s 2017 adaptation of *Death Note* is an odd mix of an American coming of age story and a psychological thriller. Light Yagami’s live-action counterpart, Light Turner, is your average relatable teenage protagonist, who just happens to end up with the death note. He is a relatable good guy and takes some pushing by the Shinigami Ryuk – played by William Dafoe, which is perfect casting – to write a name in the book. He writes the name of a school bully who had left him bleeding in an alley for defending a classmate earlier that day. After witnessing the death note’s power at work, Light realizes he can use the death note on his mother’s killer, Antony Skomal, who was acquitted after killing Light’s mother with his car. Riding on the adrenaline of his justice, he decides he will use the death note to bring justice to those who have caused pain to innocent people, the way Skomal had to him. He sets out with a mission similar to that of Light Yagami’s, to use the death note only on criminals, gains a

following, and is eventually being hunted by a detective named L. The film does make use of mythology-based symbolism, though it is not Christian. In both the show and the film, L is very suspicious of Light; but he can prove it, and in the live-action adaptation L compares Light to Icarus and threatens him saying “you’re the one that flew into the sun. I’m just here to make sure you burn” – much more outspoken and aggressive than his calm and collected anime counterpart. L’s character is replaced with a much more American archetype of the active detective, physically chasing down his perpetrator. The live-action adaptation also demonstrates this by having L call a press conference, with the American flag waving symbolically in the background as he actively challenges Kira on TV – very different from L in the anime, who did not have a face in the public. It is as if the more nuanced and figurative game of cat and mouse of the original story was assumed to not be enough for an American audience and had to be replaced by a physical one.

***Your Name* (Post-Production)**

The 2016 box office hit *Your Name* was a tremendous success bringing in \$358,922,706 to the box office and beating out 2001’s *Spirited Away* for the record of highest grossing anime film of all time. It is a heartwarming romantic fantasy story steeped in Japanese mysticism that is beautifully animated and told. It is arguably Director Makoto Shinkai’s best work to date. The film tells the fantastical story of a Tokyo boy named Taki and countryside girl Mitsuha, switching bodies in their dreams and learning how to live each other’s lives as they try to figure out what exactly is happening to them. The film uses themes of Japanese folklore and myth about the flow of time and space to weave its story. With its worldwide success, it is no wonder that it was picked up by producer JJ Abrams and director Marc Webb for a live-action remake in the coming years. However, early reports of development report that the film’s setting will be changed from Japan to America, much like Rupert’s remake of *Death Note*, but

the story could suffer for it. The Japanese elements of lore and wonder will have to be replaced with American ones, likely native American as the reported plan is to change Mitsuha's character to be a Native American woman, completely removing Japan out of an originally Japanese story, and making it an American one. Though it would be a shame for this story to lose any of the magic that won the hearts of anime fans everywhere, only time will tell if that will be in fact the case.

Alita: Battle Angel (2019)

Finally, in February of 2019, Robert Rodriguez's film *Alita: Battle Angel* was exactly what the anime doctor ordered. The film took classic 1990 cyberpunk manga series *Gunnm* and brought it to life, arguably to more success than the 1993 anime *Battle Angel* had. The film's CGI, much like Sander's *Ghost in the Shell*, is gorgeous and pushes the outer boundaries of the medium with a basically entirely animated main character – Rosa Salazar as Alita – a cyborg that is meant to look completely “otherworldly,” with her large eyes and petite frame, in an already outrageous science fiction setting that still manages to look real and lived in. The film took home the Visual Effects Society Award for “Outstanding Animated Character in a Photo Real Feature” for exactly this. But computer animation is not the only place where this film does right by its predecessor: it stays true to the heart and soul of its source material, in a way none of the aforementioned films managed to.

Alita: Battle Angel is primarily a quest for identity. Alita is a cyborg girl who comes into consciousness in a dystopian world, brought on by a 300-year-old apocalypse as the result of a war with Mars. She has no memory of who she is or where she came from and after living sometime with the Dr. Ido, the father figure of the story who found and rebuilt her, Alita finds that she has a mysterious instinct for battle. She uses this to take up the work of a Hunter-Warrior, bounty hunter conscripted by “The Factory,” the looming power over this war-torn world. Through the connections, both positive and negative, that Alita forges with the people she

encounters in this world, such as Dr. Ido, Hugo, and other Hunter-Warriors, she begins to form her own unique view of the corrupt society around her. This is solidified by Alita's discovery that she was actually a "Berserker," a cyborg from Mars that invaded Earth 300 years ago and recalls that she watched her comrades die because they kept fighting for a cause that was not their choice. Alita decides she does not want to be like that, she wants to make her own choices and fight for what matters to her. Throughout the story, Alita blossoms from being an innocent to carrying the weight of the world around her on her shoulders, as she discovers something to fight for.

Alita: Battle Angel stayed true to its source material better than any other live-action American remake to date. Regardless, the film has received some criticism for lacking any Asian actors in an originally Japanese story, specifically with casting Keenan Johnson, a white actor, in the role of Yugo and changing his name to Hugo, who was one of the few obviously Asian characters in the original manga. However, the original story, though it was Japanese, takes place in what was the Colorado area of the United States before the war with Mars. Had the story originally taken place in a futuristic Japan, like *Ghost in the Shell*, the lack of Asian characters and actors would be problematic because of how homogeneous Japanese culture is. So, while the film has been criticized for its casting, and accused of "white washing" some of the characters – it does not do so in a way that is culturally imperialistic because it does not change the themes or ideologies of the story.

Conclusion

Hollywood's relationship with Japanese anime has been nothing short of complicated and will likely continue to be so for the foreseeable future. Without the consideration of the complications of bringing an animated property to the big screen in live action, adapting a story from a foreign culture is a task in and of itself. There is bound to always be things "lost in translation," for

misunderstandings to occur, or even the purposeful revisioning of a story: but superimposing American ideologies and themes over Japanese ones is cultural imperialism, and that is where “reimagining” can become problematic. While live action films like *Ghost in the Shell*, *Death Note* and the upcoming *Your Name* have fallen into this proverbial trap of changing a story in ways that are oppressive and limiting to the original property, *Battle: Angel Alita* did not make that mistake and proved that it can be done in a way that is tasteful and respectful to the source material. Imperialism is no longer culturally accepted in the modern world, but American cultural imperialism is still occurring in live action remakes of anime and it needs to be paid attention to, or we will just keep creating our own hollow stories: beautiful shells with no spirit, no ghost.

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Sara Haden is an undergraduate student at CSUSB who will be earning her BA in History in June 2020 and was also part of the editing team of this edition of *History in the Making*. She is currently hoping to start a credential program soon to work toward becoming a high school history teacher. She has loved both anime, film, and history for most of her life and is extremely interested in how different stories are told and the effects of those stories. Sara would like to thank the other editors for their help with her pieces, Dr. Jeremy Murray for his guidance and Dr. Tiffany Jones for always encouraging her to go after topics that really excited her.

