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Cultural Re-Contextualization:

Journeys of "Global Brands" from Japan — and Back

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to suggest one alternate possibility for promotion of Japan as a creative force capable of appealing to global audiences, as the Ministry of Trade and Economy would like to promote using anime and manga and other forms of popular culture. This alternate possibility could be the strength of Japanese craftsmanship and creativity to meet global requisites and venture outside of the barriers of the claustrophobic Japanese markets.

Further to an older case study[1] in which I analyzed the popularity of the 2007 live-action *Transformers* movie in Japan in order to make a case for Japan's unique patterns of consumption of popular culture works, this paper will take a broader look at the specific elements within the Japanese attitudes towards "robots" within movies and animation, and how they contrast with those of the West, in order to understand the duality in discussions (particularly in magazines and such publications) regarding the *Transformers* franchise — is it identifiably American, or Japanese? To do this, we shall explore the collaborative production method of the current television series and we will also analyze what kind of marketing strategies are implemented for localization.

Japan's global strength — hiding "Japaneseness"

The June 13, 2012 issue of Newsweek's Japanese edition has a special feature entitled "Is Cool Japan Going Cold?" The focus lies on the

Japanese government's apparent failure to achieve any specific results from its policy of banking on Japan' s popular culture products — its "soft power" — abroad and reap the profits of their globally-appealing contents, a policy now entering its tenth year.

The downward spiral has been felt for a long time, and in spite of the popularity of Japanese animated contents around the world, few in the animation industry took the government's idea seriously as a particularly effective policy. Rather, many focused on their own ways of directly appealing to overseas consumers.[2]

Earlier in the year, the Wall Street Journal's WSJ Magazine's January 27 piece, entitled "Made Better in Japan", brought to attention the "obsessive — some might say insane — pursuit of perfection" that is prevalent in Japan's service sector. This extends to virtually all of Japanese craftsmanship, with their second-to-none attention to detail perfectly illustrated by the article's examples, such as that of a tapas bar in Kyoto which goes to the extreme lengths of importing even the napkins directly from Spain to recreate the authentic atmosphere halfway around the world.[3]

Rather than emphasizing orientalist stereotypes and strengthening visuals mired in exoticism, Japan's strength can thus be said to be the ability to recreate foreign cultures with precision, all flaws intact — a precision that comes with the level of craftsmanship expected by a society of otaku. This precision is very rarely successful when promoting a uniquely Japanese product abroad unless some efforts can be made for adaptability such as what was done with *Pokemon* (and even then, *Pokemon* is the exception, rather than the rule).[4] However, this precision can be taken advantage of in international co-productions within the entertainment industries as we have seen in the past and are actively continuing to see currently.[5]

Mixing Japanese and Western sensibilities to create universal content

Transformers Prime is an animated television show created by

Hasbro Studios which premiered in the United States on Hasbro's own cable network, the Hub, on November 26, 2010. It is the latest installment in the long-running *Transformers* franchise, also owned by Hasbro, in partnership with Takara-Tomy of Japan. It has significant value as a property around the world, and one glance at the visuals and/or credit sequence gives the impression of a US-written show. True enough, the main production staff in terms of creative input, from the first preliminary designs through to each episode's scripting and storyboarding stages, are primarily based in the United States. However, the main production work itself — the "hard labour", of sorts — is undertaken over at Tokyo-based Polygon Pictures.

Polygon Pictures is no stranger to producing animation as a subcontractor for overseas intellectual property holders. They are currently producing several episodes of *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* — a wholly-owned Lucasfilm production. It is virtually the first show that is completely produced as someone else's IP from the point of view of Polygon. They have no say over how it is executed, and are expected to follow all instructions to the letter. Additionally, the section of Polygon's studio housing the workstations at which the animators for *Clone Wars* are allocated is cordoned off from the rest of the floor by dividers to ensure security. It is very clear in this respect that the *Clone Wars* property is purely Lucasfilm-owned and the materials are being lent to Polygon for the production work only, leaving out any room for creative partnership. This rings necessarily true upon consideration of the implications of the "sharing" of said materials — that is, Polygon is expected to handle only a batch of *Clone Wars* episodes at a time, rather than act as the main contracted studio. Therefore, there are other studios apart from Polygon at work in charge of other episodes of the same show. As such, it would be difficult for Polygon to claim production credit in any true cooperative sense.

Their latest project involves production work for *Tron: Uprising*, another animated show which at the time of writing has recently begun its broadcast run in the US, and in this case the production process is somewhat more of a collaborative effort. Having previously established

a trust-based relationship with the Disney group through productions such as the all-CG *Winnie The Pooh* animation, Polygon was approached by its contacts there with an offer to work on an animated spin-off of the *Tron* movies.[6]

The first task for Polygon during the *Tron* project was how to effectively translate the unique 2D character designs and backgrounds into a 3D environment which would then lend itself well to manipulation and transformation, while looking impressive in motion on a television screen. Specifically, the characteristics of the designs in *Tron: Uprising* are such that most of the characters sport extremely thin, spindly bodies with legs completely disproportionate to their torsos, when compared to a real human body. Prior to being able to begin any animation after the 3D models are done, a process known as rigging must be employed, wherein the frame and joints for each character are constructed, with each character rig designed according to how the character is going to move (or rather, "act") within the narrative. This "translation" of the original designs is a time-consuming, multi-step process where many creative decisions need to be undertaken, and in this case its completion was the result of combined creative input from both the Polygon side and the Disney side. The choice to go with a seamless mix of both 2D and 3D elements came from Polygon.

In the case of *Transformers Prime,* also, the producers all came from companies with whom Polygon had had a close relationship with previously, and thus, had already established the trust which formed the basis for a working collaboration.[7] That goes counter to the standard understanding of what a subcontractor would normally be required to do, and the depth of the relationship allows for a greater level of creativity and innovation.

Robots in the West — A society of "technophobia"

Hideaki Yoke, a product developer for Takara-Tomy who has been involved in the *Transformers* brand since its inception, explains how he sees the global popularity of the franchise in an interview published in

the September 2011 issue of Financial Japan. Through his views, we can get an idea of how Takara-Tomy understands both sides of the picture not just in terms of the consumption patterns of the end users, but also the sociological and cultural factors at work in each target society which formulate those very patterns. He mentions that at the very start of Takara-Tomy's relationship with Hasbro, the two companies were completely at odds with differing approaches to everything. However, he quickly realized that those differences were extremely effective lessons in the virtues of diversity, a concept which is now commonplace but was fresh at the time. In an environment where diversity flourishes, innovative ideas are allowed to grow.[8] This realization echoes a lot of the anecdotes of pitching ideas to and fro with the international partners that Shuzo Shiota, president of Polygon Pictures, shares.

Yoke goes on to explain the contrasting understandings of the concept of the "robot" in Western and Japanese societies. During the 1960s, as Japan was rising as a technological superpower, the image of the robot expanded in the minds of the younger generation both through animations such as *Tetsuwan Atom* and *Tetsujin 28-gou,* eventually manifesting into the 1970 Osaka Expo. These "robots" in fiction were creations born from the ashes of death, in the case of Atom it was the loss of his creator's son that drove to his creation as a replacement but was soon discarded when he was found not to have the ability to grow up like a normal child. Similarly, the main reason for the construction of the giant that was Tetsujin was the need for the ultimate weapon of war, a nuclear-driven robot that would crush the allied forces and bring victory to Japan in World War II. However, the war ended in Japan's defeat before the robot's completion and instead Tetsujin was used as a peacekeeping hero to fight evildoers.

These ideals of what robots are and should be, and how they interact with society, are intrinsically tied in with Japan's postwar history and attitude towards technology. Similarly, social factors affect the traditional Western ways of thinking regarding technology, including robots.

If *The Terminator* was a typical American action/horror movie,

then *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* was almost a Japanese twist on the original. As such, these works paint an interesting picture of the division between robots in the American mindset. The original 1984 film featured Arnold Schwarzenegger playing a relentless killer cyborg programmed to go back in time to wipe out the mother of the future leader of the human resistance which is locked in battle with an army of machines in 2029. Conversely, the second movie, from 1991, has him play another cyborg programmed to protect a group of humans from an even bigger threat. In the sequel, the humanistic elements of the machine once it is allowed to "learn" and its child-like inquisitive attitude towards human behaviour (as exemplified in the line, "Why do you cry?") point toward a divergence from the hitherto typical zeitgeist in terms of machines and emerging technology in the American consciousness, so that viewers care deeply about Schwarzenegger's character by the end of the movie. To contrast this new change in attitude with the case of *Robocop*, from 1987, it is clear that at that time American film audiences still had not reached this stage of acceptance since the movie had the titular character — formerly a human police officer whose memory was wiped and body was almost completely destroyed, leaving his brain functions to control an automated anthropomorphic law-enforcement machine — essentially prove that only a true human can uphold the moralistic values necessary to overcome corruption and greed, and machines can never judge right from wrong.

Ultimately, these examples illustrate the Western fears of automated systems running society and/or automatons living in our human society. To position her stance on cyberpunk anime works such as *Bubblegum Crisis* and *The Guyver*, Susan Napier calls Hollywood movies like *The Terminator*, *Robocop* and *Total Recall*, "technophobic" (2001, 88).[9] Sure enough, they certainly capture that tension in the Western mindset. However, in just four years, director James Cameron[10] overturned this outlook for mainstream moviegoers, but Yoke explains that the Transformers had already achieved this with American children by mixing Japanese sensibilities with American ones back in 1984. By the time the 2007 Michael Bay-directed live-action theatrical incarnation of

the *Transformers* appears, enough shift in the social consciousness has occurred, not least due to both the ubiquity of new technological innovations and speed at which they develop as well as the childhood nurtured on tech-based toys and fictional heroes set in a technological utopia, that this mindset has evolved to one fully accepting that heroic robots can protect humans from peril, and they themselves — despite being enbodiments of advanced technology — are nothing to fear.

Yoke explains how Japanese society, on the other hand, has long viewed robots as heroes. Coming from a background of popular tropes in children's entertainment in which the heroes "transform", or "*henshin*", into a more powerful mode, the basic concept of the heroic robot, as introduced by Go Nagai in his seminal work *Mazinger Z*, served the utilitarian purpose of a giant suit of armour "piloted" by the protagonist. Effectively it served as an extension of the weak body of the human — the human had no "power" or strength until his "transformation". This extends to all of the *sentai* (superhero teams which often pilot robots which then combine into larger robots as the action escalates) live-action series and the robot anime series which followed, up to and including *Mobile Suit Gundam*. Gundam was still a "hero" mecha because it was a unique design of which there was only one model in existence, a prototype, more powerful than all other "Mobile Suits" and as piloted by the weak-willed, reluctant hero, Amuro Ray, was an extension of his own self. Thus when we look at the Gundam, we are really looking into Amuro Ray's "battle mode", and Amuro is essentially one and the same with the Gundam.

Analyzing this, we can see through the patterns established in robot shows that primarily they were there to help humans, with the threat of technology overcoming the human race replaced with a different evil — that of humans' own misuse of said technology to bring about suffering and injustice to other, innocent, humans. Thus the complexities in children's entertainment were already embedded in a nascent state from an early period in time and fully bloomed to fruition in the late 1970s and 1980s with *Mobile Suit Gundam, Fang of the Sun Dougram, Armored Trooper Votoms, Blue Comet SPT Layzner* and so on,

all of which had by this point evolved the entire "robot" genre into a realistic, politically-centred narrative within which robots and other machinery were tools and weapons of war. By this point, however, the viewership of these programmes were no longer restricted to children, as adults were increasingly becoming involved.

Toshiya Ueno's[11] example of *Mobile Police Patlabor the Movie,* 1989, along with other such Mamoru Oshii movies, gives us a clue as to why foreign audiences relate so well to Oshii's particular stories. The themes of terrorism are explored not through the lens of ideologies clashing, but rather, as misuses of technology — where the criminals are rarely caught, and if so, are not shown to repent, since there is always an undertone that the progress of technological development will trundle on regardless of human will or moral code. That is the most frightening aspect for viewers and listeners of Oshii's warnings, and it is highly compatible with the American attitude of technology as something to be weary of. Perhaps this is one reason that the popularity of Oshii's works abroad almost overshadows that of his home country.

In the *Patlabor* movie, the antagonist, Eiichi Hoba, commits suicide in the first two minutes of the runtime. It is later revealed through the investigation conducted by the detective characters that he planted a computer virus into the new operating systems of construction robots known as "labors". The virus forces the thousands of labors in use in Tokyo to activate without pilots and run amok upon detection of a certain sound pitch inaudible to humans, which comes as a result of resonance in large structures caused by high wind speeds.

Ueno makes the point that the danger of the imminent destruction of Tokyo has been embodied within many forms of popular culture appearing during the high economic growth period, in particular as "*kaiju*" giant monsters starting with Godzilla — always allegories for nuclear holocaust or some other catastrophe. Ueno compares this trend to the appearance of Hoba and states that the main difference here is that Hoba is just a human after all, in spite of his extraordinary knowledge and ability (1998, 33). It is my contention, however, that since *Godzilla*'s birth was in fact the result of a man-made nuclear explosion,

and as such, is directly comparable to the virus unleashed in *Patlabor*, the comparison between Hoba and *kaiju* is a rather inappropriate one, since Hoba is not the one embodying the destruction as Godzilla and other *kaiju* do, rather, he is simply the one who put it in motion.

Of course, Hoba is still technically the "villain" of the movie, but he is gone and cannot be brought to justice. In fact, it is interesting to note that the police force characters like Chief Goto at times, while never condoning his actions, sympathize with Hoba's feelings and motivations (a point that Ueno also mentions), sharing at least parts of his view that technology was advancing at a rate too fast for humanity to cope with. The climax is then, inevitably, humans versus an army of mindless machines.

Thus, the *Patlabor* film's depiction of the main threat not as the evildoing human mind controlling everything, but the technology itself being the evil that has been let out of Pandora's box, is one that can be considered a Western perspective, all the while still upholding the Japanese trend of maintaining the ideals of *some* machines being heroic and friendly, as seen in the way the heroine police officer Noa Izumi cries when she fears that should her own Patrol Labor (whom she has even given the affectionate nickname "Alphonse") be infected, it would have to be dismantled (a point made more poignant after the explanation that she has given the name "Alphonse" to a cat and a dog that she previously owned, thus in this case, the robot is understood to be thought of as a pet of sorts, and, for Noa, "dismantling" is therefore synonymous with "putting him down"). Thus Noa cares about Alphonse as if he were a character, almost like *Tetsujin 28-gou*'s young hero Shotaro cares for Tetsujin, even though these robots are not actually sentient. This would be the Japanese side starting to be visible.

With *Transformers*, the only real difference is that the characters are explicitly integrated within the bodies of the robots, rather than implicitly. The heroes are the robots and the transformations are "disguises", to blend in better with the world of the humans. The human-robot interaction in this case is mostly played as friendship, sometimes a form of paternal love.

Yoke compares the "robots as heroes" concept to the understanding of what a "hero" is for American child audiences, which he says is that of a "big and strong father figure" (*Financial Japan* No. 82, 84). Indeed, a sense of responsibility and justice is usually what protagonists of children's US programming in the 1980s embodied, and theories and analyses of these "heroes" as surrogate father figures for children at home with working parents are plentiful. Yoke posits that with characters such as Optimus Prime — the wise, noble leader of the heroic Autobots, who also happens to be an alien robot fighting a war — *Transformers* essentially combined the characteristics of both the noble and just father figure role model hero that American children enjoyed, like *Superman,* with the powerful technological tool which would protect humanity that the Japanese were accustomed to.

The robot context as seen within Japan

As such, it makes sense that the themes and codes in the original 1984 *Transformers* cartoon are not so far removed from that which Japanese children had been exposed to up until then, although they were presented in alternate ways (such as there being no scenes of reused stock footage for transformation, as were the norm in the 1970s). However, as previously mentioned, the Japanese market had already evolved past children-oriented simplistic good-versus-evil battles and by 1985 — the year that *Transformers* arrived in Japan — the main trend of robot animation was gritty realism in its depictions of war, something lacking in the *Transformers,* or any US animation series at the time. The Japanese version did incorporate some elements of specifically Japanese tropes, mostly established in the 1970s, such as calling out the battle-cry "Transform!" every time a robot would transform. Again, these types of "codes" were increasingly being omitted from newer shows of the time due to their emphasis on realism.

It is no coincidence that once the bubble burst for the "gritty realism" in television animation of *Votoms, Layzner* and such shows, that we started seeing the OVA[12] market take off in an extension of this, with

Mellowlink[13] and others continuing the trend straight into the hardcore violence extreme. So in the late 1980s, the themes of TV animation begin to move away from mature themes, once again, and instead focus on dynamic visuals.

Famous for his work as animator on many of the latter-1980s to 1990s Japanese robot shows, Masami Obari has recently been frank about his experiences working on those shows. He describes the previous generation of animators who had "gone all-out crazy" at the beginning of the 1980s with shows like *Super Dimension Fortress Macross* and such, and how at around the mid-1980s they all left television animation to pursue work in the OVA (Original Video Animation — fan-centred straight-to-video animation) format. The problem here, he explains, is that this was effectively a staff exodus from the TV animation industry, and the keyframe artists such as Obari slid into their open spots almost by default.[14]

In an interview I conducted for a separate publication (currently in the editing stage) with anime critic Ryouta Fujitsu, he alludes to 1985 having been the year when television "stopped being interesting" to animation fans,[15] corroborating Obari's inside story. The change is clear-cut, even to a casual viewer. The political tension of the Cold War as depicted in the space-age setting of 1986's *Layzner,* for example, is absent from the likes of *Machine Robo,* and any incarnation of the *Transformers.* As *Gundam* and other shows had been in the past, *Layzner* was cancelled before its story could finish. This only spurred the shift of animators towards the OVA market, since the product there was the home video itself, rather than reliance on the show being effective or not in driving sales of robot toys, the manufacturers of which were the shows' sponsors and had the power pull the plug on an unprofitable property.

So now on the one hand, there was a booming OVA market where there were very few restrictions as to what content is appropriate, and on the other, the television market which was reeling from the aftermath of the revolution that the young animators had caused. Obari concludes that there was little new to bring to the table for the new

animators who took their place (Arai 2012, 20–21). In practice, though, the developments in shorthand techniques, animation effects and detailing of cels was where the effort was focused, while the content itself reverted to children's fare.

By 1988, the situation had evolved to the point where a Japanese-only sequel to *Transformers* entitled *Super God Masterforce,* appeared, in which all of the characters are humans and the Transformers themselves are lifeless bodies until they mechanically integrate with the humans through a "*gattai*" combination and then they are essentially powered-up versions of themselves, complete with a robot body. Intriguingly, the opposite pattern also appears, in which the catchphrase term "robots in disguise" is taken to another level and some of the alien robot characters are in fact, hiding within a human "shell".

Apart from the lucrative toy merchandising nature of these ideas, this concept is typically Japanese, and did not transfer over to the United States or European versions of the story. By this point Sunbow and Marvel Studios, producers of the original animated series from 1984, had had a falling out over unpaid funds and no new animated material was being produced, but the toys were still going on sale, with new models every season. The models available in the 1988–1989 period came from the Japanese "Masterforce" line and they were rebranded as "Powermasters" and "Pretenders" for the Western markets, following the reimagining of the story in the US and UK comic books. Within the pages of these comics, though the aforementioned key concepts for this year's Japanese Transformers were present, they were not a break from the established *Transformers* history like they had been in Japan. Namely, the Transformers were still the Transformers, as in, alien, sentient robots that transform into vehicles — although now they integrated/combined with humans on a bio-mechanical level to "power-up". The idea that they are actually humans all along is not carried over into the Western fiction.

Localizing "Global Japan" back into "Japanese Japan"

Hirofumi Katsuno and Jeffrey Maret, in their case study of *Pokemon* as an example of a localized, globalized content restructured from Japanese elements, take plenty of cues from Susan Napier and Trish Ledoux to fill in some background regarding the understanding of animated television fare which they describe as the "cartoon space" and the "anime tradition", in which the former is the dominant understanding by Western society exemplified by *Tom & Jerry* and Disney, and the latter is the wide variety of more diverse genres of animation "geared for a broader audience". (2004, 83)[16]

The 2007–2009 television series, *Transformers Animated,* a show broadcast originally on the Cartoon Network cable channel, features visuals which are very much in a modern two-dimensional US animation style, typified by such shows as *The Powerpuff Girls* and *Dexter's Laboratory* which built up most of this angular, stylized visual grammar in the mid- to late 1990s and these days almost define the look of Cartoon Network programmes. This dynamic, exaggerated style may not resemble Japanese animation characteristics much in terms of character or set design, but Genndy Tartakovsky, the animator primarily behind the look and feel of the highly-influential *The Powerpuff Girls* and *Dexter's Laboratory,* has inserted plenty of references and nods to Japanese animation and culture in terms of both choreography cues as well as narrative content. Many episodes of *Dexter's Laboratory* feature extended transformation scenes of giant robots, obviously parodying those types of sequences in Japanese works, as well as tongue-in-cheek references to the strange-yet-cool aspects of Japanese culture[17]. Similarly, the *Powerpuff Girls* concept itself is almost typically Japanese in that a special team of cute but powerful little girls saves the world from various villains. The design of the characters itself seemingly resonated with certain Japanese subcultures and *Powerpuff Girls*-themed merchandise is currently available in Japan for a specific type of (adult) fan, despite the show being originally designed for (and, in the West,

consumed by) children.

Genndy Tartakovsky's latest directorial work is *Sym-bionic Titan*, which is an extremely obvious homage to *Tetsujin 28-gou*, *Reideen*, *Mazinger Z* and countless other retro giant robot shows from Japan. Sure enough, issue 7 of "Toon Guide", a Japanese-language fan-publication researching the phenomenon of modern US cartoons, in particular the Cartoon Network shows, describes Tartakovsky as claiming to have been profoundly influenced by Japanese shows during his childhood, such as *Battle of the Planets* and *Speed Racer*. Similarly, the show's designer Paul Rudish tells of his love for robots such as the *Shogun Warriors* and *Micronauts*.[18] Intriguingly, in spite of the amount of Japanese elements these Cartoon Network shows intrinsically contain as their Western selling points, they find little mainstream audience in Japan itself.

Transformers Animated has had an interesting following in Japan, to begin with simply by virtue of being a modern Cartoon Network show featuring a mixture of both Western and Japanese elements which follows the line of evolution as described above, but also due to the addition of other elements for the Japanese localization. Namely, the Japanese edition features a newly-produced opening title sequence. The voice-over that greets the viewer at the beginning of this sequence is that of Optimus Prime, who cheerfully exclaims (in Japanese), "Hey there, good little kids! I am Optimus Prime, leader of the Autobots! Eh? You can't remember that? OK, I will say it again. I am Optimus Prime, leader of the Autobots! Pleased to meet you. Alright, it's time for Transformers Animated to begin! Transform!"

Obviously, the intention here is to bring in young audiences and in a brief space of time allow them to understand the basic concept behind the Transformers. In addition, although there have been many *Transformers* TV series in Japan before this one, this was the first rendition in which the names of the characters remained (mostly) unchanged from the US original — a result of the unification of the character and faction names and terminology that was implemented once the 2007 live-action movie was released in Japan.

However, what follows after this narration is a much more "Japanese"-looking animation style, in terms of choreography, than the original US opening. The essence of this one-and-a-half-minute sequence is clearly a manifestation of Japanese techniques to maximize dynamic effects, which have their roots in the similarly-styled openings to robot shows from the 1980s and 1990s (the very techniques that Masami Obari and his generation of animators perfected). The other intriguing issue is that most of the animation for the series overall was produced in Japan anyway. Four studios are credited with production, all of them Japanese — Studio 4C, Mook Animation, The Answer Studio and Ajia-do Animation Works.

A Japanese blogger known as Boisterous Bone gathering information on the foreign reactions to Japanese pop culture contents such as anime and manga has an entry on the opinions concerning the Japanese *Transformers Animated* opening sequence. He has translated into Japanese some of the English words of praise for the new version, one of which pointed out that this opening was much more favourable than the Japanese version of the 1990s CG-animated series, *Beast Wars Transformers,* which had a similar "Hey there, good little kids!" voice-over before segueing into a mismatched visual edit of scenes from various episodes strung together with a Japanese rap song overdubbed[19].

This is odd, because as we have seen from the content, the target audiences for "US produced" shows are becoming more mature and adult-oriented, whereas what we are seeing in Japan is that those same shows are being re-written and simplified for younger children. To return to Katsuno and Maret's essay, the dichotomy of the "cartoon space" and "anime tradition" is no longer there, and if it is, I would argue that its existence lies within the consciousness of the users/consumers, insofar as their understanding of the two lies perhaps in a rather simplistic definition of what entails "Japanese animation" as opposed to "Western animation", or vice-versa. Either way the division is fading faster in reality than perhaps is openly visible within the mainstream, because subculture groups are closed off. To bring up another example, Japanese animation studio Gainax, famous for having been founded by

self-proclaimed otaku and creating the most otaku-centric anime during the period from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s, produced a show in 2011 entitled *Panty and Stocking with Garterbelt,* full of crass humour and adult jokes. However, the look and animation style was almost indistinguishable from that of the Cartoon Network productions, obviously with intention, and many of the jokes derive from references to, and parodies of, Hollywood movies or Western pop culture. Some episodes feature nods to *Ghostbusters* and *Back to the Future,* while others are complete homages to some specific intellectual property, in one case, a full episode devoted to the lineage of the *Transformers,* from the satirical easy defeat of the characters with live-action movie-inspired designs, to the minute split-second background details, each of which caricature some minor event in the 1980s cartoon.

Despite these indications of a seemingly narrowing rift between the idiosyncrasies of the Japanese market and that of the "Western/global" market, Hasbro Studios' *Transformers Prime,* with its extremely mature storytelling (for *Transformers*) combined with Polygon Pictures' high production value visuals apparently still needs heavy editing for success in Japan. The final scene of episode 3 of *Transformers Prime* ends in a minor cliffhanger in which impending danger is foreshadowed. While an Autobot (heroic) character, Ratchet, is busy working in the background, we focus on a small tool on the ground which comes alive in the foreground to resemble a mechanical claw which then begins to move towards "us", the viewer, and attacks the "camera", switching the screen to black, after which the words "To be continued" appear. There is no dialogue at all during this final scene, only ominous music and sound effects. The Japanese version of this episode, broadcast over a year after its premiere abroad, fills all of the silence with a long monologue from Ratchet, his back turned to us, in which he explicitly breaks the fourth wall to address us, the "good kids watching TV" (direct quote, my translation), and how he thinks he "heard you calling 'behind you, behind you', but if I turn around, you will make fun of me, so no, Mr Ratchet isn't falling for that one!"[20]

At this stage, we have now undergone a complete role reversal com-

pared to the *Pokemon* example given by Katsuno and Maret. Where they described Japanese anime having "intervals of silence to build dramatic tension" (2004, 84) (in spite of the fact that they are specifically referring to background music and sound effects, the same can be said for dialogue), the localization procedure of shortening or eliminating the silence is now being implemented for the Japanese audience. But why should this be? The answer may lie in the nebulous categorization of *Transformers Prime*, and in fact the entire *Transformers* franchise, for the Japanese market.

Conclusion

On June 19, 2012, it was reported that *Transformers Prime* won in two categories at the Daytime Emmy Awards for the second year. While around the world it continues to gather popularity expanding to various age groups, in Japan, *Transformers* was and still remains a child-oriented intellectual property, whose main source of revenue comes from toy sales. With the aforementioned highly developed culture of robots which is dominant in, and rather unique to, Japan, the very concept of Transformers — sentient robots from outer space fighting a battle between good and evil — is still regarded as childish. The *Transformers Prime* animated series has gained quite a large adult following for its mature storytelling and characterizations, but they are still viewed as not mature enough for older Japanese viewers. Also, toy manufacturer Takara-Tomy has expressed their intent to market product directly to younger users, with their cheaper price point and small additions to the toys: "arms micron" — collectable, transforming weapons that are unique to the Japanese market and fit onto the existing Transformers toys which are otherwise the same around the world. These weapons are featured in added comical segments at the end of each episode of the Japanese broadcast. In order to tie the concept with the show further, characters onscreen call out "Arms up!" whenever they deploy weapons, another space where there is no dialogue in the original. Other scenes have been edited in the Japanese edition to save

time (to make room for the extra shorts at the end of each episode), while others have been cut seemingly for violence.

What this all means in the greater scope is that, to return to the example of Polygon Pictures and the Wall Street Journal magazine article, the power of "Cool Japan" lies not within its ability to promote its rich culture and craftsmanship in an almost egotistical fashion (as the Newsweek article states, "For Japan to call itself 'cool' is pitiful"), but rather, to create global, universal content which can be enjoyed by any-

Fig. 1 A photo of a TV screen during the broadcast of Episode 2 of the Japanese edition of *Transformers Prime*. The superimposed note reads, "Part of the broadcast content contains scenes which are problematic within Japan, but we will show them as they were intended out of respect for the original work." Ironically, a comparison with the US original proves that the more violent scenes were indeed cut. The DVD commentary for this episode, featuring staff members Jeff Kline, Mike Vogel, Therese Trujillo, and David Hartman, reveals that even they were surprised by how much they were able to get away with, and they did expect a certain graphic scene to get cut, but it remained intact. This specific scene is much shorter in the Japanese version.

one, anywhere in the world. The editors of Financial Japan had already realized this when they put Optimus Prime on the cover of their *Transformers* special issue underneath the words "A new 'Cool Japan' transformed through US-Japan collaborations".

Some writers have started to appraise the collaboration between Japan and the West in terms of production as a form of "cultural exchange". Seeing the potential of animation as a global medium, it would be prudent to take advantage of intercultural communication during the production process to reap such benefits as mutual acknowledgement of varying approaches to problem-solving. One example would be the differences in methods employed for animating a certain character. Depending on the cultural background of the animator, the character will behave differently, and perhaps that will limit its appeal overseas. The key is to reach a universal balance through reciprocity.[21]

Two main hurdles remain, however. The first is how to actively assert the Japanese origins for global recognition to take place. Many Japanese co-productions have depended on the deletion of Japanese elements for localization to other countries to the extent that the country of origin is, invariably, mistakenly thought to be the United States. However, this is not so much the case in Europe and South America. The second is, how to "re-localize" the content back into the Japanese market for consumption by the Japanese? The localization of *Transformers Prime* is questionable, but this is the result of a mixture of merchandising priorities as well as the peculiarities of the Japanese culture of animation, with its own unique history and lineage — *Transformers* has and, perhaps for a long time, will continue to be an oddity within this context.

Notes

1 Rivera, Renato 2008: "The Popularization of Geek Culture and the Marginalization of Otaku Culture", *Journal of Kyoto Seika University,* No. 34, 119–140.

2 "Is Cool Japan Going Cold?", *Newsweek Japan Edition,* June 13, 2012 issue,

Hankyu Communications, 51–59.

3 "Made Better in Japan", *The Wall Street Journal Magazine,* February 2012 issue, Dow Jones Publishing (Asia), 26–33. Online version available at: http://online.wsj.com/article/SB 10001424052970204542404577157290201608630.html (last accessed August 17, 2012)

4 Katsuno, Hirofumi; Maret, Jeffrey 2004: "Localizing the Pokemon TV series for the American market", in *Pikachu's Global Adventure: The Rise and Fall of Pokemon,* Tobin, Joseph (ed.), Duke University Press, 80–107

5 Here I refer to examples of works such as the live-action Hollywood-produced *Speed Racer* movie from 2008 and the recent *Voltron Force* US-produced television animated series (to name just two) — both works being derivatives of Japanese intellectual property, *Mach Go Go Go* (animated TV series, 52 episodes, 1967–1968) and *Hyakujuuou Golion* (animated TV series, 52 episodes, 1981–1982), respectively. Such derivatives can be produced outside of Japan without requiring the consent of the original Japanese creators due to licensing issues stemming from complications in the original documents stipulating the conditions for overseas distribution rights. In recent years, disputes have arisen as a result of these issues, most notably one surrounding ownership of design elements by the production agency Studio Nue and animation production house Tatsunoko Production, since Tatsunoko apparently transferred said ownership to the distributor Harmony Gold USA, who went on to produce the *Robotech* series using Tatsunoko-produced footage of various animated works, and continues to make sequels based on that property.
(http://www.animenewsnetwork.com/news/2002-02-26/macross-lawsuit, last accessed: August 17, 2012)

6 Personal interview with Polygon CEO Shuzo Shiota, conducted on May 24, 2012.

7 *Ibid.*

8 川口有紀 Kawaguchi Yuki,「トランスフォーマー：日米コラボで変形した，新しい "クールジャパン"」("Transformers: A new 'Cool Japan' transformed through US-Japan Collaboration")，フィナンシャルジャパン (*Financial Japan*), September, 2011, ナレッジフォア Knowledge Fore, 78–89.

9 Napier, Susan J. 2001: *Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation,* Palgrave Macmillan, 88.

10 While James Cameron may not have actively been thinking about Japanese sensibilities towards machines and how they can help humanity when

he was producing his 1991 film, he has gone on record numerous times during the 1990s to appraise Japanese science-fiction works such as *Ghost in the Shell* and *Gunnm* (known as *Battle Angel Alita* in some regions).

11 上野俊哉 Ueno, Toshiya 1998：*紅のメタルスーツ：アニメという戦争Metal-suits, The Red: Wars in Animation,* 紀伊國屋書店 Kinokuniya Shoten, 26–64.

12 Original Animation Videos (OVAs), were straight-to-home video animation works which arose in the early 1980s and boomed in the mid- to late-eighties. Their production and subsequent popularity had its root causes in the audience shift from television animation of the original otaku generation, having reached its peak with animated series like *Super Dimension Fortress Macross* and some of its contemporaries, so that the concept of the TV series as a marketing tool for toy companies to advertise their product changed into that of animation being the product itself. Fans emerged who would pay substantial amounts of money for a single 30-minute VHS cassette tape or Laser Disc if the quality of animation was impressive enough.

13 *Armor Hunter Mellowlink* was an Original Video Animation work from 1988 which expanded the universe presented in 1983's robot military action animated television series, *Armor Trooper Votoms.* The twist is that in *Mellowlink,* though robots are featured, the main character does not actually pilot one. This is a result of the producers taking advantage of the OVA format not having to rely on sponsors, in particular the toy manufacturers, common for the time.

14 荒井淳 Arai, Jun 2012：*いまだから語れる80年代アニメ秘話――スーパーロボットの時代――* (*Secrets of 1980s animation finally revealed: The age of Super Robots*), 洋泉社 Yousensha, 20–21

15 Rivera Rusca, Renato 2012: "Approaches to Anime Journalism in the 21st Century", *Colony Drop Volume 2,* forthcoming.

16 Katsuno and Maret 2004: 83–84.

17 One episode of *Dexter's Laboratory* features the lead character going on a foreign exchange program to a Japanese school, where it is revealed that all the students have their own personal giant robots, with giant monster attacks being so commonplace as to be considered mundane.

18 LOU 2010：「Sym-bionic Titan：帰ってきたゲンディ」"Sym-bionic Titan: The return of Genndy", *Toonguide No. 7,* 眠田直 Minda, Nao (ed.), Warmachine, 27–28.

19 陽気な死者のバンケット：アニメ・特撮・マンガ・声優に対する海外の反応を

超適当に翻訳するサイト（"Banquet of the cheerful deceased: A site half-heartedly translating the overseas reactions to anime, tokusatsu, manga and voice actors"):
http://boisterousbone2.seesaa.net/article/150577471.html (last accessed: August 17, 2012)

20 Further to this example, the recent behind-the-scenes *"Transformers Prime" Late-Night Perfect Transformation 2-hour Special* television programme (aired after midnight on August 12, 2012, TV Tokyo), featured a section where the presenters (some of whom were made up of the Japanese dub voice actors) compare clips from the original US broadcast versions of the episodes with the Japanese ones. One particular episode (season 1, episode 12, entitled "Predatory" in the English version, "Monster Bug Transformation! The Forest of the Spider-Woman" in the Japanese edition) is described by the production staff on the US edition Blu-Ray disc's audio commentary (which is not explicitly referred to in the Japanese TV special) as being an homage to horror movies, with its misty forest setting, a drab colour palette used throughout, handheld-style camerawork and an abundance of tense, silent pauses before some shocks. All this is a notable break in presentation and atmosphere from the previous episodes. However, the Japanese edition has some scenes cut out (including, notably, a brief shot of a grotesque "collection" of dead aliens inside a spaceship), with others having overdubbed comical lines (mostly jokey pop-culture references) where there was previously no dialogue. The TV special concluded that these lines were added to relieve the tension and that the original was "too scary for a programme shown at 8 am on a Saturday morning". It should also be noted that at no point does this special programme ever mention that the animation itself is produced in Japan, nor is there any reference to Polygon Pictures.

21 Kiyoshi Tane, in an interview with Polygon Pictures staff members, invokes an opportunity for cultural exchange between the US and Japan in describing how the character of Miko, a cheerful but rebellious teenage girl in *Transformers Prime*, is brought to life through the collaboration of both foreign and Japanese animators. Her wildly exaggerated overreactions are animated mostly by foreign staff at Polygon, while the somber, more subtly nuanced expressions are better handled by Japanese.
多根清史 Tane Kiyoshi, 2012：「ポリゴン・ピクチュアズのスタッフが語る制作秘話：日本のフル3D CGアニメ技術がハリウッドの本気に応える！」("The

staff of Polygon Pictures talk about production secrets: Japan's full 3D CG animation skills respond to Hollywood's passion!"), *オトナアニメ Vol. 24* (*Otona Anime Vol. 24*), 洋泉社 Yousensha, 102–105.

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