How To Watch Television

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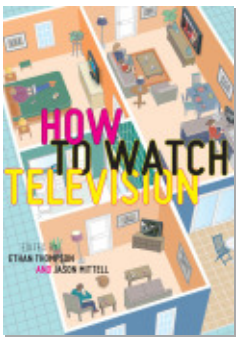

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Samurai Champloo
Transnational Viewing

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Abstract: Television criticism usually addresses "what" TV is watched, and often "who" watches, but "where" TV is watched is less commonly considered vital to understanding it. In this look at the anime program *Samurai Champloo,* Jiwon Ahn argues for the importance of "where" to the meanings and pleasures of texts which—like anime—circulate in television's global flows.

Watching an imported or translated text on television is an increasingly ordinary experience in the current state of globalization. But what unique critical questions should we consider in order to make sense of such viewings? To understand our desire for and pleasure in viewing imported television texts, we need to consider how texts produced for overseas distribution are designed differently for international audiences, and how this design may inflect (or not) our viewing of them. Anime offers a productive example in that the format's long history of international circulation inevitably involved the development of textual strategies suited to transnational consumption, including, notably, an effort to balance exoticism with familiarity in terms of appeal. While the popularity of shows such as *Dragon Ball Z* (Cartoon Network, 1998–2005), *Ranma ½* (Fuji Television, 1989–1992), and *InuYasha* (Cartoon Network, 2000–2004) on U.S. television can be attributed to this mixing of exotic and familiar, this essay focuses on the more recent case of *Samurai Champloo* because of its more self-conscious and playful balancing of these two modes of appeal.

Samurai Champloo is a twenty-six-episode anime series that premiered on Fuji Television in Japan in 2004 and has since been distributed worldwide. In the United States, the show aired on the Cartoon Network as part of Adult Swim until 2006, and was recently redistributed by FUNimation, an anime distribution network that includes a cable TV channel. In order to discuss how to watch *Samurai Champloo* specifically, we need to know what *Samurai Champloo* is, beyond just being a "foreign" text.

We can start by investigating what the curious word "champloo" means. While it's easy to guess that the "samurai" in the title relates to the show's genre affiliation, "champloo" can be understood as signifying the show's eclectic approach to representing time and space in its diegetic world. Coming from the regional language of Okinawa, the tropical southern islands of Japan, *champloo* literally means "something mixed," and is also the name of a popular local dish (*champuru*) created from stir-frying all sorts of different ingredients. Although the show never explains the term's meaning, it would be reasonable to begin our inquiry with an understanding that *Samurai Champloo* is an anime text that uses the genre conventions of samurai, while providing "something mixed" for the viewing pleasure of the contemporary global audience. This essay considers the critical issues involved in viewing *Samurai Champloo* specifically in the transnational context, using the show's first episode, "Tempestuous Temperament" (U.S. airdate May 14, 2005), as its main reference point. By looking at the episode as well as the show more generally, I aim to illustrate how our awareness of the context of viewing informs our reading of the show and intensifies the polysemic pleasures we take from it.

Samurai Champloo follows the genre conventions of *chanbara*—samurai movies—which belong to the larger category of period drama, called *jidai-geki,* in Japanese national cinema. Set in the historical past of the Edo period (1603–1868), the show features three main characters, two of whom are wandering samurai warriors who represent widely different samurai identities. Mugen, the main character, is an unorthodox swordsman whose unlawful past as a pirate keeps haunting him. Jin, on the other hand, is a rogue samurai who is on the run after inadvertently murdering his own teacher. Coming together from two opposite ends of *bushido* (the code of conduct for samurai), the two men set out on a journey toward an unknown destination, aiding Fuu, a tea house waitress, in search of an ever mysterious "samurai who smells of sunflowers."

In "Tempestuous Temperament," the three characters are introduced through a series of brawls in a small town as being, respectively, hopelessly rebellious (Mugen), reclusive yet righteous (Jin), and feisty and determined (Fuu). The show's setting is also established as the Edo period through the costumes characters wear, the architectural style of buildings, and the showcased socio-cultural customs. But while ostensibly a period drama, the program seems less concerned about authentically reproducing historical details than we might expect. The episode begins with a text, written in the format of traditional scroll calligraphy (in English), which reads, "This work of fiction / Is not an accurate / Historical portrayal. / Like we care. / Now shut up and enjoy / the show." Instead of aiming at historical authenticity, *Samurai Champloo* frequently exhibits aspects that do not belong to the period, such as the hip-hop music of the opening credits, the use of scratching as a transitional marker between separate plot points, and the

graffiti-style font used in the title sequence. As the episode progresses, it gradually becomes obvious that part of the show's fun is its intentional mixing up of discordant details, as we encounter characters carrying around a boom box and speaking with a contemporary "street" accent on the streets of Edo.

This stylistic mixing is reminiscent of the aesthetic characteristics of director Shinichiro Watanabe's previous work, *Cowboy Bebop*, first aired in the United States on the Cartoon Network from September 2001 until February 2002. *Cowboy Bebop*, which made Watanabe an internationally recognized anime auteur, is considered canonical by many anime fans because of its distinctive form that freely juxtaposes the conventions of different genres including space opera, the western, film noir, and American musical influences of jazz and blues. *Cowboy Bebop* proved especially successful in presenting a chaotically anachronistic atmosphere through its mixing of different historical styles, in spectacular contrast to the blasé attitude of that show's main character, Spike, a bounty hunter who lives in a small, dilapidated spaceship named "Bebop," floating aimlessly in space. It also vividly visualized the sense of alienation in a postindustrial society where the experience of up-rootedness becomes a defining condition of human existence. This anachronistic frenzy of the environment combined with the moody feelings of retreat, embodied by Spike, create a sense of longing, a kind of nostalgia for an unknown time, which can be considered symptomatic of the postmodern experience.

Despite a wide difference in setting (Mars in 2071 versus feudal Japan), *Samurai Champloo* bears a strong resemblance to its predecessor in terms of character development, an episodic narrative design, the use of contemporary music, and most importantly, its bold mixing of existing genres and styles. Unlike the stylized celebration of postmodern nostalgia in *Cowboy Bebop*, however, the mixing of generic and historical iconographies in *Samurai Champloo* contributes to an overall sense of global connectivity by introducing the contemporary international influences of hip hop and graffiti art into feudal Japan. If in *Cowboy Bebop* the temporal mixing of past (cowboy, bebop), present (the current drama), and future (the setting of 2071) holds the key to understanding its theme of existential angst, in *Samurai Champoo* it is the spatial connection, such as the mixing of iconographies of global spaces, that enhances the dramatic quality of the three characters' search for Fuu's absent father, through which process they form a deeper human connection. This connectivity of global spaces is most stunningly exemplified in the show by the graffiti art on the walls of the national monument Osaka Castle in episode 18, "War of the Words" (U.S. airdate, January 5, 2006).

Samurai Champloo is thus a rich text to examine within the analytical frameworks of auteurism and genre theory, inviting us to look comparatively at several works directed by Shinichiro Watanabe and analyze their varying strategies for genre remixing. When we look at *Samurai Champloo* not just as a self-contained

FIGURE 39.1.
Graffiti art adorns the wall of the famous Osaka Castle, complicating its status as an "authentic" Japanese monument.

work but as a text received within a specific context of a complex global flow of ideas and influences, however, critical issues involved in viewing the show inevitably multiply. For example, in order to watch anime on U.S. television, we need to consider at least four different critical issues: 1) viewing anime outside Japan as a global media product; 2) viewing anime from a fan's perspective as a source of global fan culture; 3) watching anime on television, rather than on a computer screen or on other mobile devices, as a legally distributed televisual text; and 4) viewing anime on television in the United States. I will focus the current discussion on the question of transnational viewing, which is related to issues 1 and 4 here, and show how our awareness of those issues enables us to understand the polysemic attractions of the familiar and the exotic that *Samurai Champloo* consciously constructs for the transnational audience.[1]

In the first episode of *Samurai Champloo*, we see a constant negotiation between the familiar and the exotic played out through the show's form and content. What is familiar in this exotic-sounding anime is first its formal style. After the calligraphic text dismissing concerns about historical authenticity is shown, the episode opens with a scene of execution in which the two main characters whom we have already seen in the opening sequence are about to be decapitated. This scene of high tension is dramatically framed in a mixture of high, low, and Dutch (canted) angles, and edited at a rapid pace. This is followed by a flashback showing how the two men got into such a dangerous situation. Yet, instead of smoothly transitioning to the previous day, the show first displays an intertitle, "One Day Earlier," and presents a street scene of a contemporary Japanese city in which cars are busily moving and a boy is dancing in front of the camera to the beat of hip-hop music. Then the intertitle repeats more insistently, "One Day Earlier!" with an exclamation point added, and we see what appears to be video footage rewinding back to the premodern scenery of rural Edo.

These opening scenes are significant for two reasons: first, they reveal the show's formal sophistication, with its rapid editing, stylized shots, and nonlinear

narrative structure, which more closely align the show with globally influential movies such as *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *Trainspotting* (1996), and *Fight Club* (1999), rather than well-known anime texts such as *Akira* (1988) or *Princess Mononoke* (1997). The reflexivity in the use of subtitles/intertitles also attests to the way that the show positions itself as familiar to global youth audiences who are presumably media-literate enough to handle such a playful and whimsical approach to reality. The episode consistently shows familiar tropes of formal sophistication and reflexivity; for example, the two fights Mugen and Jin get involved in are presented through parallel editing, repeatedly cutting back and forth with scratching sound effects as if the hands of the editor function like those of an invisible DJ.

The show presents a dimension of familiarity through its character development of Mugen and Jin. While ostensibly from seventeenth- or eighteenth-century feudal Japan, the two main characters look perfectly familiar to the contemporary global audience: speaking freely, acting independently, questioning authority, and refusing to compromise their individual freedom, they display an attitude embodied in the existential hero typically found in the genres of the western or the film noir. Throughout the episode and the show more generally, the two male protagonists are presented as the only characters with a sense of humor, and their deadpan jokes guide viewers through alternating moments of tension and danger. The rebellious, anti-authoritarian, and fearless characters of Mugen and Jin, contrasted with greedy, corrupt, and inefficient authority figures, add to the familiarity of the text to the global youth audience.

What is exotic in *Samurai Champloo*, on the other hand, originates unsurprisingly from the show's period setting, which provides abundant opportunities for the show to display the iconography of the exotic for non-Japanese viewers. These include costumes and accessories characters wear (*kimono* dress, *geta* shoes, *kasa* hat), food and drink characters consume (dumplings, skewers, hotpot, *sake*), and buildings characters reside in, as well as music and dance, tea-drinking, sword-fighting, and more. These cultural artifacts, which Susan Hayward argues are part of the process of constructing national identities and myths, are featured casually in *Samurai Champloo* as part of its narrative world, yet function significantly in constructing a unified vision of the Japanese nation, with its own distinctive culture, exotic and mythical to non-Japanese viewers.[2] Even though some of the historical details in question are overtly inauthentic, viewers and fans do not seem to have a problem in accepting them as meaningful markers of characters' national identities, judging from, for example, how readily those characters' outfits are reproduced at "cosplay" ("costume" + "play") events at anime conventions around the globe.[3] This exotic appeal is further accentuated later in the show, when we are introduced to the show's third-person narrator, Manzou the Saw, who functions as a cultural informant and interpreter by explaining the significance of certain cultural

practices such as woodblock painting and baseball in Japan to contemporary viewers. Through these efforts to present both familiar and exotic attractions, *Samurai Champloo* positions itself as a singular yet accessible text, offering possibilities for multiple readings and pleasures for diverse transnational audiences.

As mentioned above, viewing anime as a global media product requires us to consider how anime's distribution and consumption contribute to the current formations of geopolitical power relations. Although it may sound odd to suggest that adorable anime characters such as Pikachu and Totoro can be part of a global power struggle, the concerns of cultural imperialism, especially regarding U.S. influence in Latin American countries, have been consistently raised in debates about globalization over the past decades.[4] Sometimes called "Disneyfication" (similar euphemisms include Coca-colonization and McDonaldization), the tendency has prompted concerns that the mass-production and distribution of cultural and media products by multinational corporations (MNC's) will overpower and eradicate more organic developments within local cultures, resulting in the domination of a globally homogeneous monoculture; and that because most MNC's are based in the first world, often in the United States, the resulting global monoculture will impose Western and/or American values and lifestyles on citizens in different parts of the world. When we consider anime as a global media product consumed by viewers outside Japan, the question of cultural imperialism, and the concerns about a global monoculture become complicated because of the unique location of Japan apart from the Western/American paradigm.

The fact that anime texts themselves are produced through a labor-intensive process adds further complexity to considerations of transnational anime texts, since much production of anime has been outsourced to Asian countries since the 1980s, especially in the case of 2D animation, which has been outsourced mainly to South Korea, and to a lesser degree to Taiwan, both of which are former colonies of Japan. Even for cultural products, such as films, television shows, animated series, books, CDs, etc., the practice of outsourcing reproduces asymmetrical relations of production, which Toby Miller and other scholars call the "New International Division of Cultural Labor."[5] Consequently, the implications of consuming cultural texts produced through the problematic process of outsourcing needs to be part of our reception of these texts, as exemplified by Jason Mittell's discussion of *The Simpsons* as paradoxically the most "American" text produced through outsourcing in South Korea.[6] Thus, while non-Japanese involvement in the production of *Samurai Champloo* may be minimal, it is worth considering how the show, set in the often-glorified historical past of the Edo period, embodies the idea of Japan as a nation, promoting values and ways of life as authentically "Japanese."

Additionally, viewing *Samurai Champloo* on television not just outside Japan, but specifically in the United States, needs to be further scrutinized. It is reasonable

to assume that the political relations between countries exporting and importing cultural products may affect the reception of texts—and vice versa. For instance, the South Korean government banned Japanese popular cultural imports, including anime, for over forty years from the end of World War II until 1997, due to the history of Japanese colonization. Recent years have seen the emergence of a doctrine of Japanese "soft power," which has led the officials within the Foreign Ministry in Japan to start sending selected teenage girls as "cute ambassadors" to international cultural events, with the hope that such adorable representations of Japan would both promote popular cultural exports and soften its national image.[7]

Certainly the history of past relations between the United States and Japan has impacted the reception of anime in the United States. This may be a factor in the strong subcultural appeal that anime seems to hold for adolescent fans in the United States, arguably more so than other pop culture imports, such as Hong Kong martial art movies, Bollywood musicals, and, more recently, K-pop (South Korean pop music). Japan as a nation has a certain kind of fixed, strong resonance for older generations—whether as a war-crazed totalitarian society or as an economic powerhouse. Viewing anime in the United States and being able to appreciate its seemingly childish yet potentially profound texts distinguish American teenage viewers from preceding generations' presumed lack of openness to cultural otherness. This consideration of the national identity of television shows and their viewers is especially important in the case of *Samurai Champloo*, since the show presents a particularly complicated case of cultural politics in that it both promotes and denies Japanese national culture from the Edo Period as the basis for an authentic national identity. In other words, because *Samurai Champloo* spectacularly showcases a mythical Edo in the text, while at the same time disavowing its authenticity by playfully remixing it with contemporary cultural influences, it is worth considering the show as a Japanese text that presents additional viewing pleasures to American viewers in particular.

These sets of critical issues involved in viewing anime texts on U.S. television respectively correspond to the question of viewing position, or where the viewer is coming from in watching the show, which becomes especially relevant when we consider the meaning of polysemy in transnational television viewing. Described by John Fiske as a site of struggle over the multiple (political) meanings of a text, television's polysemy takes on a new complexity in the process of global exchanges of television shows, formats, and influences, blurring boundaries between dominant and oppositional readings, and producers' and fans' positions.[8]

Samurai Champloo is consciously designed by the show's producers as a combination of exotic Edo period drama, with its traditional Japanese spectacle, and the familiar tale of youthful resistance against authority, represented by the rebellious character of Mugen and the fugitive character Jin. Even though it is obvious

FIGURE 39.2.
Samurai Champloo playfully mixes imagery of Edo period drama and youth rebellion.

that the producers of the show perform a balancing act between the exotic and the familiar, and that the design of the text strategically embeds plenty of details both exotic and familiar, the pleasures we take from viewing *Samurai Champloo* on U.S. television are neither inauthentic nor one-dimensional. In other words, even though anime as global media products are programmed as polysemic in order to address diverse transnational audiences, the polysemic pleasures audiences take differ depending on the situatedness of those audiences. Thus, while transnational viewers find *Samurai Champloo* appealing because of its programmed polysemy of the familiar and the exotic, the polysemy of the text can still function as a site of struggle for political meanings, as is evidenced, for example, in an ongoing debate amongst fans over the possible subplots of romantic relations among the three characters or about the sexual orientation of the protagonists.

Being aware of the show's polysemic design, I would argue, does not limit but rather intensifies the pleasures we take in viewing *Samurai Champloo* on U.S. television. For an awareness of our own position in our involvement with a foreign text only enriches the political meanings we produce from our viewing. Just as *champuru*, the popular Okinawan dish, is savored not because of any particular flavor produced from a known recipe, but because of the flexibility of its form that allows people to experiment with and personalize recipes, *Samurai Champloo* can be fully appreciated only when we understand the specificities of our own local viewing of the transnational text, and participate, knowingly and willingly, in the process of meaning production through polysemic readings.

NOTES

1. For further discussion of the international fan cultures of anime, and more specifically, the debate over the fascination that the "foreign" texts of anime hold over the global youth audiences, see: Annalee Newitz, "Anime Otaku: Japanese Animation Fans Outside Japan," *Bad Subjects,* 13 (April 1994), http://bad.eserver.org/issues/1994/13/newitz.html,

and Henry Jenkins, "Pop Cosmopolitanism: Mapping Cultural Flows in an Age of Media Convergence," in *Globalization: Culture and Education in the New Millennium,* Marcelo M. Suarez-Orozco and Desiree Baolian Qin-Hillard, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 114–40. While Newitz argues polemically that American "fanboys" enjoy viewing anime because of their nostalgia for the American historical past, when politically incorrect representations could be freely circulated in public media, Jenkins interprets American youth's embrace of foreign cultures such as anime, Bollywood, and Hong Kong action movies more positively, calling it "pop cosmopolitanism" and viewing it as fans' attempts to distinguish themselves from their parents' generation through transcultural consumption.

2. Susan Hayward, *French National Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).
3. For just one example, see how the three main characters' outfits are recreated for fans' "cosplay" (character-playing through costuming), http://www.cosplaymagic.com/sachco.html.
4. For an in-depth analysis of cultural imperialism, see John Tomlinson, *Cultural Imperialism: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York: Continuum, 1991).
5. Toby Miller and Geoffrey Lawrence, "Globalization and Culture," in *A Companion to Cultural Studies*, Toby Miller, ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2001).
6. Jason Mittell, *Television and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 445–48.
7. Isabel Reynolds, "Japan Picks 'Schoolgirl' Among Cute Ambassadors," *Reuters*, March 12, 2009, http://uk.reuters.com/article/2009/03/12/us-japan-ambassadors-cute-idUKTRE52B4JC20090312. For a discussion of "soft power" in the Japanese context, see Douglas McGray, "Japan's Gross National Cool," *Foreign Policy* (May/June 2002), http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2002/05/01/japans_gross_national_cool.
8. John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1987).

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