

Misreading the Random: A Translational Reading of the Japanese Anime Cowboy Bebop

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SESSION #0 INTRODUCTION

0.1 A dialogue between self and other

Last August, heat waves once again assailed Virginia mercilessly. I sat inside my fully air conditioned suburban home beginning to play with some ideas for my Master's thesis. Diagonally across from me was our 13-year-old Toshiba TV on which my brother was playing a Japanese anime DVD called *Cowboy Bebop* that he had just received in the mail from an eBay seller in Hong Kong. *What is that? It's the hippest thing I've seen in a while*, I said to myself. It jammed with my intellect: *I'm going to write a paper about this thing.*

First aired as a TV series in 1998 and then released as a feature-length film in 2001 in Japan, and now on Cartoon Network in the US, *Cowboy Bebop*¹ features a story about four interstellar bounty hunters:

It's year 2071, 70 years after the destruction of some architectural landmark, World Trade Center, on my home planet Earth. I'm a just a nobody: a part-time writer who somehow made it here on Mars. Last Sunday, I was trudging down the city's street, jam-packed with pedestrians and street vendors from assorted planets and colonies, to get to El Ros, a place where most of us migrant freelancers pass time. But it turned out like no other Sunday: I met Spike and Faye while they were staking out the place for their 15-million-woolong bounty with the remote assistance of their partners Jet, an ex-cop, and hacker girl Ed stationed in the Bebop, their interplanetary home. A fascinating

¹ *Cowboy Bebop*, also the same title in Japanese (except written in the Japanese phonetic alphabet as 「カウボーイビバップ」).

bunch of interplanetary migrants, the Bebop crew sets out to capture the bounties not because they care about the justice codes of the universe, but because of the award money, which barely supports their frontier existence. They cast themselves into the game of bounty hunting in order to dodge the nihilist threat posed by the brutal ambivalence of their world. It's a battle against the universe's disinterest, against one's potentiated self-annihilation. Existential questions are uttered until they become meaningless in this ephemeral high-tech Milky Way. They live to sustain their quest for the meaning of life while, knowing subconsciously that such a singular meaning of life doesn't exist in this pluralistic age bombarded by random surfaces of difference. Here I catch myself for having started to write about their story unknowingly. I am drawn into their frontier experiences because I, too, share some of the disoriented affect about my ambivalent migrant existence.²

Here's the problem: my *Bebop* friends speak only Japanese; but thanks to technology, their speech is coupled with optional English and Chinese subtitles and English dubbing. How could I write a paper about them when I neither speak Japanese nor can claim to be a specialist in Japanese culture? The quandary of a student questioning her abilities and inadequacies recurs in the foreground of my struggle—between my identity as an everyday viewer/consumer of the anime and as an academic writer. I evaluated my credentials to write about a pop culture text of a society that I hardly know anything about, yet nevertheless decided to plunge into it wholeheartedly: instead of writing about what I know, I intend to write about what I *do not* know.

² The italics section is a “performative” (I will explain this in section 1.1) synopsis of the anime series. The intent behind such a narrating style is to recreate some of my experience watching the anime.

Over the years, I have come to see that there is but a fine line between knowing and not knowing. In the *Book of Genesis* (4:1), Adam “knew” Eve; in turn, Eve “conceived” her child with Adam.³ In this instance, “knowing” is an intimate *act* between two people. And knowledge is based on experience. However, in academia, we rarely speak about knowledge as the experiential data gathered from our immediate reality. Institutionalized knowledge, such as things taught inside a classroom, is often imprisoned in layers of mediation. Oftentimes, what we know is what other people come to know through the experience of yet another person or people. The issue of what qualifies as “real” knowledge becomes hazy. Do we really *know* that there are 9 planets in our solar system? Though I do not intend to engage in a deep debate on the disciplinary manner of academic philosophy about the role of epistemology in the academy, I feel the need to express my stance regarding knowledge. To know is to be engaged in a dialogue between first-hand experience and institutionalized knowledge. Returning to the initial perplexity over my credentials to write about something which I don’t claim expert knowledge, I am coerced with contemplating my identity as a student and as a sociocultural being. The contemplation revolves around my relation with *that something I do not know*.

The personal, occupational, and sociocultural faces of my identity situate my voice in an awkward spot: I am a Chinese American graduate student of East Asian Studies at a university in the US who is interested in Japan as an area but has not formally learned the Japanese language. I do, of course, think my reading of the Japanese anime would be greatly altered and enhanced if I spoke Japanese, but I also think my not

³ The words “knew” and “conceived” are translated in the King James Version of the Biblical scriptures from the Hebrew words *yada* (“yaw-dah”) and *harah* (“haw-raw”), respectively.

knowing Japanese puts me in a particular position to experience the aesthetic dimension of the anime, as it is received transnationally, i.e. in the US. My response is to reconcile this anxiety through my writing. I want to underscore this awkwardness with a constant reminder of my sociocultural position in relation to the text I am studying. My eventual hope is to demonstrate through this essay the possibility of a rapprochement at the intersection of the personal memoir and academic writing. Or, I see myself as an ethnographer writing about the aesthetics of the anime “performance.”

Concurring with Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto’s text-and-theory-dialectical take⁴ on discursive writing about (Japanese) popular media, I see yet another crucial relation, that is, the dialectics between self and text, between self and theory. I propose a discursive approach to study the Japanese anime *Cowboy Bebop* in terms of a threefold relation between the text, what others say about the text and its form and context, and me. Being attuned to the different voices and recognizing their distinct sources, I choose to read the dissonant responses to the anime and other works of similar types ethnographically. Encountering the unknown, the ethnographic readings of the text and words of others, transforms my cultural frame of knowledge. In the process of transforming the unknown into the known, both in self and other, I as an ethnographer am transformed.

⁴ I am inspired by how Yoshimoto takes the middle ground between text and theory in his discussion of Tanizaki’s work to elucidate the East-West dichotomy in Japanese literary discourse in general. “Given that a mere philosophical understanding of how the geocultural dichotomy of East and West lacks a conceptual coherence or factual basis has not had much impact on the popular conceptualization of the contemporary world, it is important to explore other ways of changing our perception... By examining Tanizaki’s work, we may be able to learn how to overcome the hegemonic framework by simultaneously using and destroying these geocultural categories.” “Reexamining the East and the West,” *Multiple Modernities*, ed. Jenny Kwok Wah Lau, p.54.

This essay is divided into four “sessions.”⁵ Session #1 “The Uncanny” stages the estranging experiences I have with *Cowboy Bebop* first as general TV spectral experience, then as an animation and anime. In Session #2 “Translation,” I attempt to “translate” some of the anime’s apparent differences across its linguistic and cultural boundaries, going from Japan to the US. In Session #3 “Random Juxtaposition,” I venture into a close reading that focuses on the anime’s mix-and-match aesthetic. Finally in Session #4 “Misreading the Random,” I close the essay with a few critiques about the anime in relation to its and my own spatio-temporal contexts. Grooving with the *Bebop* spirit, 3, 2, 1, let’s jam!⁶

SESSION #1 “THE UNCANNY”

1.1 The uncanny TV screen

Under the sultry sun on a crammed street, commercial signs stick out from storefronts and hover over the sky; airborne travelers glide by pedestrians, cyclists, and motorists; pet shops, herb shops, outdoor food vendors crowd one next to another; street signs point in eight different directions; pedestrians’ voices and space travelers’ noises sound in synchrony like a big band...until the phone rings.

Now, on the TV screen, inside an air-conditioned apartment: the commercial signs hang loosely on the storefronts; the mobile objects float on the two-dimensional plane; the shops and vendors fit proximally like Lego pieces; the multiple street signs freeze in disorientations; and, wait, where is that bizarre big band music coming from?

⁵ I use the word “session” to echo the *Cowboy Bebop*’s way of saying episode, i.e. the series contains 26 *sessions*. The intent is to preserve some of the *Bebop* spirit in this writing.

⁶ A spoken line in the introductory title song “Tank!” of the *Cowboy Bebop* series.

Before the phone rang, I was hanging with my *Bebop* friends. Then the ringing phone asserted another layer of reality: that *I* also exist in another world outside of the *Cowboy Bebop* world. The diegetic reality constitutes my reality until the moment I realize, with the ringing phone, that I am a spectator outside of that reality. Being self-conscious of my role as a spectator, I gaze into an *other* space in which things seem juxtaposed one next to another randomly, as surfaces of difference glide by one another. But words such as *randomness* and *otherness* become emptied of meanings the moment I lose touch with my own material reality. The fictional event that takes place on screen can engross me to the extent that I don't even know that I have a physical existence in front of the TV screen. The dissolution of self awareness—the ontological knowledge of the difference between me and the diegetic world on the TV screen—happens precisely when and where my reality and my *Bebop* friends' reality fuse into one.

The experience of watching television can be an uncanny one. In the now classic essay "The 'Uncanny'," Sigmund Freud expounds on the German word for uncanny—*unheimlich*, which literally means "not of the home." The etymology of the word connotes a distance away from home, or away from the feeling of being home. The closest thing to the definition of the uncanny is: that which "...is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression" (Freud 1953: 241). Through literary examples, Freud surmises that the uncanny can emerge when there is a collapse of the boundary between the fictional and the real (1953: 249-250). In other words, the affect of the uncanny emerges in one when s/he encounters something familiar from an estranging distance. So, the uncanny thrives on an interaction between the

familiar and the unfamiliar, in turn destabilizing the distinction between the two.⁷ In the TV spectatorial experience, the uncanny is the interaction in which the not-home TV engages its viewer to the extent that s/he loses touch with his/her home reality. And, the roles of the familiar and the unfamiliar don't have to be rigidly mapped onto the physical and the non-physical realities, respectively, in the viewing experience. In fact, the familiar home can often happen on screen: the event happening on screen can be more real than the spectator's physical reality, or simply, "hyperreal."⁸

Whereas Freud speaks of home on the personal level, in *Art as Experience*, John Dewey conceives of a non-dualist relationship between a human and his/her world based on the notion of a home as an accumulation of experience: "The world we have experienced becomes an integrated part of self that acts and is acted upon in further experience... Through habits formed in intercourse with the world, we also in-habit the world. *It becomes a home and the home is part of our every experience*" (1934:104; my emphasis).⁹ Extending the logic of this self-world relationship, I assert that home can also be regarded as a cultural self, as one's cultural baggage or frame. This means that the self is no longer a sequestered individual, but can be imagined as one among many of a similar background within a single home community, echoing Benedict Anderson's assertion in *Imagined Communities*. The conception of a cultural self as a home will later become useful in our discussion about transcultural reception of media.

⁷ Susan Napier takes Freud's *unheimlich* in reading of the forest in Hayao Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke*. See "Confronting Master Narratives: History As Vision in Miyazaki Hayao's Cinema of De-assurance," *positions* 9:2, Durham: Duke University Press, 2001, p. 484.

⁸ Jean Baudrillard speaks of the TV spectatorship as a "vérité" experience... a sort of frisson of the real, or of the hyperreal..." See "The Procession of Simulacra," *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Shiela Faria Glaser, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994, pp. 1-42.

⁹ French scholar Pierre Bourdieu's similarly address the notion of *habitus* as a dialectical practice of the individual's experience with his/her objective perception of the world. See *Outline of Theory of Practice*, New York, Cambridge University Press: 1977.

Undeniably, the uncanny can be entertaining. The question of whether something is entertaining becomes a matter of how alienating it can be while still retaining its fun in an unthreatening way: How much difference can there be between home and a temporal or spatial other before this difference stretches beyond the subject's tolerance or comprehensibility, verging on the experience of culture shock? I think of uncanny fun as a kind of "threat" experienced within a safety net, like a roller coaster or an ethnically flavored restaurant. The safety net is the home conditioned over time by one's experiences with his/her surroundings. How is it that some people love the clever jokes on a British sitcom while others prefer seeing blood squirting out a headless samurai whose hand is still tightly gripping a long bloody sword?¹⁰ And presumably, there are people who enjoy both (or neither) British sitcoms and samurai flicks.

The uncanny self-other relation is a peculiar one that straddles difference and similarity. Without any self-other difference, the experience can be uninteresting, lacking the potential of being uncanny or entertaining. Imagine a tourist who travels across a hemisphere just to arrive at a destination that resembles his/her home. In tourism, the necessity of the self-other differential is always at the crux of the business (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995b:371). On the flipside, an experience entirely new, without a self-other similarity, is difficult to grasp and identify with. Without the conception of self, there can hardly be any differences or similarity, or fun. The key to the uncanny is reflexivity as induced by an other with which the self identifies. The uncanny as a process is

¹⁰ This particular gory image of the samurai is "quoted" and ironized in a recent Hollywood 2003 release, *Kill Bill vol.1* directed by Quentin Tarantino.

contingent upon a dialogue between self and an ambiguously un/familiar other.¹¹ The uncanny as a product yields self reflection. In *Destination Culture*, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett demonstrates the uncanny “museum effect” as that which “forces us to make comparisons that pierce the membrane of our own quotidian world, allowing us for a brief moment to be spectators of ourselves...” (1998:48). Similarly, the TV spectacle can create such a moment for its viewer to see him/herself critically and this interaction with the TV spectacle can be a potential transformation of self.

Inspired by Richard Schechner, I compare the uncanny TV spectatorial experience to the stage performer’s situation: The self-other dialogue should not be merely centered upon either the subject (“me”) or the object (“not me”), but the space in-between (1985:111-2).¹² Furthermore, it is crucial to attend to the subjunctive, the “as-if”¹³ nature of this performative or dialogical process. By negating the dichotomous relationship between the acting subject and the object acted upon, Schechner ascertains the liminality and contingency of the performative experience (1985:113). An object outside the performative frame, e.g. the phone ringing, can serve as a reminder of the subjunctive-ness of subjectivity. So, using Schechner’s terminology to describe the TV spectatorial experience, the viewing subject is a “not not me”—a vision of self from

¹¹ The reciprocity in relationships, verging on the breakdown of the subject-object dichotomy, is inspired by my reading of Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*. In it, Buber configures a particular kind of (ideal) relationship—an *I-Thou* relation—that necessarily calls for the “concentration and fusion into a whole being (that) can never be accomplished by me, can never accomplished without me. I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You.” (1970: 62). Also, the notion of subject-object dissolution is prevalent in the philosophy of Zen Buddhism and in particular mystical readings of the Jewish and/or Christian scripture.

¹² The “in-between” space was conceived by anthropologist Victor Turner in his formulation of the ritual process. This idea has been used by media scholars in constructing a paradigm for TV reception. See Horace Newcomb and Paul M. Hirsch, “Television as a Cultural Forum,” *Television: The Critical View*, ed. Newcomb, H., New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 505-506.

¹³ As a side note, the subjunctive quality can also be useful in thinking about the Freudian ambivalence between the diegetic and the real as mentioned before. Jean Baudrillard also uses the notion of “as-if” to describe the TV spectatorial experience. See Baudrillard, p. 162.

distance—that acts in contingency to the ambiguously un/familiar “not me” on screen. In other words, televisual spectatorship can be an as-if performance during which the viewer is staged, and then acts and reacts to an uncanny spectacle on the same stage. The performative quality stresses the activeness of TV spectatorship, contrary to the notion of a passive couch potato. I’m not arguing that all TV spectatorship is active and performative at all times, but here I am interested in the potential active engagement with the flashing TV screen.

In the beginning of this section (1.1), the italicized paragraph captures the as-if state prior to the phone ringing; the following paragraph narrates a post-phone-ringing non-performative experience with the TV (in which there is no dialectic between the spectator and the TV). Throughout the essay, I will continue to intersperse performative writing as a way to narrate my dialectical viewing experience with *Cowboy Bebop*. Watching the anime puts me on the stage with the *Bebop* characters: At times, I feel that I am a space traveler contained inside a flight cabin the size of a 19-inch television. At other times, when I’m not physically watching the anime, I can still be performing my staged identity, e.g. feeling like an interstellar space cowgirl of the 22nd century when I trudge down the Lawn of Thomas Jefferson’s historical academy in Virginia at the turn of the 21st century, seeing a horde of students as the multi-ethnic inhabitants of Mars.¹⁴

1.2 The uncanny animation and anime

Animation is literally an uncanny medium. Using the example of dolls and automata,

¹⁴ Read “Play at Being American: Games and Tactics” by John Caughie for a theoretical account of playful identifying with American culture through US TV programs. *Television: The Critical Views*, ed. Horace Newcomb, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 587-601.

Freud attributes the animation of an inanimate object as one of the sources of the uncanny (1953:226, 250). Freud quotes Jentsch, "...a particular favorable condition for awakening uncanny feelings is created when there is intellectual uncertainty whether an object becomes too much like an animate one" (1953:233). The vanishing of the distinction between imagination and reality can in fact be realized through the medium of animation. We can even say that animation is driven by an animistic impulse of humanity also seen in other performances such as puppetry. Imamura Taihei, a mid-20th-century Japanese media scholar, wrote vividly:

animation gives life to all inorganic things: stones speak water gestures like a human, rats get drunk... Notice how humans devolve into dogs and dogs evolve into humans. Flowers grow in winter and the dead return to life; physical objects dissolve into thin air. This is the objectification of human dreams and is the revival of animism; an animism that humanity has wanted to make real since ancient times (Driscoll 2002:284-285).¹⁵

I agree with Imamura on the connection between animation and animism; however, it is difficult for me to essentialize animism as a fixed universal quality buried in humanity's ancient past. Instead, I am interested in animism's fascinating pluralistic dimension as a contemporary manifestation that changes in accord with and thus reflecting its time and place. We will return to the point about animism in the end of the essay as it specifically relates to *Cowboy Bebop*.

Furthermore, the technique used to animate still images exudes an uncanny aura. In production, the primary way to give life to an inanimate graphic object is to give it a human voice. On the one hand, the fact that there are no human bodies shown on screen to some extent defamiliarizes the viewing experience; on the other hand, the stories, the

¹⁵ This passage is quoted and translated by Mark Driscoll in "From kino-eye to *anime-eye/ai*:" from Imamura's original text in Japanese, *Theory of Animation*, rev. edn 1992 (originally published in 1948), Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, p. 19.

characters' anthropomorphic looks, and the use of real human voices make the medium somewhat familiar or akin to real life situations. Film scorer and critic Michel Chion likens the disembodied voice to an apparition "wandering along the surface, *at once inside and outside*, seeking a place to settle..." (1999:23). In contrast to the regular cinematic situation, the disembodied voice in animation is expected to be continuous and the spectator does not expect to visually witness "what body this voice normally inhabits" (1999:23), thus widening the gap of the viewing subject's identification with the object on screen. Incidentally, the literal English translation of the Japanese term for voice actor—*seiyuu*—is "voice spirit."¹⁶ My conjecture for an etymological explanation is that a human voice gives life or spirit to the anthropomorphic virtual characters. Another way to interpret the term, echoing Chion, is that the voice spirit is a disembodied ghost that temporarily resides in a graphical image. Both references mentioned—the disembodied voice and the voice spirit—serve to elicit the apparition-like quality of anime (or animation) to infer the medium's inherent breach with real life situations. This irrevocable disjuncture—between voice and body—emanates, again, a sense of uncanniness.

As distinct from animation in general, "anime" is an abbreviation for the word "animation" that became popular in post-war Japan (Miyao 2002:191).¹⁷ In the US, the term was recently adopted to replace longer terms such as "Japanese animation" or "Japanimation" (Desser 2003:180). For the purpose of this paper, I refer to anime as a

¹⁶ translation of *seiyuu* is actually done circuitously via my understanding of the *kanji* or Chinese characters of the Japanese word. *Sei* in Chinese means "voice" where *yu* means "spirit."

¹⁷ The literal meaning of "anime" in Japanese is "'twinkling', and is a metaphor for the bright flash of an atom bomb." Tomie Hahn and Curtis Bahn, "Pikapika – the collaborative composition of an interactive sonic character," *Organised Sound* 7(3): 2002, 229. Interestingly, the term "animé" in French meaning "that which is animated" can be used to emphasize the unnatural, apparition-like process of making an animation.

phenomenon that represents a specific subgenre of animations, generally of a Japanese origin, in present-day global media culture. It should be noted here that anime is becoming an umbrella term that covers the animated works produced in East Asia which stylistically adopt the aesthetics of Japanese anime.

In terms of aesthetics, anime can be differentiated from other animations by its visual flatness and stillness: the pictures appear more two-dimensional than, say, Disney cartoons or Marvel Comics; and the motion of the pictures are frequently broken up by still *mise en scene*. These formal characteristics are by no means exclusive to anime, but they are simply more pronounced in anime than in other animated works. In animation production, besides the synchronization of voice and graphics, the creation of a movement or an illusion of movement in still figures is essential. The animation artist can either literally draw the broken-down movements of the figure and then photograph the drawings in series; or s/he can simply create a relative movement by moving, for instance, the background layer to give the sense that the foregrounded figure is moving (Lamarre 2002:330). It is worth noting that the latter technique requires less labor on the part of the artist(s); and with this method, the animation lacks the fluid movements that the former technique can render. There is a tendency in anime to apply the latter technique more frequently than in Disney or other Western animated works. This can be explained by the fact that animation studios during post-war Japan, due to budget constraints, were much smaller in size than the Disney studios (2002:335-6). In short, flatness and stillness were byproducts of the production's socioeconomic history, but have become a style over time.

On the reception side, the resulting jerky movements make the animated figure appear machine-like (Lamarre: 2002:339), resounding the Freudian uncanny, as exemplified by dolls and automata. The relative lack of intermediate movements seen in anime “makes the viewers aware of the film process itself...” (2002:39). A more significant point is that the excess awareness of the film process during viewing subsequently alienates the anime viewer, producing the affect of the uncanny.¹⁸ This allows me to say that the anime viewer feels the uncanny more readily than a viewer of other kinds of animated or other mediated works of live action.

1.3 The uncanny *Cowboy Bebop* and I

What was it like to watch a Japanese anime in Central Virginia in 2003-4? Uncanny, indeed. My affinity for anime emerged rather fortuitously. Before *Cowboy Bebop*, I had had minimal exposure to the anime genre, excluding a few feature-length hits by Hayao Miyazaki, such as *Spirited Away*, *Princess Mononoke*, and *My Neighbor Totoro*, introduced to the US by Disney, and my childhood experience of reading translated Japanese manga¹⁹ in Taiwan. Even within the genre of animation in general, my exposure in recent years has been limited to the few Pixar productions such as the *Toy Story* series and most recently, *Finding Nemo*.²⁰ The venture back into the world of

¹⁸ For a detailed account of the ideology behind the hiding of the film apparatus, see Jean-Louis Baudry’s “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus,” *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, 286-98.

¹⁹ *Manga*, which literally means “aimless picture,” refers to Japanese (or East Asian) comic books. Many sources indicate that manga is one of the main precursors of animation in Japan. In most instances, the anime extrapolates plotlines from manga series and “converts” them into animated medium. See Susan Napier, *Anime*, p.20.

²⁰ I also grew up watching many animated children’s series produced by both Japanese and North American sectors, to name a few: *The Smurfs*, *Ghost Busters*, and *Thunder Cats* of the US, and *Astro Boy*, *Doraemon*

Japanese anime has been a very recent move. No doubt, anime as a genre is ambivalently familiar and unfamiliar to me. The appealing differences of anime's style and content from the North American cartoons take me back to my childhood, growing up in Asia (Taiwan). My nostalgic gaze split between my past and present selves orients me in this project.

Blended with nostalgia is my intellectual curiosity. But this intellectual curiosity does and should not make my relationship to anime or to the “masses” of its audience a rigid, non-dialectical subject-object relation (Williamson 1986:100). Neither the mass audience nor the text itself should be read as the only object of study. The self that is reading and writing about the text should also be examined; thus, the subjectivity of the student scholar is also at stake in the research experience. Throughout my research, I maintain an awareness of the reasons that I identify with *Cowboy Bebop* and the anime form: “As the ethnographer becomes a native of what he or she is studying, he or she becomes a stranger to him- or herself” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995a:232). As I become more familiar with the anime, my self is transformed into an other. Recognizing this, I conduct an intellectual dialogue—instigated by *Cowboy Bebop*—with my estranged self. In the end, I want to see how *I* am transformed by the anime experience.

SESSION #2 “TRANSLATION”

2.1 The unfaithful translator

In Session 1 “Asteroid Blues,” in a white apron with his cybernetic left arm on his hip, the bald, scar-faced Jet stir-fries some “beef with green peppers” in a wok with his

and *Ranma ½* of Japan. Certainly, I am fluent in the Disney feature-length animated movies like *The Lion King*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Robin Hood*, etc.

muscular right arm. Jet interrupts Spike's Kung-fu practice by announcing that dinner's ready. The topless, lean Spike, who resembles Bruce Lee, answers by asking what's been cooking. Jet enunciates *Qing-jiao-rou-si*. That sound, the Japanese pronunciation of the name of the dish, caught my attention. It sounded exactly the same as its (Mandarin) Chinese pronunciation, except with a Japanese inflection! The first time I sat down to watch *Cowboy Bebop* on DVD, I configured the video setting to its original language mode in Japanese first with Chinese subtitles,²¹ then with English subtitles. The viewing process became a game for me to aurally pick out the Japanese words or phrases that I could understand, i.e. any Japanese words sounding similar either to Chinese or English, the two languages that I feel most at home with. Adjusting the DVD player's language/audio and the subtitles settings, I discovered that in the English dubbing, the characters enunciate the words "bell peppers and beef"; and in the 2-line English subtitles, the top line shows "SPECIAL 'beef with bell peppers'" while the bottom line spells out the transliteration *Qing-jiao-rou-si* in parentheses.

So I was confused. In both oral and written forms, there are 3 different verbal signifiers (*Qing-jiao-rou-si*, *Beef with bell peppers*, and *bell peppers and beef*) to match a single utterance by a Japanese-speaking character (as well as a single animated visual representation). Which one of the 3 signifiers is the most accurate? The question of accuracy depends on where we locate the source: the closer the signifier is to the source, the more accurate it is. But can we say that "the source" is necessarily Japan because the anime was produced in Japan? What about the Chinese source of the dish?

²¹ I felt as if the Chinese subtitles, rather than the English, would be closer to the original text in Japanese. This was based on my semiconscious assumption that it is easier to translate Japanese into Chinese than into English because of Japan's cultural and historical connection with its neighbor China.

In Chinese, *qing-jiao* means precisely green peppers, not just ANY bell peppers; and, *rou-si* literally translates into meat strip(s). The specificity of the word lies in the shape of the meat, not particularly in the kind of meat, such as “beef,” although beef is the ingredient conventionally used. Thus the English translation, *Beef with bell peppers*, does not exactly fit the literal Chinese meaning of *Qing-jiao-rou-si*. Still, this doesn’t say anything about what the term *Qing-jiao-rou-si* conjures in a Japanese viewer.

Meanwhile, Spike further destabilizes the term by questioning his own plate of *Qing-jiao-rou-si*: “You DON’T call a meatless ‘beef with bell peppers’ [his plate] ‘beef with bell peppers’ [the proper name for the dish]...do you?” Jet assertively and rather maternally replies, “Yes, you do. You do when you’re broke.”²²

Like Jet, I question the nature of my diegetic dish of *Qing-jiao-rou-si*: Is Spike and Jet’s *Qing-jiao-rou-si* the same as the kind that my Taiwanese/Chinese family makes at home, or is it more like the kind in a Chinese restaurant in suburban Virginia or in central Tokyo? I believe neither. The question itself is blundered. My eyes and ears inform me that *Qing-jiao-rou-si* is nothing but lights and sounds flashing in specific patterns on a television screen; and more importantly, neither the verbal signifier nor the visual image necessarily represents any dish called *Qing-jiao-rou-si* in Japan or anywhere else. Even if I divined all the possible ways beef and bell peppers can be stir fried together in Japan, I still wouldn’t be able to answer the question of what *Qing-jiao-rou-si* means to a Japanese viewer. In my attempt to judge the accuracy of the different signifiers, I first have to assume the location of “the source” in a particular nation or

²² For the purpose of writing this paper with precision, unless otherwise indicated, I choose to quote the subtitled English translation, rather than that in the English dubbing. This particular configuration of viewing mode—Japanese audio with English subtitles—is how I watch the series on DVD for the majority of the time.

language, and eventually I do not find such a definite, authoritative source. What I do find is that I'm conflating the signifiers with the assumed signified in the actual reality. These signifiers only function to represent the anime's diegetic reality. But my uncanny viewing experience flirtatiously crosses the boundaries between the actual reality and the diegetic reality. The desire to reify the anime emerges from my *blind spot*—because of my preexisting cultural frame coming into the text—of not speaking the Japanese language or, simply, not having lived in Japan. On the flipside of the same cultural frame is my Chinese comprehensive ability that allows me to see with *an X-ray vision* through the presumably foreign-sounding proper name of the dish as to a Japanese viewer.

Just when I am surfing on the wave of my musings on words and their meanings, Walter Benjamin's voice creeps in and expounds, in English with a German-Jewish intonation, upon the cultural-linguistic distinction between the words *pain* and *Brot*. Yes, I did in fact read Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator" in its English translation months prior to being hooked by the *Cowboy Bebop* series. Benjamin writes:

While all individual elements of foreign languages—words, sentences, structure—are mutually exclusive, these languages supplement one another in their intentions...*The words Brot and pain "intend" the same object, but the modes of intention are not the same. It is owing to these modes that the word Brot means something different to a German than the word pain to a Frenchman, that these words are not interchangeable for them, that, in fact, they strive to exclude each other* (1969:74; my emphasis).

It is important to note the distinction between "intention" and "modes of intention." To intend is to conceive of an idea, e.g. the general idea of a dish of stir-fried beef and bell peppers. So the object of intention is conceptual. Modes of intention, however, come into play when a speaker of a particular language connects the idea to a specific term in that language. For instance, in a Chinese takeout restaurant in central Virginia, the mode

of intention for an English speaker is established when s/he sees and tastes a plate of stir-fried beef and bell peppers and then links that experience to the idea of such a dish; or when s/he learns of that experience vicariously while reading a novel or a tour guidebook. The mode of intention is thus formed when the specific verbal signifier *Beef with Bell Peppers* becomes a shortcut representation of that experience. Therefore, intention is conceptually based, whereas the mode of intention is experientially based and contingent on the specific cultural context in which the experience takes place. The questions are: can any intention exist autonomously without a mode of intention? Can it exist without being tied to some experience (of some one)?

In a single cultural setting, the triangular relationship between the object of intention, mode of intention, and verbal signifier seems seamless. The shortcut conflation of the experience and its respective verbal signifier is unproblematic when one has no acknowledgement of cultural specificity. Blinded to the existence of other cultures, the culture-specific meaning of *Beef with bell peppers* is assumed to be equivalent to the non-specific universal idea of such a dish. But Walter, what happens when the recipe for a French *pain* travels to Germany?

In cross-cultural space, the verbal signifiers confront one another and discover that they are dissimilar to one another in both pronunciation and written form. Not only that, the awareness of this dissimilarity destabilizes the seamless assumption that one's home mode of intention is absolute, thereby illuminating the relativity of one's cultural existence. Realizing that, one starts to see that the meaning of *Qing-jiao-rou-si* to a Chinese speaker is not exactly what *Beef with bell peppers* is to an English speaker. Nevertheless, they are not always mutually exclusive because there can, in fact, be

exclusive differences *as well as* overlapping similarities in the cultural experience of their respective speakers. Hypothetically, a Chinese chef can travel to Japan and introduce her recipe of *Qing-jiao-rou-si* to a Japanese chef. Neither culture nor language can be pure and fixed concepts as figured by Benjamin. The important point is that language cannot exist apart from its experience in culture and in reality. The fact that *Qing-jiao-rou-si* and *Beef with bell peppers* are not completely interchangeable leads us to attend to the inference that there is no perfect translation. Of interest to us is the manifestation of the affinity between language and culture as an untranslatable “difference” from one cultural context to another—a cultural difference only evidenced in cross-cultural experience. Based on one’s previously accumulated (cultural) experiences, this difference can be either a lack or an excess, or a combination thereof, of the comprehensive ability in accessing a text. For example, my reading of the *Qing-jiao-rou-si* scene is a mix of a lack of Japanese language skills and an excess of Chinese and English comprehensibility.

Watching anime in a transnational setting is a tricky business because it involves two levels of translation: a) anime itself as a medium is an audio-visual translation of reality-referencing ideas, e.g. the difference between animated green peppers and real green peppers; b) anime’s linguistically and culturally specific contents are transmitted across different national and cultural boundaries from production through distribution to reception.²³ We should not assume that *Qing-jiao-rou-si* is exactly *Beef with bell peppers*. And, Spike’s *Qing-jiao-rou-si* is not the same as the *Beef with bell peppers* that one can find in the Chinese restaurants either in Virginia or anywhere in China or Tokyo. We can,

²³ Another point can be that anime already is a historical translation from its medium’s origin in the West to Japan. But this is not a central point in this project.

however, see the terms as somewhat similar to another. The cross-cultural fictional space of the anime plays with this uncanny ambivalence in meaning. In today's transnational world, with the advent of technological flexibility that caters to our specific modes of reception (e.g. with the DVD player's language and/or subtitles configurations), we can now more or less personalize our viewing experience. In addition to the cultural-linguistic translation, the technologically mediated form further widens the space for variations in readings—or more precisely, *misreadings*.

In one of the underground versions of the *Cowboy Bebop* series, *Qing-jiao-rou-si* is subtitled as *Ginger roast*. Never mind that no one knows what “ginger roast” means; yet it seems to be a translation based on an aural proximity: *Ginger Roast* sounds remarkably similar to *Qing-jiao-rou-si*. Another complication revolving around the transnational reception of anime is dubbing. The director of the American production crew that handled the series' dubbing (or Automatic Dialogue Replacement/ADR) acknowledges the difficulty of translating a Japanese work into English as “dealing with a mythology that just can't be translated; it's a different cultural vocabulary” (Reyes). And yet the English dubbing is crucial for the anime's reception in the US because it alleviates the estranged feelings of a foreign text. And yet, I feel a little uncomfortable when Spike enunciates *Beef with bell peppers* and feel more at home when he says *Qing-jiao-rou-si*. My cultural baggage seems to assume that Spike, too, is more at home with the Japanese pronunciation of *Qing-jiao-rou-si*. And this is also the reason that I watch the anime with subtitles rather than dubbing.

Something is bound to be lost in a translation. The *Beef with bell peppers* dialogue turns out to be an internal philosophical dialogue about my experience of

translating the anime into ideas and words. It seems like the intended effect of humor is lost once I begin to intellectualize the passage. Part of its humor is that beef is so expensive in Japan and that the absence of beef in a dish called *Beef with bell peppers* indicates how poor these bounty hunters are. Nevertheless, Benjamin's inevitably unfaithful translator ameliorates my self-positioning as a transnational spectator of anime and relieves my anxiety induced by my "ex-centric" position as a non-Japanese speaking spectator who speaks both English and Chinese and lives in the US. I don't have to get it all in order to enjoy it all.

2.2 The "ex-centric" cultural translator

In Session 3 "Honky Tonk Women," riding in the elevator in a casino, Jet tells Spike about his dream in which Charlie Parker predicted, "Only hands can wash hands. If you want to receive, you must first give." Spike misses Jet's point that this may be a clue to finding their bounty and responds, "Do you think Charlie Parker would quote Goethe?" Just when Spike goes on to say that their attempt to find a bounty at the casino will be fruitless, Jet interrupts him by saying that smoking is not allowed in the elevator. Spike quickly swallows his cigarette and wears his signature smile of embarrassment.

Seeing and hearing this scene, my first instinct as a student was to check to see if Goethe actually wrote or said those words. But does it matter? After all, what would happen if Goethe were misquoted? It is a dream (of a cartoon character) anyway. Charlie Parker could, of course, have misquoted Goethe if he wanted to. But my point is that I, too, like Spike, missed the point: my intention to check on the Goethe quote is motivated by my knowledge about Charlie Parker and Goethe and my habits as a student.

I then realized my position, with respect to this scene, as that which straddles two (sub)cultural groups: that of Jazz and of academia. The references to Charlie Parker and Goethe function as cultural signifiers. Unlike the linguistic signifiers, such as Jet's stir-fried dish as described in the previous section, these signifiers can be connected to a multiplicity of meanings. The meaning of Charlie Parker to people not familiar with the Jazz repertoire can merely be a foreign name; or, the sound of Charlie Parker to a non-English speaking viewer could simply be an empty signifier of some Anglo-American or Western person, of no particular meaning at all. The problem with a cultural signifier is that the definition of culture is more elusive than language. While it is easier to assume a literal meaning of a linguistic signifier, due to the conventions in everyday practice, cultural signifiers are hard to pin down—they often float as rootless objects in the (global) space until they are registered by an audience of a specific subcultural group.

Jet and Spike's conversation about Charlie Parker and Goethe conjures in me another point about my preexisting cultural baggage: My cultural frame as preconditioned by my subcultural linkages to Jazz and academia narrows my reading to the literalness of signifiers, i.e. whether Goethe really did write those words. I wonder if there was a point to begin with, as intended by the makers of the anime. Having "a point" assumes that there is a unilocal center, a specific group of audience which the anime intentionally targets. Is this group supposed to know (or not know) about Charlie Parker and Goethe? My feeling is that while there may not be one point in particular, there are many points built in the design of the anime. Here I will term my excess knowledge about Charlie Parker and Goethe as a kind of "cultural mirage," as opposed to a blind spot. Because of these mirages, my fruitless effort (uncannily echoing Spike's

prediction) to intellectualize a reading of the cultural signifiers makes me realize my position outside of a *presumed* cultural center, an ex-centric position,²⁴ in the reception of anime. More precisely, the anime makers welcome mirages as such because part of its fun is that there does not have to be such a presumed cultural center to begin with.

On a different occasion, I showed Session 7 “Heavy Metal Queen” to the fellow students in my graduate seminar.²⁵ Their responses were not at all what I expected: one person expressed that this anime, as a typical example of how he generally perceives Japanese popular cultural artifacts, “is a bunch of Western signifiers that seem *cool* to the Japanese.”²⁶ Another person indicated that *Cowboy Bebop* has nothing musically to do with the sound of Bebop.²⁷ Someone expressed that it was “an excruciating experience” because it reminded her of those “repugnant” cartoon experiences she had when she was a child. And in the visceral register, a few agreed that its “brutal” randomness gives a “seizure-like effect.” Interestingly, someone noted that Decker, the nerd-villain of this episode, looks like Woody Allen. While these comments seem single-dimensional, their self-referential quality gives me an insight into the wide variety of potential effects produced by the anime. The dissonant responses are based upon each person’s individual experiences shaped by his/her cultural or subcultural milieu. While a person familiar

²⁴ I borrow the term “ex-centric” from Homi Bhabha. See *The Location of Culture*, p. 177.

²⁵ This conversation took place on November 10, 2003 during class time in MUSI 725 *Performance: Antiquities and Modernities* (instructor Michelle Kisliuk).

²⁶ This comment is compelling because there is no doubt that the makers of the series want to convey coolness with Western signifiers. The *Cowboy Bebop: Anime Guide Vol. 1*, an item of peripheral merchandise, packages the anime’s statement as being cooling: “It would be a story with young, vivacious characters, a rich storyline, crisp dialogue, stylish direction, . . . It would be the epitome of cool.” What is assumed here is that the use of Western signifiers can in fact effect coolness. Whether this is a statement directed at the Japanese audience or the non-Japanese audience remains to be deciphered. I tend to think that the cool effect can be manifest in both Japanese and non-Japanese viewers.

²⁷ He also pointed out a Marc Johnson song titled “Samurai Hee-Haw,” (*Bass Desires*, 1994) of which the title *Cowboy Bebop* seems to be an inversion.

with jazz has the epistemological ground to claim that there is “no authentic bebop” in the anime, it is also unlikely that someone who has never seen Woody Allen would make the Woody Allen reference. The assertion and mediation of self are crucial in the response to the audio-visual or literary medium. Even more complexing, the individual self can be at once situated in multiple subcultural dimensions. This makes it so that the dialectical process occurs not only between the viewer and the anime, but among the multiple selves within one physical self in relation to the anime.

In *Anime: from Akira to Princess Mononoke*, Susan Napier describes the US fandom reception of anime as being marked by “a *heightened* self-consciousness” because of “the estranging or defamiliarizing aspect of the genres involved, the medium of animation versus that of live action, and the Japanese or non-American origin of the texts themselves” (2001:242). Napier reports that most of the US audience is attracted to anime because of its sheer “difference” or “otherness,” not necessarily because of its Japanese-ness, but because of its non-American-ness (2001: 245). My question, nevertheless, points to the myriad responses from my classmates who all consider themselves USAmericans/Westerners. And most of them don’t find themselves attracted to anime’s otherness at all. Instead of “difference” or “otherness,” I want to use the word *uncanny*. The cultural uncanny in anime reception can be pluralistic, and a mixture between difference and similarity. Specifically, I assert that most of the uncanny in the US anime experience is neither generically nor nationally—but culturally (by extension, subculturally and personally) bound.

Reiterating the first section of this essay, the cultural self is not merely the individual him/herself: It is the dialogue between the individual and whatever s/he

encounters, a reflexive self-other(s) dialogue. For instance, the interactive process of self-referencing between the animated Woody Allen-like character on screen and the viewer who has seen Woody Allen films reaffirms him/her as a member of the Woody Allen subculture or of the American film consumer culture. Here, the notion of culture refers to the collectiveness of human beings in relationships with others of shared experiences. So, depending on context, a culture could be either as micro as between two people or within one individual, or as macro as all humanity. Such a broad scope in the definition makes “culture” transnational. Since anime is produced,²⁸ distributed, and received in a transnational setting, we can say that anime is a cultural phenomenon; but because its transnational reception can also exist on a subcultural or personal level, we can then say that anime reception is a *transcultural* phenomenon. Here I must indicate the paradox embedded in the term transcultural: using the prefix “trans” to describe a movement or dialectic across “culture(s)” —which, by definition, is fluid and elusive in nature—ends up reifying culture itself. A discussion about transculturalism cannot entirely dodge the reifications of the cultures as elicited. On the other hand, a discussion about transculturalism can serve to dissolve some of the preconceived notions about culture as a fixed phenomenon, e.g. bounded by national borders, by adding a pluralistic dimension (because of its potential subcultural or personal existence). So, for the lack of a better term, I resort to the usage of transculturalism.

In short, responding to Napier’s formulation about the non-Japanese/USAmerican spectatorship of anime, I want to emphasize this cultural “otherness” as the uncanny in its

²⁸ The production of anime is not strictly confined to Japan anymore. The anime production crew is now comprised of units located in different parts of East Asia. For instance, production units in China and South Korea handle the mass output of drawings after the Japanese sectors come up with the set character design.

myriad faces, as that which heightens the awareness of the cultural position of self. In other words, the transnational reception of anime highlights the dislocation of the cultural self or the ex-centric cultural location of self, who is bound to misread or “miss the point.”

2.3 The performative translator

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha adds that the transnational quality of culture makes it also *translational* (1994:172). So if anime is a transnational (and transcultural) phenomenon, how then do we translate it across cultural boundaries? This question posits the idea that watching anime across national and cultural boundaries forces one to become a cultural translator. Bhabha takes off from Benjamin’s idea of translation and extends it to cultural praxis. Realizing that a translation can never be total, Bhabha takes Benjamin’s idea of the untranslatable to mean the incommensurability of cultures: “With the concept of ‘foreignness’ Benjamin comes closest to describing the performativity of translation as the staging of cultural difference” (1994:227). What I like about this formulation is that it ascribes to the translator an agency in the process of translation. We can see the translator’s performance of cultural difference as a unity between his/her reading voice and a body as characterized by his/her cultural difference. Then to translate the viewing and reading experience into words, the words are re-rendered and tied down to the performative writer’s voice that is now embodied by his/her cultural difference. Unlike the conventional translator, who renders self or body invisible as a way to present an undisturbed surface of a “complete” transference of material from one cultural space into another, Bhabha’s translator earnestly faces up to his/her personal and

cultural bias(es) in the process of translation. S/he is a translator who never ceases in the attempt to translate the foreign other—despite the awareness of the failure inherent in the attempt—and subsequently realizes the foreignness of self.

To clarify the meaning of a cultural translator, Bhabha utilizes the trope of a migrant. To survive, the migrant's marginalized position requires sensitivity to maintain a mutual relation to others. Admittedly, not every migrant has the duty to better serve self and other, but the marginal voice embodies the struggle to reconcile its difference and is laden with the struggle against his/her cultural baggage. Needless to say, an individual presently existing in a society of global confluence is bound to have cultural blind spots and mirages. Thus every one is a potential migrant.

On a tangential note, I prefer the notions of a “blind spot” and a “mirage” over “foreignness” because the former two connote a sense of forward vision yet with a necessary dialectical reference to home or self; whereas the latter (used in both Benjamin and Bhabha) merely conveys a one-way, distanced gaze away from home. The former two terms imply a sense of reflexivity that's lacking in the latter. Also, while a blind spot signifies a lack and a mirage an excess, foreignness merely touches an unknown—it doesn't specify the kind of relationship that the encounterer has with the unknown. Here, it seems crucial to specify the kinds of relation one can have to a blind spot or a mirage. One can be “blind” to the existence of his/her blind spots. A paradox arises when s/he has a critical distance from his/her blind spots—in a position that allows him/her to *see* or acknowledge his/her blind spots. This can be likened to the situation of changing lanes in driving when one acknowledges the existence of his/her blind spots by turning his/her head to look around the blind spots. Although the paradox doesn't work as well for a

mirage, one can be “blind” to the fact that a mirage is an illusion by believing that it’s real; and by realizing its existence as a mirage, an illusion, the encounterer is free from the obscuring power of the mirage. In short, realizing the existence of one’s own blind spots or mirages is actually the means to transform oneself. Inherent in the migrant is a sense of urgency due to his/her marginal position and undeniably, this urgency calls for the self to be affected, changed, and thus transformed. What’s transformed in one’s perception of the world. (To be continued in sec. 4.2.)

Let’s go back to the discussion of anime reception. If there were one way to “properly” receive the anime transnationally, I would say that it’s with the migrant’s gaze: “The migrant culture of the ‘in-between,’ the minority position, dramatizes the activity of culture’s untranslatability” (Bhabha 1994:224). Similarly, both blind spots and mirages are more pronounced, or can be dramatized, when the perceiver is in a marginal position rather than a hegemonic one. Then, the question raised in the beginning of this section How do we translate a text across national and cultural boundaries? becomes whether one is aware of his/her blind spots and mirages and how s/he factors them into his/her transcultural experience vis-à-vis the text.

In contrast to the migrant’s gaze are two possible perceptual positions: the tourist’s gaze and the resident’s gaze. The gaze of a camera-wielding tourist is usually uncritical and not reflexive. The tourist takes the home cultural frame to the new site but doesn’t allow his/her preexisting cultural frame to be affected by the other, not to mention the possibility of being interrogated by it. Sometimes, though, the tourist can have an ephemeral moment of reflection but it usually doesn’t last. Despite the experience of the new, the gaze of a tourist remains at home with his/her existing cultural

frame, along with its blind spots and mirages. By contrast, the resident's gaze is projected by a home inhabitant who, in comparison to the migrant, occupies a comfortably privileged position. The comfort zone makes the home resident *blind* to his/her blind spots and mirages. Basically, what demarcates the gaze of the migrant from that of the tourist and the resident is a kind of reflexivity that allows the gaze on the other to reflect back on the self in dialogue.²⁹ This reflexive gaze of the migrant is conducive to challenging thereby transforming one's home cultural frame.

My purpose for explicating the different gazes as well as the different kinds of translator is to uncover the process involved in viewing the transnational anime. Viewing/ reading and writing about anime are tasks of translation that inevitably fail: the impossibility of a total transference of the experience of audio-visual materials into words. Beyond the recognition of the impossibility of a perfect translation, I nevertheless attempt to translate between languages, cultures, and media. I do realize and strive to wrestle with my own blind spots and mirages that influence my reading of and writing about the anime. As a performative translator, my voice as expressed in this writing is embodied by my migrant being: a bilingual and bicultural citizen in the world I inhabit, an interdisciplinary student in the academy. I suppose that I can't misread the text if I locate the center in me.

I was lost in New York's Chinatown. It didn't bother me that the shoulders of strangers rubbed my shoulders when they passed by. All I cared about was finding the place where I was meeting my aunt's family for a dim sum lunch. The posterior side of

²⁹ This gazing back of the object appears in writings on the viewing experiences of museum, art, and film. See Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's *Destination Culture*, pp.17-77; Roland Barthes, "Right in the Eyes," *The Responsibility of Forms*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991, pp. 235-242.

my neck was aching because it was twisted in a funny angle—I was looking up and ahead, in the sea of multifarious signs, for one specific sign that says “Unicorn Chinese Restaurant.” Maybe I should cross the street so that, from a distance, I could read the multilingual signs hanging on the storefronts of this side of the street. Wait, is this a tourist gaze? Imagine having to do this every day, as a migrant constantly has to do upon his/her arrival to a new place. No one around me seemed to be looking for anything as hard as I was: They looked ahead simply because they didn’t want to bump into anyone. Presumably, most of them are the resident-migrants or immigrants here in Chinatown. They know to speak in their mother tongue when they see another (im)migrant like them. Sure, some of them learned to speak in the tongue (English) of the majority here and spoke it when they had to; while others didn’t. Two blocks over was Little Italy, a completely different neighborhood where people spoke an entirely different tongue. Constantly having to translate the foreign into the native, I imagine an estranged migrant thrives in this uncanny space of the American metropolis.

The preceding passage narrates an as-if experience I had in New York. Walking down the streets in the city’s multiethnic neighborhoods, I felt as if I were a migrant-resident of an asteroid city in the interstellar 22nd century. The experience of *Bebop* affected the way I perceived my reality.³⁰ *Now, where is my blaring Dixieland-like music soundtrack?*

SESSION #3 “RANDOM JUXTAPOSITION”

3.1 The frontiers of “cowboy” and “bebop”

³⁰ Part of the intention of this passage of performative writing is to resonate with the ending of section 3.2 on ethnic pluralism.

I flip to the back cover of the *Cowboy Bebop* series DVD set released in North America. First I see Spike slouching cross-legged and holding a paperback book titled *King of...* something, then in the foreground, I spot a fuzzy drawing of a bottle of Mariachi Tequila, an empty glass, and a pile of cigarette butts sticking up. Above Spike's head is an un-indented text in a white san-serif font that reads:

JAZZ AGERS, flower children, lost generation, beatniks, rockers, punks, nerds, hackers, lovers, generation X—whatever the designation, there have always been outlaws in our society who live in pursuit of autonomy. At times they are revered for their roles as pioneers, challenging the unknown; other times people consider them lawless desperados and a dangerous presence. Yet, really, it is only their exuberant music and an autonomy founded to express opinions different from those of others that set them apart from the rest of society. THE YEAR 2071 AD. That future is now. Driven out of their terrestrial eden, humanity chose the stars as the final frontier...

This blurb resonates with much of the present avant-gardist's manifesto. The commonality lies in the idea of frontier. The makers of the series play with the frontier idea: "[w]ith the section-by-section collapse of the former nations" causing the emergence of "a mixed jumble of races and peoples... They spread to the stars, taking with them the now confused concepts of freedom, violence, illegality and love, where new rules and a new generation of outlaws came into being." Despite their differences, they share a passion for "exuberant music" and the desire to be independent-minded. The notion of frontier implies the division between self and other and, as importantly, the location of the self in the minority. This sense of struggle can be detected in the marginal position of both the migrant and the frontier as they encounter something new and unknown. Yet, this "something" is subtly different in each case: the migrant encounters an already inhabited space while the frontier is the encounter of an uninhabited space. Where the migrant struggles with a hegemonic force that's tangible, the frontier struggles

more with a more abstract, unexpected space. What seems more useful is to think of the common ground between the two figures since our discussion revolves around the immediate moment of contact and how this clashing of differences can be conducive to the creation of newness. Similarly, the repetitive insertion of “outlaws” and “autonomy” contained in the above statement evokes a confrontation between marginality and hegemony. And it is through this encounter, a tension between the marginal and the hegemonic, that the drive for newness emanates a frontier spirit.

To trace the source of the frontier idea in Japan’s social and cultural history, I take off from the show’s title that deliberately juxtaposes two unrelated things: cowboy and bebop. The conspicuous borrowing of “cowboy” from the Western movie genre connotes the virtue of a frontier spirit. A tangential note can be made about the historical affinity between the American Western and Japanese period film genres, particularly those based on samurai tales. Since the 1950s, there has been a flux of exchange and appropriations in the stylistic and narrative techniques between the two genres, and between the two national pop cultural spheres (Desser 2002:181-5).

In Session 22 “Cowboy Funk,” the creators of the series humorously place the incestuous relationship between (Spaghetti) Westerns and Japanese period films in the foreground. Backed up by a non-diegetic musical spoof of the theme song from the Western classic *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, the blonde-haired, blue-eyed Andy makes his stage entrance with an excessively cowboy-like flare: sitting on his horse and wearing a white, pressed cowboy suit highlighted by a perfectly shaped cowboy hat and a red bandana around his neck, Andy announces his new name Wyatt Earp and intermittently spouts English phrases like “inspiration.” His profile even includes a

membership in the Young Men’s Cowboy Association. Never mind his “authentic” cowboy wardrobe, Andy is a terrible bounty hunter. After his failure, in competition with Spike, to catch the bounty,³¹ he immediately doffs his entire cowboy wardrobe and rather shamelessly dons a samurai outfit and calls himself Musahsi³² at the end of the episode. The episode does not merely achieve its parodying effect by the comical character of Andy, it also utilizes the classic desert backdrop for several scenes.

Bebop, the second half of the title, also reveals a frontier spirit. If one were to conflate jazz with bebop for the sake of discussion, the history of jazz in Japan rings an avant-garde note. Recognized as an import from the US since the 1920s, jazz has historically been a site for the negotiation of Japanese identity within a global context (Atkins 2001:10). Among its various contesting forms, the Japanese jazz subcultural community iconoclastically revels in its marginality in the face of mainstream art forms (2001:6-7). Moreover, a facet of Japan’s colonial history is played out in the context of jazz in Shanghai—a site militarily and colonially seized by the Japanese government between the 20s and early the 30s—as the *jazz frontier*: “Shanghai was their playland, their refuge, their frontier.... But the jazz frontier is more idea than place, the product of the Japanese jazz community’s collective imagination, thus a frontier by virtue of its meaning rather than its location or inherent transformative powers” (2001:84). As mentioned before, there is virtually no “authentic” bebop in the soundtrack. To go along with the bebop-jazz conflation, there is indeed an ample amount of jazz-like sounds in the soundtrack. More importantly, bebop is a symbol of the anime’s cutting edge attitude,

³¹ The featured bounty of this session is called Teddy Bower, a reference to the Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski.

³² Musashi is the name of the legendary samurai Musashi Miyamoto.

perhaps best exemplified by the name of the bounty hunters' home space shuttle called *Bebop*.

A cultural frontier can be associated with cultural colonialism. Graphic artist Takashi Murakami claims that the “superflat” sensibility of his art is influenced by anime and manga, which he sees as indigenous efforts to counter the colonizing forces of the US in the world’s popular culture (Lamarre 2002:334). In *Recentering Globalization*, an often referenced volume originally written in English (ironically),³³ Koichi Iwabuchi focuses on the relationship between the West, Japan, and its East Asian neighbors. Sifting through texts of Japanese popular culture, Iwabuchi unravels Japan’s recent political complicity: “Japan has constructed an oriental Orientalism against ‘Inferior Asia’” in order to imperialize the rest of Asia and rise to a world power standardized by the West (Iwabuchi 2002:6-11; Robertson 1998:97-101). The recurring colonial triangle revolving around Japan’s double identity—simultaneously a cultural colonizer and a culturally colonized victim—pervades the realm of pop culture in the present US as well.³⁴ Yet, I don’t think that this “Japan-Asia-the West triad” fits exactly into the reading of *Cowboy Bebop*: its cultural signifiers are brutally juxtaposed and mixed. The anime’s style in displaying transcultural signifiers conspicuously contrasts with Iwabuchi’s examples of *Pokémon*, Japanese TV dramas such as *Tokyo Love Story* and *Long Vacation*, where the colonialist triad can be more clearly drawn.

³³ The irony is that Koichi Iwabuchi writes in English—the language of the “colonizer”—despite his Japanese nationality and professional appointment at International Christian University in Tokyo, Japan. This could have something to do with the fact that he received his doctoral training in Australia.

³⁴ In Quentin Terantino’s *Kill Bill: Vol.1*, the touchy threefold heritage of O-Ren Ishii (Lucy Liu) — between American, Japanese, and Chinese—makes a political statement. As a Japanese mafia leader, O-Ren announces, “For the price you pay for bringing up my Chinese or American heritage as a negativeness, I collect your fucking head!” Incidentally, the history of this character is expressed as a flashback in an anime sequence. The inclusion of anime in a real-life action flick could be read as a quotation from Japanese pop culture and how that gets reinvented in the contemporaneous West, or the US.

Thus far, we have only discussed the notion of the frontier as something that resonates with ethnocentric transgressions like colonialism, but one of the earliest ideas about the frontier expressed in American narratives actually sees the frontier as a non-transgressive figure. Confronting the wilderness, instead of aggressively conquering it, this non-ethnocentric pioneer maintains a mutually respected, reciprocal relationship with the unknown land (Turner 1962:4). In the case of *Cowboy Bebop*, there is a play on ethnic “ex-centricity,” an idea that revolves around a lack of a cultural center. This idea of non-ethnocentricity is rendered as a kind of randomness that makes the anime a pioneer on the frontier of the anime experience, a migrant on the edge of the anime culture. The migrant, as I see it, is a pioneer on the cultural forefront who not only adds but creates newness in the extant cultures. The migrant lives with the mission to mix and “randomize” disparate cultures and disturb ethnocentricities and cultural purities. The anime contains Chinese, American, and Japanese, Native-American, Latin-American, European, African, and Arabic signifiers; and these cultural signifiers are intentionally jumbled and manifested randomly on the subcultural levels, e.g. a street co-inhabited by multiracial people and subcultural groups like the punks, the hippies, the Bruce Lee groupies. This randomness seeps through its content and form. Here, the randomness is not a coincidence, it is a deliberate play on pluralism.

3.2 Ethnic pluralism of the city

I'm chasing a potential bounty. The old trustworthy Swordsfish, a predecessor to Spike's sidekick Swordfish II, comes to an abrupt stop in front of a pole of street signs pointing in eight different directions (figure 1). A couple of the signs are in Chinese and English as

well as in pictographs, hm...one has something that looks like a bus, but I hardly know what the others say or whether the other signs are in actual languages at all. And how could I know? And does it even matter? Now where am I to go? Wait, wasn't I supposed to be going after Asimov Solenson? All of a sudden, I lose track of where I am going. These signs do the opposite of what they are supposed to do: *They disorient me.*³⁵

Much of my as-if experience with *Cowboy Bebop* is like the above, exhilarating and disorienting. As the *Bebop* spaceship pass through an interstellar gate, the intercom announces its welcome message in (at least) three distinguishable languages: Japanese, Chinese and English.³⁶ The visual and aural juxtaposition of different languages is, however, nothing new in contemporary media. Many so-called postmodern films such as *Blade Runner* (1982) as well as anime movies like *Akira* (1987) and *Ghost in the Shell* (1996) are all set in similar futuristic “multicultural” milieux.³⁷ Yet, randomness can be rendered in a variety of different ways. Next, I want to look more closely at *Ghost in the Shell* and *Cowboy Bebop*, both from the late 90s.

Ghost in the Shell sets its cyborg story in a futuristic city that resembles, in part, a Chinatown of most major cosmopolitan cities in the world, or 1970s Taipei or Hong Kong. This run-down part of the city is where sketchy characters roam around the narrow streets, markedly saturated by garbage and, for our interest, an excess of signs in

³⁵ The above is a performative narration of my self in Session 1, set in *Tijuana*. According to the *Cowboy Bebop Anime Guide vol. 1*, Tijuana is a colony of mixed races, “...a jumble of folks from everywhere; the largest part is made up of Asians, Latinos, and Europeans. The streets are most like South and Central America, but the mixture of races and languages is a whole different story,” p. 26.

³⁶ A more brutal example of the aural foreignness is seen in recent release *Lost in Translation*, where many Japanese dialogues are deliberately left untranslated for the English-speaking audience.

³⁷ Also, earlier, but not as “violently” mixed examples are *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*.

Chinese.³⁸ The image of a filth-ridden town is non-diegetically accompanied by the sound of Chinese oldies of an obtrusively Lo-Fi quality. One could hardly mis-identify it as anything other than a place occupied by Chinese (immigrants). Susan Napier footnotes the filmmaker Mamoru Oshii's intention of setting the story in a Hong-Kong-like city as a way to create "a vision of the future that lies just beyond the landscape of reality" (Napier 2001:272). Yes, I accept the necessity and desire to stage a cyborg story in a place with characteristics that uncannily straddle an unknown future and a familiar present. But what I don't get is the specific reference to Chineseness as a device used to loosely anchor the story to reality. Why couldn't it be 1970s Tokyo or Yokohama? Moreover, to Oshii, the appropriate setting in *Ghost in the Shell* is intended to outplay the story details (as interpreted by Napier, "once having found the right city, the actual story didn't matter"; 2001:272). For a setting so meticulously contrived, it is hard to believe that the use of Chinese codes is a mere coincidence: The intention is, in fact, *not* random. The nostalgic and exotic association of Chineseness with rundown urban dwelling becomes evident as the director's conscious choice when one views another one of Oshii's anime films *Patlabor* (Inuhiko 2003:79).

In contrast, *Cowboy Bebop*'s references to Chineseness are installed next to representations of other ethnic or linguistic groups in a pronouncedly random fashion.³⁹ For instance, situated next to a vertical commercial sign that denotes by a single Chinese

³⁸ It is possible that this scene is "quoted" by *Cowboy Bebop*. That a truck of two lab workers sets out to look for their experiment subject, a dog, in *Bebop*'s Session 2 could parody *Ghost in the Shell*'s serious scene featuring a search team for a destructive unit of criminals. The effect of quotation of another media text will be discussed in the following section 3.3.

³⁹ This stylistic randomness, as expressed by mixed linguistic signs, is employed in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982). Giuliana Bruno responds to it as a result of "recycling, fusion of levels, discontinuous signifiers, explosion of boundaries, and erosion." See David Harvey, "Time and space in the postmodern cinema," *Postmodern after-image*, pp. 61-73.

character a pet shop's name would be a sign that says "Pizza Land" in English. Sure, each unique ethnic otherness, the Chineseness and American Italianness, is in turn leveled or suppressed by the presence of the other, but the random combination renders the whole milieu an artificially contrived foreignness, a kind of "placeless" foreignness in which the notion of home is defamiliarized to the extent that it becomes empty.⁴⁰

Another way to see it, however, is that the randomly juxtaposed ethnic signifiers actually accentuate the presence of each individual difference. Regardless, there is an ambivalently heightened self awareness in regards to the placeless milieu which can be disorienting and somewhat uncanny and entertaining. In this placeless uncanniness, no one person is more foreign than any other. There is no hegemony, no minority. Every individual is a migrant floating amidst familiar and unfamiliar signifiers; no one has more blind spots or mirages than the others. With the respect to the viewer, pleasure can emerge as if s/he floats around like a migrant, reading or not reading these mixed signifiers, in turn coming to identify them either as blind spots/mirages or not. This interaction is precisely the *seeing* of one's blind spots/mirages. On the contrary, in *Ghost in the Shell*, the situation of the gazer with respect to the exuding Chineseness is that of a tourist, seeing Chineseness as props of otherness, or, to borrow from Yomota Inuhiko's criticism of *Swallowtail Butterfly*, "not as present-day living entities, but as objects of tourism" (2003:84).

⁴⁰ Similar to the concept of "placelessness," Susan Napier cites a discussion on "*mukokuseki*," meaning "stateless." *Mukokuseki* refers to the "animated space [which] has the potential to be context free, drawn wholly out of the animator's or artist's mind... This 'other world'... is created by animators who themselves are 'stateless'... that animators do not possess a real '*furusato*' or hometown." Intriguingly, this assertion autobiographically emphasizes the stateless being of the makers, rather than the stateless effect as experienced by the viewers. While the commentators also mention in passing it as a vehicle to "offer[ing] an alternative world to its Japanese audience," for this project, I prefer to delve into the audience stateless or placeless response. See *Anime*, pp.24-5.

Perusing *Cowboy Bebop*'s sign play to create a multifarious "linguistic landscape" (Russell 2002:215), it becomes evident that the anime foregrounds the ideology of pluralism. We cannot deny the construction of a future cityscape especially marked by a hyper hybridization of cultures as a running theme in many anime, particularly the ones that recurs in the SF (Science Fiction) or cyberpunk genre. What seems more interesting is the way each linguistic landscape is achieved in its respective work. As explored earlier, *Ghost in the Shell* dresses its high-tech futuristic setting in part by the representation of the Chinese immigrant (sub)culture.⁴¹ *Akira*'s (Otomo 2001) linguistic signage in "Neo-Tokyo" in the year 2019 mixes Japanese, Chinese, and English relatively evenly in the background, with the occasional protrusion of Japanese signs to represent the political opposition and governmental bureaucracy.⁴² A more recent TV production, *Cowboy Bebop* takes the multiethnic style of these anime blockbusters—which seemingly adopt the cyberpunk formula⁴³—and deliberately puts the style of multiethnicity in the fore as content with explicit statements such as "a mixed jumble of races." One critic asserts that "Style is what makes the show work. Every detail is paid careful attention, from the 'Hohner' logo on a boy's blues harp to the haze of smoke, old jazz chords and subdued noise of a café as Spike dozes off, scotch on the table, 'staking out' a target's hangout" (Rider). If style is merely a predetermined formula of a particular movement or genre (e.g. cyberpunk or Sci-Fi), then the random juxtaposition

⁴¹ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett talks about the trend of seeing immigrants as ethnographic objects in late 19th century Anglo-American writings, *Destination Culture*, pp.52-54

⁴² The newest released edition of *Akira* on DVD by Pioneer Video has a special feature of translating the Japanese signs into English. This offers an alternate reading of the anime to the English-speaking audience.

⁴³ Peter Fitting attributes the role of multiculturalism in SF/cyberpunk's construction of a future city to the prediction of "an increasing blurring of Western and East cultures and commodities, with a special focus on the burgeoning high-tech economies of Japan and the Pacific Rim." "The Lessons of Cyberpunk," *Technoculture*, ed. Penley, C. and Ross, A. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press: 1991, p. 300. See also "Postmodern modes of ethnicity" by Vivian Sobchack in *Post-modern after-images*, pp.113-28.

deployed by the *Bebop* series is beyond that definition: randomness here is not the *end*, but the *means* of following a particular style. We can even surmise that the emphatic play on style is what makes the series a pioneer on the frontier end of anime works. Here, randomness constitutes and substantiates the content as the makers of *Bebop* playfully blur the boundaries between style and content. Style and content are inseparable—we cannot talk about one without the other.⁴⁴ Following the frontier spirit, both the style and content of this essay should unequivocally speak the message.

I am attracted to *Cowboy Bebop*'s random juxtapositions, especially its randomly mixed ethnic signs. I love feeling lost in a multiethnic asteroid city in 2071. I too want to be a migrant in a place where there are only migrants, where migrants are not of a minority status, but are all migrant-residents. I feel that way temporarily when I plunge into the indifferent chaos of New York's ethnic neighborhoods.⁴⁵ Knowing that my body is tied down to a seemingly not-as-ethnically-diverse town in Central Virginia, I resort to the disorienting thrill proffered by the multiethnic Japanese anime. And I'm sure the viewing experience would be very different if it took place in Japan or on Mars or in next century; and perhaps even more different if I were not a graduate student, a female, a non-Japanese and English-and-Chinese speaker. But the point is that at this specific time and place, with my perception of this reality particularly configured by my personal history, I see and relate to *Bebop* this way. I break out into a hysterical laughter when the clumsy blonde-haired, blue-eyed Andy Musashi laments his bounty-hunting failure in an elegy entirely in Japanese. Jamming with Ed—an orange-haired, medium-brown-skinned

⁴⁴ Susan Sontag explicates the organic relationship between style and content in "On Style," *Against Interpretations: And Other Essays*, New York, Picador: 2001, pp.15-38.

⁴⁵ This experience is narrated in the form of performative writing at the end of section 3.3.

13-year-old hacker tomboy from Earth with the name Edward Wong Hau Pepelu Tivrusky IV—makes me feel at home. I can't help it, but doesn't my full name Wendy Fang Yu Hsu has a similar ring to Ed's?

3.3 Intertextuality & intermediality

In addition to the brutal juxtapositions in the diegetic setting, the juxtaposing style permeates the audio-visual aesthetics, too. The soundtrack has a similar style, for instance, in Session 7 “Heavy Metal Queen,” the non-diegetic sound is a John-Zorn-like genre mix-match of avant-garde free jazz and ska. On a single soundtrack from the series, there is a slew of different sonic idioms including rock, pop, bebop, big band, rockabilly, funk, electronic/dance, usually in a synthetic form mixing a few such genres.

Moreover, flooded by random textual quotations from American popular music are the names of the sessions. (All episodes have an English as well as Japanese title.) Some episodes adopt verbatim an entire song name: Session 11 “Toys in the Attic,” both song and album title by Aerosmith released in 1993; Session 14 “Bohemian Rhapsody,” a 70s classic hit by Queen; Session 15 “My Funny Valentine,” a standard originally composed by Richard Rodgers; Session 18 “Speak like a Child,” both the title of the album and a song by Herbie Hancock released in 1968; Sessions 24 & 25 “The Real Folk Blues,” title of Muddy Waters’ 1966 album. On the sinister side, several episodes playfully alter a part of an extant song’s title (notice the italics), e.g. Session 3 “Honky Tonk *Women*,” a conspicuous play on Rolling Stones’ “Honky Tonk *Woman*”; Session 8 “Waltz for *Venus*,” an echo of Bill Evans’ 1961 release *Waltz for Debby*. One immediate question could be, do these song-title references relate to the content of the respective

episodes? Sometimes, the literal meaning of the song title itself is appropriated to ambivalently resonate with the plot of the particular episode. For instance, Session 11 “Toys in the Attic” tells the story of how a raw steak comes alive and starts haunting the bounty hunters’ home. One of the episode’s mysterious and memorable moments involves the steak’s crawling on the grill of the ceiling.⁴⁶ The part of the song title, “in the attic,” refers to this scene. Besides that, the lyrics and the singer of the song are often irrelevant to the episode. In short, the song references serve as signs of contemporary American culture. By reading these signs literally, one can occasionally gather *random* clues to the content of the story.

On the narrative level, the contents are loosely patched together by different quotations or homages to other mediated forms or specific works. Is Spike supposed to be like Bruce Lee? Is the play on the idea of life as a dream in the *Cowboy Bebop* movie inspired by *Chuang Tsu*, a Chinese classic Taoist text? And what about those sessions that feature themes from other movies such as *Alien*, *Akira*, *Batman Returns* and actual events like the Unabomber story and the 1995 Tokyo Sarin subway attack? Questions of this sort become a game for the American fans (to my limited knowledge), as evidenced by the Internet fan sites.⁴⁷ As any other genre or medium, to be able to pick up on the references in *Cowboy Bebop* requires minimal exposure to the anime genre and medium to avoid that initial “shock” by its foreignness and to comprehend the content. Beyond that, a viewer would necessarily have some exposure to the references prior to the experience of watching the anime in order to recognize its quotations or references. I will

⁴⁶ This scene is actually a parody of Ridley Scott’s *Alien*.

⁴⁷ See <http://www.jazzmess.com/sessions/index.html>; <http://rflblues.aanime.net/Omake/Influences/>

now embark on a closer reading of the anime's sporadic play on references—in terms of intertextuality.

An intertextual form surely provokes an intertextual reading. Yet, it is precisely the act of reading between texts that gives the intertext its form. The crux of intertextuality, therefore, lies in reception. The particularity of each individual's intertextual reading in turn highlights the idiosyncrasy of one's cultural position. On the reception of television, Jim Collins relates intertextuality to “a hyperawareness on the part of the text itself of its cultural status, function, and history, as well as of the conditions of its circulation and reception” (1997:196). To take this a step further, the hyperawareness of the text and its social context in turn effects a “heightened self-consciousness” in the viewer, coinciding with the previously mentioned discussion by Napier on the anime reception in non-Japanese settings (in section 2.2). Confronting a radically intertextual work such as *Cowboy Bebop*, which showers its viewers with a profusion of cultural signifiers, a personal reading is thus a process of coming to terms with what is familiar and unfamiliar to one's cultural home. The inter- space between texts becomes the performative space between self and other: In it, the foreignness of an other confronts self by an uncanny aura of difference, just as a migrant is confronted by the foreignness of his/her environment and is challenged to see his/her nativity as an object, thus becoming aware of the uncanny position of self. To reiterate what's been stated previously, the process of realizing the position of self involves the acknowledgement of one's blind spots or mirages or both. The fact that I didn't pick up on the Woody Allen reference in Session 7 until someone in my class pointed it out

makes me realize my position in relation to the fellow students in my seminar: that I am not as culturally fluent in the repertoire of Woody Allen.⁴⁸

Rather than intertextuality, Livia Monnet focuses on the notion of intermediality—between different media—in cyberpunk film and anime. She claims that the cyberpunk genre conventionally mixes different, whether contemporaneous or recent, media forms. She elucidates intermediality by examining specific instances in *Ghost in the Shell* that blend or “remediate” cinematic and digital materials from *Blade Runner* and *Neuromancer* (2002:255-68). What is useful in this theoretical framework is the treatment of a specific media culture as a point of reference. *Cowboy Bebop*’s Session 18 “Speak Like a Child” provides an intermedial quip by the random arrival of a Beta video cassette into the home of the 22nd century bounty hunters. Having no clue what this black plastic box does or is, Spike tries to figure it out by pulling out the magnetic tape. The humor of this scene occurs at the seemingly serendipitous (but, of course, contrived by the makers) intersection of two distinct media cultures—the highly digitalized, conspicuously exemplified by Ed’s virtual connection to the web, and the obsolete analog, represented by the short-lived Beta technology. Viewers who have experienced the Beta video technology can laugh at it, perhaps only now that s/he is temporally distanced from that culture. Thus we can say that the viewer of an intertext or an intermedia⁴⁹ is a migrant floating in the space between different texts and the media cultures revolving around these texts. The migrant gazes from a distance at the texts or media cultures once

⁴⁸ On the fourth or fifth time of viewing the episode, I spotted a dead give-away for the Woody Allen reference: the restaurant in which Faye first encounters the Woody-Allen-like character is actually called “Woody’s.”

⁴⁹ Some of the other examples of intermediality in *Bebop* include: the black & white samurai and Western films on cinematic screen (the samurai film has multilingual subtitles), a “television” that regularly hosts a show called *Big Shot* that announces the most wanted bounty of the day.

experienced at home in time and/or space. Spike reminds me of my present 21st century existence distanced from my frustrated 80s self trying to play the well worn Beta tape of *Lady and the Tramp* on our decrepit Beta machine at home.

After Clifford Geertz's paradigmatic reading of (Balinese) culture as text (1973), I want to assert an expansive definition of "text"—as a cultural production of a particular time and place—in this discursive piece of writing about culture. A cultural text can then be a book, a film, a TV series, or on a more abstract level, the medium of the Internet or of language. So, if we take language to be a text, translation can also be conceived as an intertext: the work translated is essentially a "quotation" extracted from the "text" of the source language and then inserted into another "text" of the target language. Hence, a translation reads like an *intertext* that necessarily references two texts, both the source and the target languages (Orr 2003:156). While conventional translations are technically bi-textual, because they are usually the transference of material from one language to another, there are indeed multilingual translations that "reference" more than two languages.⁵⁰

To go back to the discussion of *Cowboy Bebop* as an intertext, its saturation with quotations from other texts guarantees at least some familiarity (and unfamiliarity) for most individuals. The form opens up a personal dialectical space in relation to the intertext in accord to each individual's inclinations or freedom to play with inversion,

⁵⁰ An example of such a translation can be the English translation of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* which translates the Italian into English with interspersed untranslated passages in Latin and German. Obviously, an English speaker who also knows Latin and German can have the most lucid reading of the English translation. In both the Italian original and the English translation, the untranslated passages in Latin and German can be stirring or disorienting like *Bebop*'s multilingual *mise en scène*.

camp, adaptation, appropriation,⁵¹ irony,⁵² or parody. An intertextual reception is attractive for its potential fun, playful sensibility. Moreover, the idea of intertextuality appeals to the avant-gardist sensibility especially. The opening text to the film *Cowboy Bebop: Knocking on Heaven's Door* resonates with the bebop spirit (with a hypothetical reference to “Minston’s Play House in New York, in 1941”) by explicitly stating its avant-gardist attitude: “The work...[becomes] a new genre itself.” Revealingly, in an interview, the director Shinichiro Watanabe confesses that the idea of a new genre was merely a sales pitch he wrote for the project proposal.⁵³ In addition, he indicates that, in Japan, the opacity of English didn’t induce any questions about the phrase: “we [the Japanese audience] didn’t pay attention to what’s written there [in English]! Now it’s in America, and we sound conceited!” Another thing that I had obsessively mused on ends up being somewhat irrelevant to many other people, i.e. the Japanese viewers. Again, what seems random to me isn’t exactly random to some others. Did I misread the sign?

FINAL SESSION #4 “MISREADING THE RANDOM”

4.1 Play & politics

Behind the anime’s random front,⁵⁴ I sense a backstage agenda: rather than appealing to high-art taste, the creators of *Cowboy Bebop* seem more interested in and committed to

⁵¹ One of the main activities in anime fandom, as appears on the Internet, is to extract graphics from existing anime to create new art work. An example of a “cultural appropriation” can be a creation of a music video juxtaposing different silent footages from *Cowboy Bebop* with a pop song, for example, “Everything Zen” by Bush. See Susan Napier, *Anime*, p.246.

⁵² Also, Linda Hutcheon, “Postmodern Film?” in *Postmodern after-images*, pp. 36-42.

⁵³ Watanabe indicates that the phrase was inserted into the series as a transition still to a commercial break by a designer without his permission. Also, he regrets that the idea is “exaggerated.” <http://www.jazzmess.com/misc/animeinvasion.txt>

⁵⁴ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett exposes the avant-gardist’s agenda at the Los Angeles Festival behind the mass reception of “multicultural” or “international” performances: “The organizers of the Los Angeles

its low-art market reception. The intriguing twist here is that their marketing strategy borrows from high-art as a sales pitch. The randomness is played out on the surface as multiple layers of difference; beneath the surface are the definite, not-so-random intentions of commodification and market consumption. How does the anime play with this tension? And what does this mean in the context of the anime genre and other media works at large?

So far in this essay, I have discussed the general reception of anime and provided a specific reading of the anime *Cowboy Bebop*. I have proposed the migrant's perceptual position in relation to the anime as a transnational and transcultural phenomenon. The theory of the migrant's gaze has served to theorize *Bebop*; simultaneously, *Bebop* has helped shape the general theory of anime reception in a global context. An important point can be drawn from this dialectical relationship: the reason that the anime *Cowboy Bebop* occupies a position at home in this theoretical and critical discourse about the general global reception of anime is because the anime itself contains some of this criticism internally. Specifically, its play on sign and interplay between surface and depth says something about other contemporaneous anime and media works and has larger implications about certain global trends. The way the anime achieves a critical effect is to maintain a playful but critical distance from not only itself, but also from the world that influences the way the anime was made. In other words, *Cowboy Bebop*'s play space provides an outlet for reflexive critiques which in turn critique the physical world in which it exists.

Festival 'quoted' from Japanese or Hawaiian culture, but in theory, if not in practice, withheld 'translation' for the many Los Angeles audiences who were not speakers of those 'languages'." Like the disorienting multilingual street signs in *Cowboy Bebop*, the untranslated spectacle of staged ethnic performances can be opaque and confusing. "Confusing Pleasure," *The Traffic in Culture*, p.243.

The emphatic play on surface randomness can be seen as a reflexive critique of the reception of the anime. Its intertextual form is patched together, and importantly, reads as the street signs that hang loosely on storefronts: What matters is their face value, whatever each text really means in relation to others deserves no urgency to be understood or realized. So, there is no definite semantic depth or a singular meaning to be gleaned from these signs. The point is that the viewer is *supposed* to misread; and misreading exists inherently in the design of the anime. As soon as the viewer starts to seek a singular point or a particular serious reading beyond the playful surface, one is tricked by the makers, like a puppy chasing its tail. The experience of tail chasing, or misreading, is the pleasure guaranteed by the anime.

In Session 9 “Jamming with Edward,” before the rest of the *Bebop* crew finds out about Ed’s identity as an infamous hacker, she carries a pseudonym—Radical Edward—in the virtual community. In addition to the pseudonym, Ed’s identity is further complicated by an array of rumors held by the Earth community: Jet is misinformed about her as being a “2-meter tall Ex basketball player. Beautiful kid. And on top of it, a gay alien.” Ed’s true identity is never unveiled. In fact, her multiethnically sounding name—Edward Wong Hau Pepelu Tivrusky IV—is a playful artifice made up by herself. Later in Session 24, the person that she claims to be her father insistently calls her François. (But he, too, is markedly absent-minded and I wouldn’t be surprised if Ed misreads him as her birth father, or vice versa.) Another intriguing facet about Ed’s name is that it is usually associated with masculinity. This not only accentuates Ed’s

tomboyish character, it also elicits the anime's gender-bending play on characters,⁵⁵ especially when one reads into one of the above mentioned rumors about Ed as being "a gay alien."

Relating *Bebop*'s playfully contrived multivalence to other anime works, I sense that it toys with the generic ethnic ambiguity of most other anime characters. Characters in the anime genre typically have Western features or ambiguously ethnic (to the degree of being non-ethnic) features in order to appeal to a wide global audience.⁵⁶ On the contrary, the *Bebop* characters have either exaggeratedly ethnic features of one particular group (e.g. Andy Musashi and *Laughing Bull*, a Native American fortune teller) or deliberately mixed features of several ethnic groups (e.g. Ed and Abdul Hakim). With the racial profile of "negloid" and an Arabic-sounding name, Abdul Hakim is a tall, lean, and light-skinned bounty of Session 2 who wears a large Afro, a set of large hoop earrings, and an American 70s disco outfit in his last appearance (after a series of plastic surgeries). The theme of playing with identity seems to be an ongoing theme in this series; whereas, characters in most animated works remain constant in identity. *Cowboy Bebop*'s interracial characters, ostensibly marked by characteristics of a number of different ethnicities, and characters, that play with their physical and societal identities,

⁵⁵ Jet, too, can be a gender-bending character for his feminine role in their interstellar dwelling: he cooks for the crew and often remains stationed, hence "domesticated." Specifically, Jet's virile appearance is contrasted by a small white apron in the scene about *Beef with bell peppers* in Session 1. Another character that is ambiguously gendered is V.T. in Session 7. V.T. is woman of a large stature with short blond hair and a deep voice. Despite her history of having been married to man, who is now deceased, V.T. can be said to be "butch"—the masculine dyad in a lesbian relationship—in both looks and personality.

⁵⁶ One can criticize that anime characters' Western features are an adoption of the cultural colonizer's aesthetics. See Hsu Chia-Shin (Hyu Jia-Shin), "Bound for Asian Glory: The Postcolonial Discourse on Contemporary Japanese Comics," *Envisage*, March:1, 2002, pp. 88-108. A counter argument, however, is made by Napier: "...while many anime texts do include figures with blond hair, it is perhaps more correct to say that rather than a "Western" style of figuration, the characters are drawn in what might be called 'anime' style. This style ranges from the broadly grotesque drawings of characters with shrunken torsos and oversize heads of some anime comedy to the elongated figures with huge eyes and endless flowing hair that populate many romance and adventure stories." *Anime*, p. 25.

imply the message of seeing human existence as a sign that's always subject to societal change, or as a performance that's contingent on the scripts of the society.

Another reflexive critique *Cowboy Bebop* points to is its medium as an animation. The virtual and malleable qualities of anime make it the perfect medium for commercial exchange and the mass production of images vested with commercial value. Imamura wrote compellingly, "...it is animation that gave birth to the greatest myth of the society commodity fetishism: the dead can be re-animated" (Driscoll 2002:283). The anime overtly recycles familiar global commercial images such as the white Starbucks Coffee cup with its glowing green circular logo, the classic Coca Cola and Pepsi logos and cans, the Levi's red-tab jeans, Cup N' Noodles, Pac Man, CBC News, celebrity personas like Bruce Lee, the Unabomber, Woody Allen, Antonio Banderas, and animated characters like Tom & Jerry, the Joker and Penguin in *Batman*, Akira. A dialectical engagement with the rapid-turnover images can accentuate the commercialism as experienced in the everyday reality of the viewer. Particularly, the fetishistic quality of the globally circulated commodities is underlined by their animistic movement as if they are raised from the dead⁵⁷ to uncannily "grab" their consumer. So, these images are performative in the sense that they *do* something to the viewer by their glossy animated display.⁵⁸ What one finds beneath this commercially decorated surface is a mere capitalist logic. As Imamura expresses, it is the "division of labor and scientific management of late nineteenth-century capitalism, the desire to animate and give value through the exchange

⁵⁷ Incidentally, the trope of raising the dead into life coincides with one of the meanings of translation in Wycliff's English of the Hebrew Bible's Book of Enoch: translation: "translatid from deeth to lyfe." See Susan Sontag, "On Being Translated," *Where the Stress Falls*, New York, Farrer: Straus and Giroux, 2001, 334-47.

⁵⁸ The meaning of "performative" here is taken after J.L. Austin in *How to Do Things with Words*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975.

of dead, reified things” (Driscoll 2002:283).⁵⁹ *Cowboy Bebop* not only sets its story in a world that’s saturated by commercial signs. By the means of its stylistic sign play, it also stages and dramatizes that saturated world.

Cowboy Bebop recycles common global images from the material world as well as images of itself. A group of three old men named Antonio, Carlos, and Jobim (a tribute to the renowned Brazilian composer Antonio Carlos Jobim) recurs in multiple episodes throughout the series,⁶⁰ representing the everyday bystanders in various places. In the *Bebop* movie, Andy Musashi, in his samurai outfit, proudly sits on his horse in a Halloween parade, along with Pokemon and Waldo (as in *Where’s Waldo?*). Part of the logic of representation implies a distance from the object represented. So, to re-represent self requires a distance from its represented self in the first place. The perceptual position, then, is away from its home frame. This re-representation can be read as a reflexive gaze, as compared to that of the migrant: the anime sees itself, realizing its own ephemeral identity as a commodity in the high-tech capitalist world. The recycling of images of the anime itself and other material objects in the world implies that the anime acknowledges its position in the global society.

So, we’ve taken a circuitous route and finally reached our starting point about reading “vertically,” penetrating *Bebop*’s high-art surface, to uncover its ambivalently disguised identity as a commodity in society. I cannot affirmatively say that it’s either fully disguised or entirely exposed. Here lies the cleverest trick of *Cowboy Bebop*: It

⁵⁹ This passage is quoted and translated by Mark Driscoll in “From kino-eye to *anime-eye/ai*,” from Imamura’s original text in Japanese, *Theory of Animation*, rev. edn 1992 (originally published in 1948), Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, pp. 16-17.

⁶⁰ The old man trio, Antonio, Carlos, and Jobim, makes an appearance in Sessions 1, 3, 7, 12, 14, 17, 22, 23, and the movie.

caters to people who are drawn to the high art, high culture propensity, e.g. a graduate student in expressive cultures; nevertheless, it doesn't lose touch with its low art, pop culture audience. *Bebop* deliberately blurs the distinction between high and low arts. Even though my occupational position in the academy allows my voice to critique this anime, other people not in this position may also consume and "read" the anime differently and legitimately. I don't suppose that my voice is superior to others. But what I do know is that there is no one correct position in the reception of such a text. The anime's potential for multivalent readings makes every reading a playful misreading. The playful performative reception can support that the anime either perpetuates or subverts the global commercial hegemony, or it either fears or celebrates globalization and commodification.⁶¹ Like most other anime and mainstream media forms, *Cowboy Bebop* is not serious; however, what makes it special is that it can be read with seriousness.

4.2 Misreading and transforming

Undeniably, *Cowboy Bebop* has affected the way I feel about my world, my world as geographically confined to an upland Southeast part of the US, and yet somehow ambivalently connected to the rest of the world via globally circulated information (e.g. via the Internet) and commodities (e.g. anime, coffee beans). I can't help but feel like there are more American signifiers than other signifiers in the anime. I feel like all the

⁶¹ Imamura commented that anime has a similar potential as the traditional art Japanese forms, such as the wood block prints of Edo and pre-modern picture scrolls, to escape from or even subvert social oppression. See Mark Driscoll's "From kino-eye to *anime-eye/ai*," p. 288. Along the same vein, Napier elicits the iconic appearance of *Akira* (a now anime classic) in a public area in Sarajevo, Serbia in 1993 as an act of political resistance. See *Anime*, pp. 4-5.

signs are hung on the skeleton of the US map—that is, I feel like the anime is critiquing American culture as it is transnationally disseminated and experienced. The pluralistic play can be read as a commentary upon the long-celebrated American notion of a melting pot or a salad bowl.⁶² Admittedly, this perception is seen through the lens of a graduate student who has been acculturated by the US experience. In this figuration, the US is the one that translates the world in its own image—sounds like old hat; the American imperialist Uncle Sam’s hat now sitting on the globe. But I think *Cowboy Bebop* takes this idea a step further to comment on the globalizing trend in the world as it’s becoming hegemonized by corporate American culture—in multiple re-interpreted ways. Here, my central argument is not that the US is entirely homogenizing the world, but that the non-US cultures have infinite ways to encounter and interact with the ubiquitous USAmerican-ness. *Cowboy Bebop*, as a text and a commodity, has exemplified this kind of pluralistic response. For the time and place being, I have attempted to show, through writing, that there exists an important agent who actively translates the world in his/her own image—the performative anime consumer, or the migrant misreader.

With a fear of the globalizing trend, I’ve decided to disconnect myself from the Internet to finish this composition, as an attempt to isolate myself in the locality of my surroundings in Central Virginia. Walking around Charlottesville’s Downtown Mall, I glance at a series of signs, including those for a pizzeria and a Chinese dumpling shop juxtaposed on the storefronts. On my left, I see Tom Cruise, a blonde haired, blue eyed samurai, on a poster for The Last Samurai; on my right, I run into Faye, standing like a

⁶² See “Postmodern modes of ethnicity” by Vivian Sobchack in *Postmodern after-images*, p. 113-128.

classic femme fatale on a flyer for last night's screening of the Bebop movie at the university's theater. I find a non-franchised coffee shop that does not serve Starbucks coffee. But inside the shop is a computer with a high-speed Internet connection calling me to reconnect to my virtual non-local contacts. I bring out my laptop and see the ever familiar Microsoft Word logo. Brian Eno's Microsoft Windows opening sonic theme jives with the shop's background music—a mix of bebop, Anglo-American rock, hip hop, acid jazz, Afro-Cuban pop, bluegrass, electronica, film soundtracks. Next to my laptop sits the Cowboy Bebop soundtrack with a cover that says "made in Taiwan." A man with a cowboy hat leaves the shop; then a woman walks in and takes a shot of the interior with her digital camera and then starts to browse the photography exhibit. The images on the walls instantly fly me to remote places like the Coliseum in Rome, the Eiffel Tower in Paris, the canal in Venice, "Les Miserables Palace," Notting Hill of London, Monticello in Charlottesville. Oh, I'm still here in Charlottesville. Thomas Jefferson's home in Monticello brings me back into reality from my uncanny audio-visual sign journey around the world.

Frankly, if there had not been the disorienting signs in *Cowboy Bebop*, I would have continued to misread all these global images around me as mere objects of difference, casting a rigid subject-object tourist gaze on them. Instead, I realize the uncanniness of these images as I reflect on my own migrant existence. The anime transforms my potential perceptual position of a tourist or a resident into that of a migrant *vis-à-vis* my transnational world. Like Jet, Spike, Faye, and Ed, I am a migrant, who "in this ephemeral high-tech Milky Way...live[s] to sustain [her] quest for the meaning of life while knowing subconsciously that such a singular meaning of life doesn't exist in

this pluralistic age bombarded by random surfaces of difference.”⁶³ Not only that, misreading *Cowboy Bebop* legitimates my role as an agent of the world—as someone who claims the randomness and uncanniness as her own in her reality, virtual or real.



Fig. 1: disorienting signs in Session 1
“Asteroid Blues”: in Tijuana

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⁶³ A quotation from the introduction of the essay, this is intended to echo the anime’s recycling of its own content.

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