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New Worlds of Animation: *Ulysses 31*, *The Mysterious Cities of Gold* and the Cultural Convergence of Anime in the West*

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In the early 1980s the then French-based television production company DIC produced two highly influential children’s cartoon series, *Ulysses 31* with Japan’s Tokyo Movie Shinsha (now TMS Entertainment), and *The Mysterious Cities of Gold* with Japan’s Studio Pierrot. Viewed today, these French–Japanese co-productions are fascinating examples of convergent media texts, convergent not only in terms of their production, but also in terms of their content—combining live-action documentaries with animation, blending science fiction with classical myth and adventure stories and mixing Japanese anime with European art styles. In this paper—and through these texts—I explore ideas of convergence culture in the pre-digital age and the broader implications such texts carry for textual production and dissemination in the increasingly globalised world of the future.

The age of globalisation . . . tends to deprive all ‘things’ of their origin and makes them hybrid.

Koichi Iwabuchi

For a generation of children growing up in Australia in the 1980s, the 4.30 to 6.00 pm weekday timeslot on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) was an introduction to entirely new worlds. Through series like *Astroboy*, *Star Blazers*, *Battle of the Planets* and *Voltron: Defender of the Universe*, Western audiences were first exposed to anime: *Tetsuwan Atom* (Mighty Atom), *Uchu senkan Yamato* (Space Cruiser Yamato), *Kagaku ninjatai Gatchaman* (Science Ninja Team Gatchaman) and *Hyakujuu ou Golion*. Even though these were anodised, dubbed and often heavily edited and re-written American versions, those young audiences must have felt as though they were connecting to something very different from anything they had seen before; as Paul Wells puts it (in relation to *Battle of the Planets*), ‘the sense of difference still extant in the program’s style and outlook signalled a different quality in the work . . . one that improved upon its American counterparts’. More particularly, the stories featured far more complex narratives than their American compatriots in the sense that there was real narrative development (characters fell in and out of love, characters died, lost fathers were rediscovered, references were made to previous episodes) and, even more surprisingly, narrative resolution. As a result they ‘assumed a high degree of possible maturity in [their] audience as well as catering for [their] younger clientele’ so even while featuring slapstick between robots, or ping-pong games between team-mates, they were still dealing with complex themes of sacrifice (even if the censors often spared audiences the actual deaths), gender and religion; an angel appeared in *Voltron*, the villainous Zoltar appeared to be a hermaphrodite in *Battle of the Planets* and failure always loomed large in *Star Blazers*.

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2. *Voltron: Defender of the Universe* actually comprised two unrelated anime produced by Toei Animation and Bandai: *Hyakujuu ou Golion* (which became the basis for ‘Lion Force Voltron’) and *Kikou kantai diarugger XV* (which became the basis for ‘Vehicle Team Voltron’); it is the Lion Force version that is best remembered and became the subject of the later CGI sequel *Voltron: The Third Dimension* (1998).


5. As the original Berg Katse was in *Gatchaman*.
But also screening on the ABC amongst these Westernised revisions\(^6\) were two more unusual series that are often missing from histories of anime: the Japanese–French co-productions *Ulysses 31* and *Mysterious Cities of Gold*, better known in Japan as *Uchu densetsu Yurishizu Satiwan* (Space Legend *Ulysses 31*) and *Taiyo no ko Esuteban* (Esteban, a Boy from the Sun) and in France as *Ulysse 31* and *Les mysterieuses cités d’or*. Both series were products of the then French-based television production company DIC. *Ulysses 31* being produced in connection with Japan’s Tokyo Movie Shinsha (now TMS Entertainment) and *The Mysterious Cities of Gold* with Japan’s Studio Pierrot. Viewed today, these French–Japanese co-productions are fascinating examples of convergent media texts, convergent not only in terms of their production, but also in terms of their content. In this paper I want to use these texts as a springboard to explore anime as a form of cultural convergence and the broader implications such texts carry for textual production and dissemination in our increasingly globalised world.

By convergence I refer to the coming together of what were once discrete media industries and texts. Following media theorist Henry Jenkins’ definition, convergence is ‘an ongoing process or series of intersections between different media systems, not a fixed relationship’.\(^7\) As a discourse, convergence first emerged in the 1990s around cultural studies and has most often been applied to the ‘technological, industrial, cultural, and social changes in the ways media circulates within our culture’.\(^8\) By referring to cultural convergence I am extending Jenkins’ definition of ‘a shift in the logic by which culture operates, emphasizing the flow of content across media channels’\(^9\) (emphasis added) to include content flows across nations and countries.

*Ulysses 31*

*Ulysses 31* was essentially a science-fiction retelling of the Homeric epic running for a truncated twenty-six episodes (down from fifty-two, owing to production difficulties) and debuting on 12 September 1981 on Luxembourg’s RTL channel.\(^10\) It is particularly well remembered from screenings in France (on FR3), England (on the BBC and Channel 4) and Australia (on the ABC), but it would not be until 1988 that it aired in Japan (and then in an even more truncated twelve-episode version). It also appeared in syndication in America as part of the DIC-produced Kideo TV block.

The plot revolves around the hirsute Ulysses of a futuristic, space-faring society offending the classical Greek gods (here, presented as floating, bearded, stone faces) by ‘killing’ the Cyclops (a one-eyed machine creature created by the god Poseidon) when he saves his son Telemachus and the psychic green-skinned alien child Yumi from the Cyclops’ disciples. By way of punishment, Zeus puts Ulysses’ crewmates (rather dubiously referred to as ‘companions’)—along with Yumi’s brother Numinor—into suspended animation. Ulysses’ spacecraft the *Odyssey* is then sucked through a black hole into another universe, Olympus, ‘beyond the wall of galactic ice’, where its databanks are deleted and Ulysses, Telemachus, Yumi and a robot support crew (including the token cute/annoying robot No-No) are doomed to wander aimlessly through space forever, unless they can find the Kingdom of Hades and the way back to Earth. Adding impetus to the trip is the fact that, in a variation on the legend, Ulysses must get back to Earth before the next comet passes, otherwise his wife, Penelope, will have to remarry.

Extradiegetically, the series is very much a convergent product. It was written by the French team of Nina Wolmark and Jean Chalopin, animated by Japan’s TMS and dubbed at Multidub International in Montreal, Canada. Several of the key Japanese staff came from an earlier series that was popular in both France and Japan—*Rose of Versailles* (Lady Oscar) and *The Super Dimension Fortress Macross*’ Shoji Kawamori and Studio Nue were responsible for several of the show’s spacecraft designs.

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6. Perhaps best defined by Wells as the ways in which ‘a text is literally transformed to accommodate indigenous economic and pragmatic needs, while facilitating a new model of programming’: Wells, ‘“Smarter than the Average Art Form”’, 28.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 283.
Diegetically, the series is also convergent. It is a hybrid concept, combining the classical Greek story *The Odyssey* with science-fiction action adventure set in the thirty-first century, literalised in the confrontations between the light-sabre-wielding Ulysses and the floating stone faces of the gods. The animation style is similarly convergent. While not stereotypically anime (in that the lead characters do not have the big eyes and small mouth so typical of anime characters and seem more in keeping with the relatively Westernised animation style Japanese studios use for American audiences, as in later series like the Sunbow-produced *MASK*), it still combines anime style machinery (robots, spacecraft, the *Voltron*-like ‘lion’ armour of both Ulysses and Telemachus) with European-style backgrounds (watercolour worlds, rainbow nexuses and abstract space stations) that would seem more at home in the pages of the French *bande dessinée* *Metal Hurlant* than a children’s cartoon series.

This convergent style was laid out by the original director, Tadao Nagahama, and preserved by the subsequent directors on the series when he died shortly after production of the first episode. It gives the Olympus universe an impressionist, almost dreamlike quality as demonstrated in the episode ‘Cronus, Father of Time’. Here Ulysses encounters the titular character, Cronus, who lives in a space station shaped like a sundial with a clock that controls all time in the universe. Attempting to stop Ulysses, Cronus starts to rapidly age Ulysses’ companions and traps Telemachus and Yumi inside the station. To save them, Ulysses ends up physically turning back the hands of the universe-controlling clock. This returns the *Odyssey* to the position it was in before Cronus captured it, reversing the aging of his allies and setting them all back on their voyages through Olympus.

Such an abstract solution is a common element of *Ulysses*. While trying to escape Poseidon’s armies in their Trident ships, Ulysses frequently encounters science-fiction updates on classical mythic figures like Herodotus, Sisyphus and the Sphinx, who are all to some extent trapped in repetitive cycles of servitude and betrayal through their fear of the gods. Ulysses is able to save some from this cycle (for example, Herodotus) while others remain trapped because of their greed (for example, Cronus) or pride (Sisyphus). The clear message here is the necessity for different people to work together, just as Ulysses, Telemachus, Yumi and the robots aboard the *Odyssey* must do. Where Ulysses’ offers to help are accepted, there is victory. Where they are not, there is defeat.

Ulysses thereby embodies a philosophy of success-through-convergence as potent as Ezra Vogel’s advocacy of *yokon-wasai* (Western spirit, Japanese technology). In *Ulysses 31* the Western spirit and Japanese technology combine to produce a truly hybrid anime product, where distinctive Japanese aesthetics and Western cultural forms and values coexist to be appreciated by both Japanese and Western audiences, that is thus capable of recuperation as part of a larger, global approach to the indigenisation of foreign culture.

*The Mysterious Cities of Gold*

In contrast to the futuristic *Ulysses 31*, *The Mysterious Cities of Gold* (1982) was set in the year 1532 and told the story of the orphan Esteban, a young boy rescued from a ship wrecked in a storm at sea, who joins roguish navigator Mendoza, sailors Sancho and Pedro, Inca girl Zia and, later, Tao, last descendant of the people of Heva, on a trip to the Americas in search of both the titular cities and the truth about Esteban’s father. *Mysterious Cities* debuted on 13 May 1982 (in Luxembourg) and ran for thirty-nine episodes concluding with the discovery (and destruction) of one of the seven cities of Gold and the apparent death of Esteban’s father, a priest in the city. It was written by the French team of Jean Chalopin and Bernard Deyries, loosely based on Scott O’Dell’s book *The King’s Fifth* (1966) and animated by Japan’s Studio Pierrot, overseen by both a French and a Japanese director.

Once again, diegetically, *Mysterious Cities* is a convergent text, literalised in the opening titles that feature the main characters (Esteban, Tao, Zia) over rotopscoped real locations. The series itself is also a hybrid: twenty-five minutes of fictional animation paired with a five-minute live-action documentary focussing on either a location, tribe or individual featured in the animation, creating a truly convergent blend of entertainment and education. This was because, as Mitsuru Kaneko, the man responsible for

11. Even appropriating the relevant *Star Wars* sound effects to underscore the light sabres.


Our initial impression was that for NHK our material would need to be of a more serious nature. We were quite reserved, even stiff in our initial conceptual approach but when we met with [the] NHK producer and director we were told that we could be quite free in style and even include robots and monsters, so we were able to relax and loosen our creative and stylistic approach.14

This lead to a serial hybridity, blending historical adventure (particularly in the earlier episodes) with science fiction, in the form of advanced (and potentially anachronistic) machinery including the Solaris (a solar-powered boat) and the Grand Condor (a giant, gold, mechanical condor that was similarly powered by the sun). As Bernard Deyries, the French director on Mysterious Cities, notes, it was the character of ‘Tao [who] brings knowledge of the future (along with comic relief with his parrot) . . . he comes from the lost civilisation of Mu . . . Tao is when you first meet science fiction’15 in the form of his ship, the Solaris. These science-fiction overtones reached a zenith towards the end of the series with the introduction of the Olmecs, based on the real pre-Columbian civilisation but clearly informed by Erich von Daniken’s theories of ancient civilisations coming from another world. Led by the ruthless Menator, the bald, pointy-eared and green-eyed Olmecs certainly looked alien and had suspended animation chambers and flying machines at their disposal. Deyries concedes that the ‘Science-fiction theme [was probably] a little stronger than what NHK would have liked’ but in truth the science-fiction elements were developed by the French as a way of making the series more ‘magical’ and ‘dreamlike’ (with the machines being Jules Verne-like in their execution) and by narrative necessity; machines like the Solaris and particularly the Grand Condor were the only way Esteban and company could expeditiously travel the great distances required.16

Under the guidance of character designer and image director Toshiyasa Okada, Kaneko notes: ‘We did not make it in the style of more typical Japanese animation of the time, we chose instead a European style. I think this is why it was more readily accepted in overseas markets without difficulty.’17 That said, the characters have a more ‘anime’ feel than those in Ulysses 31, with the children especially embodying the big eyes and small mouth approach to anime. While the characters are branded in the script as being Incan, Spanish, Mayan, etcetera, visually the malleability of the characters’ bodies serves to make them ethnically indeterminate. It means they can easily ‘speak’ different languages without the jarring incongruity of the poor lip-synching of dubbed live-action cinema. Moreover, their ‘cartoonish’ features (their big eyes and exaggerated body proportions) offer a mix of racial, cultural and gender characteristics that enable them to transcend national specificities. This indeterminacy is evident in the voice-over work, with Howard Ryshpan, the English dubbing director (and the voice of Mendoza) on Mysterious Cities, noting that not only were real children used to voice the children of the series, but all of the dubbed voices were Canadian because Canadian accents were deemed ‘neutral’ for both UK and American audiences.18

Japanese anime artists can easily soften, erase or replace a character’s Japaneseness, with the well-known manga and anime artist Mamoru Oshii suggesting that artists like himself unconsciously prefer to model attractive characters on ideal Western bodies rather than ‘realistic’ Japanese.19 Consequently, many characters in Japanese anime may appear as non-Japanese with different hairstyles and colours (Mendoza, Sancho and Pedro), large eyes (Esteban, Zia and Tao), and fantasy uniforms (the Olmecs). For analysts like Koichi Iwabuchi, this cultural erasure is a crucial factor in explaining the international success of anime, accounting as well for its dominant position within the Japanese anime industry’s

16. Ibid.
19. Oshii Mamoru, Ito Kazunori and Ueno Toshiya, ‘Eiga to wa jitsu wa animeshon datta’ [Film was actually a form of animation], Yuriika [Eureka] 28, no. 9 (1996): 50–81.
export philosophy. In *Mysterious Cities* this erasure becomes further problematised by the use of very French backgrounds, featuring lots of stylistic and architectural allusions to real European locations, leaving audiences with a hybrid text composed of French backgrounds and Japanese character designs.

As Mitsuru Kaneko explains, his desire to do *Mysterious Cities* was in part based on a desire to engage with a history other than Japan’s, in this case Spain and the Americas in the 1500s (inspired by O’Dell’s book). *Ulysses 31* can similarly be read as an engagement with history, this time the myths of Ancient Greece updated for a post-*Star Wars* audience. Indeed in one episode, Ulysses even encounters his classical namesake and travels back in time to Ancient Greece, with the ‘31’ of the title being revealed to be not only the century in which the series is set but also an indication that he is the thirty-first hero to bear the name Ulysses.

In both series, then, we are witnessing the indigenisation of the foreign by Japanese anime, that is, the adaptation of foreign places, characters and stories into the anime style. Scholars such as Iwabuchi have argued that Japanese cultural industries have long preferred to export ‘the process of indigenisation of the foreign’. It is my argument that these French–Japanese co-productions are important texts in the history of anime in the West not only because they make these indigenisation processes explicit, but because they highlight the way the convergent nature of anime can be deployed to maximise export opportunities, making anime truly transnational; I argue that *Ulysses 31* and *Mysterious Cities* illustrate this potential in three main ways.

1) *Through International Co-Financing*

DIC’s relationship with Japanese animators pointed to one of the ways in which anime could achieve global circulation: co-production. Strong relationships between Japanese producers and United States distributors had been in existence since the 1960s, where United States’ television stations broadcast many anime in the same year as they went to air in Japan, amongst them *Astro Boy* (debuting in 1963), *8-Man* (Eighth Man) (in 1965), *Gigantor* (in 1966) and *Speed Racer* (in 1967), but the French–Japanese co-productions of the 1980s marked a new level of cooperation. DIC’s French Director, Bernard Deyries, notes the development of DIC’s relationship with the Japanese animation studios through *Ulysses 31* and *Mysterious Cities* saying that this was ‘a new experience . . . [for the Japanese. Up until that point their] only experience with foreigners was to work for them, to be paid for work. This was a co-production, a new experience for us and them.’ This is something that would flourish particularly in the 1990s as Western (and principally United States-based) companies moved toward co-financing and worldwide distribution of anime. Examples would include the partial financing of the 1995 anime *Ghost in the Shell* by the United States-based anime distributor Manga Entertainment and its subsequent simultaneous screening in Japan, the United States and the United Kingdom; the 1996 undertaking by Buena Vista International (Disney’s worldwide distribution company) to provide worldwide distribution of Hayao Miyazaki’s theatrical anime *Princess Mononoke*, leading to their subsequent acquisition of the worldwide rights to distribute other anime from the Tokuma Shoten media group (parent company of Studio Ghibli, which produces Miyazaki’s anime); and the November 1999 Warner Brothers release of *Pokemon the Movie: Mewtwo Strikes Back* to 3043 theatres in the United States, making it the highest grossing anime in the United States to that time, with a total box office take of US$85 744 662.

Most recently, the early 2000s have been marked by a number of Hollywood movie companies acquiring the rights to remake several seminal anime series into live-action or digitally animated versions. Twentieth Century Fox released a live-action version of *Dragon Ball* (*Dragonball Evolution*) in early 2009 (13 May in Japan, 2 April in Australia and 10 April in the United States), while Warner Brothers has the rights to *Akira*, and (Hong Kong-based) Imagis Animation Studios released a digitally...

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animated movie of Astro Boy in October 2009. While there is little to recommend these remakes to anime fans, they do point to the textual mutability of anime, another key factor in anime’s global circulation that I will return to below. Being a live-action film, Fox’s Dragonball Evolution casts either Asian or Caucasian actors in the roles, demarcating Chi-Chi, Yamcha and Roshi as Asian (Jamie Chung, Joon Park and Chow Yun-Fat, respectively) and Goku, Piccolo and Bulma as Caucasian (Justin Chatwin, James Marsters and Emmy Rossum, respectively), whereas in the original anime (and manga) the characters remain ethnically indeterminate in much the same way that the characters in Mysterious Cities do.

The increasing co-financing of anime from transnational and multinational companies—such as Beuna Vista International and Manga Entertainment—reveals a tightly woven network of multinational investment in anime. Furthermore, the sale of anime’s licensing and distribution rights to foreign distributors plays an increasingly significant role in Japan’s anime industry, enabling domestication and transnationalism to occur. One result of these commercial forces is a growing de-nationalisation of anime, so characters become global icons, like Astro Boy or Pikachu, or resonate in particular countries (as Ulysses and Esteban do in Britain and Australia), increasingly becoming global commodities that seem familiar irrespective of national origin. That these anime can be promoted by marketing campaigns and easily appropriated by transnational audiences to become an appealing product in any domestic market makes anime one of the most attractive convergent commodities currently circulating through the media sphere.

2) Through Textual Malleability

But the transnationalism of anime depends as much on its content, its textual malleability, as it does on its financing, production and distribution by national, multinational and transnational organisations. Wells, for example, notes that animation has survived so long because of its ‘recombinancy strategies that enabled it to re-invent itself in a populist idiom and context in the post-theatrical era’, while as far back as 1979 Vogel was similarly pointing to Japan being ‘very flexible’ in its ability to adapt ‘to changed conditions’. These recombinant strategies essentially allow animation—and more particularly Japanese anime—to persist through hybridisation. Here the notion of hybridity refers to the process that occurs ‘when one cultural space absorbs and transforms elements for another, most often a strategy by which indigenous cultures respond to the influx of Westernised media content by making it their own’.

The textual malleability and hybridity of Ulysses 31 and Mysterious Cities, in terms of both their narratives and their design and how this enables them to indigenise the foreign, has already been covered earlier. But it is important to note that this malleability is really only possible because anime itself is a convergent product, in part informed by Japan’s indigenisation of foreign (Western) popular culture, creating a new drawing style known as gekiga, where distinctive Japanese aesthetics and Western cultural forms and values coexist (and are similarly capable of appreciation by both Japanese and Western audiences). This style developed because of the wide distribution of superhero and Disney comics and animation in Japan during and after its post-war occupation by the United States. Consequently, many elements of manga and anime style are heavily influenced by Western material, such as the large eyes and cute features of characters like Astro Boy. Tezuka Osamu, the manga no kamisama (God of Manga), openly acknowledged the strong influence that United States’ animators such as Walt and Max Fleischer had on his own work; when writing on the growth in Japan’s manga (comics industry), Tezuka noted that ‘[t]he Japanese comics industry first began to show signs of heating up . . . after World War II. Western comics were imported by the bushel full, and had a tremendous impact.’

Japan’s animation industry commenced in about 1956 (the establishment of Toei animation) and by the mid 1960s, locally produced manga and anime had become the most successful forms of domestic

26. Wells, “Smarter than the Average Art Form”, 27.
27. Vogel, Japan as Number One, 70.
31. Ibid., 11.
entertainment in Japan, so much so that domestic titles, such as *Doraemon* and *Sazae san*, actually challenged Disney and other United States animation. The eclipse of imported products by locally produced versions encouraged Japanese cultural industries to feel confident that it would be through exporting ‘the process of indigenisation of the foreign (West) rather than the export of the product per se that Japan [could] capture the attention of people in Asia’. It is anime’s inherent hybridity that allows its easy appropriation and domestication by geographically disparate local markets.

3) *As Convergence Culture*

Unsurprisingly, this means that anime has become a large part of Japan’s export culture. Iwabuchi notes: ‘Since the defeat of World War II, Japanese elites have always advocated a popular slogan. *Minshuka* (democratisation) in the 1950s, *kindaika* (modernisation) in the 1960s and *kokusaika* (internationalisation) since the 1970s . . . Of all these, *kokusaika* has been the most popular and lasted the longest’ and we can see this reflected, in part, in the idea of ‘*yokon-wasai*’ (Western spirit, Japanese technology). As an example, Iwabuchi points to ‘*katakana* . . . square Japanese syllables used mainly for words borrowed from foreign languages. The use of *katakana* both signifies an indigenisation of the foreign and marks a difference from Japanese tradition’. This is part of a larger tradition Iwabuchi identifies of indigenising both ‘tradition’ and ‘the Western’ where ‘the struggle with Westernisation is over. This is a self-confident self-Orientalisation, which boasts about its own cultural “hybridity”’. Just as Ien Ang urged Westernised overseas Chinese to take their hybrid identity positively, so too does Iwabuchi suggest that what is happening in Japan is ‘a similar celebration of hybridity . . . a Japanese hybridity [that] tends to essentialise “Japaneseness”’. The point then becomes not that Japan has been Westernised but, rather, as we have already seen in the examples of *Ulysses 31* and *Mysterious Cities*, it is the West that has been indigenised by Japan. This is something again reflected in Mitsuru Kaneko’s description of working on *Mysterious Cities* when he says that the 1980s were: ‘the heyday of such animation with so much under production at that time, especially science fiction . . . The discipline was that the work would have to be of a quality and standard good enough for overseas export.’ An open acknowledgement of the *kokusaika* slogan.

The dissemination of Japanese popular culture (including manga and anime) has been analysed by a number of scholars who tend to take one of two positions. First, that Japanese popular culture can be classed as a new form of cultural imperialism or Japanese soft power. Secondly, that these Japanese products are already hybridised and familiar to a globally dispersed audience because they lack a clearly identifiable Japaneseness in terms of national, racial or ethnic markers. This undercuts the reconstruction of Japanese national/cultural identity and therefore makes these texts incapable of either representing or promoting the Japanese lifestyle or ideals. However, I would argue that these positions need not be mutually exclusive and thinking of Japanese popular culture as a form of convergence culture actually enables us to reassess anime as a type of soft power that is made transnational through its hybridity. Despite its lack of obvious Japaneseness, anime still encourages an appreciation of Japan, as I will outline below.

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34. Vogel, *Japan as Number One*.
36. Ibid., 15.
37. Ibid., 3.
38. Ibid., 15.
40. Mitsuru Kaneko interview, ‘Production Documentary’.
In his study of the export strategies of Japanese audiovisual companies throughout the 1990s, Iwabuchi has identified three methods Japanese cultural industries use to disseminate cultural goods. First, they create standardised global products that appeal to different domestic markets. Second, Japanese ‘indigenises’ foreign cultural forms into its domestic culture, similar to the way in which television franchises (like Dancing with the Stars or Idol) can create appealing local versions. Third, they engage in a process of mu-kokuseki (literally, the absence of nationality) through which Japanese cultural presence is removed from export products like manga and anime, that is, the export product is de-nationalised. Indeed, in making this point, Iwabuchi cites cultural critic Toshiya Ueno’s notion that the Japanese nature of these export products stems from their very un-Japaneseness.

For Iwabuchi, this process of mu-kokuseki results in Japanese popular cultural products, which he refers to as ‘the three Cs’ (cartoons, comics and consumer technologies like computer/video games), becoming ‘culturally odourless’ (i.e. lacking in Japaneseness) and therefore more readily capable of being taken up by global cultures. By odour, Iwabuchi is referring to the odour of a cultural community produced by its ‘racial and bodily images of a country of origin’. A product’s cultural odour can therefore be measured by whether consumption of particular cultural products produces positive images of the country of origin (or certain ideas of a national identity). Anime is odourless because of the large Caucasian eyes and rainbow hair of most anime characters, modelled on Westerners so they do not look Japanese and therefore lacking that Japanese cultural odour (erasing nationality, erasing race), assisting their export and reception in the West. This leads Iwabuchi to conclude that the idea of Japan that so many anime fans long for is a largely virtual one, produced via this process of mu-kokuseki.

However, it is arguable that odour can come from more than just ethnic representation (or lack of ethnic representation). Iwabuchi, for example, neglects to account for racial or ethnic nuances that audiences (and particularly fans) may locate in other aspects of the text, as in narrative style, character behaviours and motivations, generic choices or the very format of anime itself. So in describing Robotech, Fred Patten notes that the series was actually pitched at Star Trek (science-fiction) fans rather than children, meaning that ‘the main complaints against the series—that it’s too hard for kids to understand, that there’s too much violence in it, that it’s controversial—aren’t particularly valid. It is supposed to be geared to teenagers and adults, not children’. Similarly, in reference to Eighth Man, Patten notes that anime was ‘more honestly violent than standard American cartoons . . . In American cartoons you can have frantic slugfests and nobody even needs a bandage.’ Both of these comments relate to elements of the text other than ethnic representation—particularly the emotional content: love, violence and loss. Similarly we could point to the relatively slow pace of Ulysses 31’s narrative, or its emphasis on family, love and loss, or the very ‘Japanese’ ambiguity of Mendoza’s character in Mysterious Cities (Japanese in the sense that male protagonists in anime, like the titular character of Vampire Hunter D, Captain Harlock or Tuxedo Mask from Sailor Moon, are often more ethically ambiguous than their Western counterparts, who tend to fall into neater good/bad dichotomies)—and its emphasis on family, love and loss—as carrying a very precise odour quite removed from their ethnically indeterminate representations.

Therefore, despite Iwabuchi’s assertions that anime is odourless, I would argue that there is still a recognition of difference when encountering anime, a sense that this is a new experience, a new world we as an audience are being exposed to, especially in comparison to other (animated and often Western) products. While it may not be an odour, it may perhaps be more particularly described as a resonance, that is, it resonates with its audiences in a different way to other forms of animation, whether anime in a ‘pure’ form (as in Spirited Away), edited and altered (as in Battle of the Planets) or a co-production (as in Ulysses 31 and Mysterious Cities). At the very least there is a maturity to anime, in its themes, narratives, characters and the expectations its places on its audience (to keep up with...

43. Iwabuchi, Recentering Globalization, 27.
44. Ibid., 28.
45. The American ‘revisioning’ of three separate anime series—The Super Dimension Fortress Macross, Super Dimension Cavalry Southern Cross and Genesis Climber Mospeada—into one narrative for Western audiences.
47. Ibid., 106.
narrative continuity) that is not present in comparable animation. Quite apart from the design, such narrative conventions mark out anime as something different.

It could be further argued that, especially since the Japanese government’s acknowledgment and acceptance of anime and manga as part of traditional Japanese culture, this virtual idea of Japan that Iwabuchi argues fans of Japanese popular culture long for is bleeding into the ‘real’ Japan, as in areas like Akihabara, Shibuya, Shinjuku or Harajuku, or in the building and display of a life-sized Gundam in Odaiba in 2009. This is in part engendered by the fact that ex-Prime Minister Taro Aso was himself a self-confessed anime and manga fan, allocating funds for a national anime, manga and media arts centre in Tokyo and funding the International Manga Award for foreign artists, with plans to create up to 500 000 new jobs in the popular culture industries by 2020.49

However, beyond this ‘virtual’ ideal of Japan, there exists a common fan story that the difference encountered in anime (whether pure, edited or co-produced anime) actually encourages audiences to seek out more Japanese cultural products (and often more ‘authentic’ or ‘real’ Japanese products), often culminating in a trip to Japan as the ultimate authentic experience.50 Therefore *mu-kokuseki*, this absence of Japaneseness, actually encourages audiences to seek out more about Japanese lifestyle and ideals, to fill the gaps in the original text. In this way Japanese popular cultural products like anime operate as convergent texts, transnational because of their textual malleability but still promoting appreciation of Japan as the nation of origin/production. In this way they actually do promote Japan’s image abroad because they encourage their audiences to engage in an ongoing series of media intersections, in search of the authentic or the real, that often culminates in an engagement with Japan itself.

**Conclusion**

Arguably, Japanese popular culture is increasingly becoming the popular culture of the world, a part of what Alice Crawford describes as ‘a broader cultural shift in which the styles of the Pacific Rim, specifically Japan, have become influential across a broad array of artistic practices’ including animation, toy design, filmmaking and comics.52 The Japanese External Trade Organization (JETRO) reported that the anime-related market in North America was worth US$2.829 billion in 2007.53 In relation to anime, *Pokémon*, *One Piece* and *Naruto* dominate television schedules in a way that *Voltron*, *Battle of the Planets* and *Star Blazers* did for an earlier generation. The United States-based Cartoon Network licenses many anime action series directly from Japan (including *Dragonball Z*, *Gundam Wing* and *Bleach*) and more and more American animation is adopting anime’s style—from the superflat style of artist Takashi Murakami, to the *chibi* styling of *The Powerpuff Girls*, to the anime styling of series like *Teen Titans* and the Matsuda *Batman*, to the anime-like narratives of *Avatar* or *Skyland*, to the anime sensibility of *Ben 10*—reflecting what Wells refers to as ‘the profound influence of Japanese aesthetics’.55

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48. This is outlined in the Japanese Ministry of Education, Sports, Culture, Science and Technology [Monkasho] White Paper of 2000 and the Keishano reports (2001). It also raises an interesting paradox, outside the scope of this paper: in accepting anime and manga as part of Japanese traditional culture, is the Japanese government acknowledging that traditional Japanese culture is a hybrid culture too? Or is this an attempt to obscure the hybridity of anime and manga in favour of presenting them as part of a purely nationalistic discourse?


55. Wells, “‘Smarter than the Average Art Form’”, 27.
For audiences in the West, anime is increasingly becoming generational; DVD releases invite the children of the 80s to relive the nostalgia of Ulysses’ struggle against the gods (and Esteban’s struggles in general) with a new generation of anime fans. Anime is increasingly participatory, too, as fans of the original anime are frequently behind these DVD releases and packaging design, encouraging their peers to interact in participatory communities that debate anime ideas and characters, indulge in cosplay (costume role play) and create their own hybrid manga/anime forms. And anime is increasingly global, with anime becoming a common language, a common currency, around the world, even if the series themselves are often reinterpreted in very different ways.

You will not find *Ulysses 31* or *The Mysterious Cities of Gold* referred to in any great detail in studies of anime. But in their own small way, these French–Japanese co-productions acted as signposts, pointing back to the ways anime originally developed as hybridised texts, and forward to the ways in which anime would recombine and adapt as part of the global convergence culture of today. Through co-production and textual malleability, matched with the ability to operate as soft power, anime may very well be the preeminent example of convergence culture operating in the world today—and for a generation of Australian children it all began with that recognition of difference on their television screens when *Ulysses 31* and *Mysterious Cities of Gold* first aired almost thirty years ago.