

**You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.**

**Earlier this year, I talked about how I first came across Godzilla on Channel 56 in Boston. If you're too young to have experienced the TV landscape before cable, there used to be only four networks including PBS. But there was this extra dial of channels you could surf through -- UHF channels -- that went to a hundred. Most of them were literally static. But every so often, you came across a channel that had really unusual stuff -- things you couldn't find on regular networks.**

**That's how I discovered the cartoon Star Blazers.**

**Or at least, that was the American name of the show. In Japan, it was called Space Battleship Yamato -- where it came out way before Star Wars.**

**Now I barely remember what was going on in my life back then, because I was in second grade. But I remembered that show vividly.**

**Each season had a huge story arc, like a TV shows today. It was set in a post-apocalyptic Earth where humanity's last hope was an old battleship sent into space. Actually the whole backstory was sung in the opening credits.**

**The show dealt with serious issues like war, sacrifice, honor. Characters died. The action sequences were amazing. But I was also fascinated by the look of the show. I remember knowing that it was Japanese, even though it was dubbed. And every character has the same basic face with really big eyes.**

**I had no idea that show was a big breakthrough for Japanese animation, or "Anime," until that point anime had the reputation of being silly stuff for kids. The art form only got more sophisticated. When I was in high school, the first critically acclaimed Japanese animated films came out -- the cyberpunk thriller Akira and Hayao (hi-YOW) Miyazaki's first masterpiece, My Neighbor Totoro.**

**But the movie that really stuck with me was Ghost in the Shell, from 1995. Until that point most of the sophisticated anime at that point was either**

about kids or for kids. This movie was unapologetically adult. It was rated R in for nudity and violence.

**Ghost in the Shell** is about an elite group of cops that are cyborgs. Their bodies are mechanical, but their brains are human -- organic. While they're chasing down bad guys and searching for a mysterious hacker, the main character -- a cyborg named Motoko (mo-TO-ko) Kusanagi -- grapples with the existential question of what does it mean to be alive.

The movie was so popular in Japan; it spawned sequels, and a TV series. Now there's going to be a live-action Hollywood re-make starring.... Scarlett Johansson.

The movie is still in production, but the studio released the first image of her, wearing a black wig. According to IMDB, she still has character's Japanese name, but in that image, she's just called "The Major," which is Kusanagi's rank on the force.

The backlash on the Internet was fierce. Here was another example of whitewashing – where Hollywood casts white actors in roles that should have gone to Asians or Asian Americans. The studio execs, when they're being blunt, will sometimes say, that they couldn't cast unknown Asian-American actress in a huge blockbuster movie? Which is total bullshit because they cast unknown white actors as the leads in big budget fantasy movies all the time. And if they don't cast Asian actors enough in any kind of movie, how are they going to become stars to begin with?

But then I came across this video posted by a Japanese vlogger called Yuta. He went up to people on the street in Japan, showed them the image of Scarlet Johansson, told them this was controversial in the U.S., and he asked could you guess why? People on the street looked baffled. They asked did the Americans not like her haircut? Did they want a better actress?

RK: The whitewashing thing has been a virtual non-issue here in Japan.

I asked Roland Kelts about this. He's the author of *Japanamerica*. He's half-Japanese and lives in Tokyo. He says for a lot of Japanese people, the idea of whitewashing is literally foreign to them because they have a thriving film industry with Japanese movie stars.

RK: There are some people here in the anime industry who laugh it off, they're going to make a mess of it anyway so who cares? The original will still be around. And on a deeper level it's anime, in some ways the tradition of anime is characters who are devoid of any specific racial background.

**Race is the elephant in room when it comes to Anime. Susan Napier teaches Japanese animation at Tufts University.**

SN: And without doubt the single most asked question I get whenever I give a general lecture is why are the characters in Japanese anime white or Caucasian. You'd think I'd be used to this talking about this 20 years, I'm surprised, I don't see them as causation I see them as anime.

**But how did that happen? Japan is a fairly homogeneous society. So why does Anime exist in a racial limbo?**

**To figure that out, we need to go back to the beginning, or at least the beginning of most modern stories about Japan – the end of the war.**

**That's just after the break.**

**BREAK**

**Anime films and TV shows are usually adapted from Japanese comic books or Manga, which became really popular after World War II. Manga is fan-paced and fun, but it's also influenced by traditional Japanese art.**

RK: The traditional Japanese scroll paintings you unfurl essentially each side from the scroll, opens up for you, read right to left, which the way Japanese stories are read and graphics are read, right to left, just like Manga today you read right to left.

**In the early 1960s, one of the first manga books to be adapted to animation was Mighty Atom. Or as he was known in the English-speaking world: Astro Boy.**

**Astro Boy was a good-natured little robot who fought bad guys and flew around with blasters coming out of his feet. His creator, Osamu Tezuka (oh-SAH-moo Te-ZOO-kah), was one of the first Japanese artists to imagine Anime as a brand with global potential.**

RK: He was big fan of Disney's work, especially Bambi, the early work, and he felt his characters should look either racially indistinct or Caucasian because that was the only way to reach global audience.

**It worked. His other shows like Kimba the White Lion were also global hits. Japanese animators copied him, and his style became the norm.**

EY: in many ways the Asian style or the Anime style is a riff on a Caucasian face and Western style of animation.

**This is the journalist Emily Yoshida. She says before World War II, most cartoon characters in Japan looked recognizably Asian.**

EY: After the war, there is -- I don't want to diagnose it too specifically but there is a self-effacement not having that image in the images that an average Japanese person would see. A lot of that is their toys and their products they're exporting couldn't feature face like that because it had become so synonymous with stereotypical sneaky evil Asian caricature you can see in horrifying propaganda from the time the States.

*Interesting to think the Japanese are very aware and when cultural products, you can trust us now. We're not those people.*

EY: The US famously took away army, signed treaty couldn't have army or military presence which still exists to this day -- they had to do a PR revamping at that time, so they made toys, they made things for kids, they made things that were fun, and in many ways the development of the anime face is the most benign style of representing a human.

RK: Now of course to any reader of manga or viewer of anime as they were released in Japan, the characters spoke Japanese they ate Japanese food, they behaved in Japanese way, they would bow, etc, it's not like viewer thought these characters aren't Japanese but in terms of racial identity they were fairly indistinct and that was partly a way of erasing the sense of constricted racial identity in a nation that felt ashamed and humiliated by the war.

**Anime is still wildly popular around the world. But the genre has distinctly Japanese themes. For instance, the backgrounds are not just backgrounds. They are hugely important in world building. Sometimes a director will dedicate several minutes of valuable screen time to establish a sense of**

**place, or the weather. If you've never seen Anime, that may sound boring, but it actually feels kind of magical.**

**Roland Kelts says Anime is also influenced by Shintoism, which imagines that every object in the natural world is inhabited by a spirit, or a pagan god. So when objects come to life in Anime, its not a big deal, or something a character would need to hide – like the toys in Toy Story who come to life in secret.**

RK: The whole concept of Transformers was created by a Japanese toy company in 1980s, the simple concept was these cars have spirits and that's very Shinto because the tenant in Shinto is animistic, the notion is that usually every object usually in nature but 1980s automobiles were part of natural world in Japan, if you will.

**Or the cyborg cops in Ghost in The Shell. Again Susan Napier.**

SN: One of the most brilliant parts of Ghost is almost 3-5 minute wordless sequences where heroine Motoko Kusanagi riding boat down canal and looking at people on the opposite shores and people on bicycles and rain comes down, rain drops on water and see her looking out in lonely contemplative way, and you imagine she's thinking about herself because she sees a mannequin, and then she sees woman who looks like her on a bridge, and she's trying to figure out where her place is as a cyborg in this world, which is still a human world but is technologically permeated. That's a very distinct aspect of J culture, a lot of things are unsaid, felt, seen or understood that are not totally conscious, not necessarily verbal.

**Another thing about Anime that's very Japanese -- you don't see the same distrust of technology as you do in Hollywood films --- the fear that HAL or the Terminator is going to take over.**

**On one hand, Anime is haunted by the atomic bomb – from Astro Boy's atomic heart to the weapons that wipe out neo-Tokyo in the film Akira.**

**But the fault usually lies in humans and their hubris. Technology itself is usually portrayed as benign because high tech was literally a live-saver in Japan, pulling the country of the rubble and turning it into an economic powerhouse, and the envy of the world by the 1980s.**

**A lot of Anime from that time period takes place in a society where technology is changing very fast. The past itself is a ghost. This new gleaming city is the shell.**

EY: That's not 100% wow everything is awesome, story that's like a lot of self alienation about not even recognizing yourself in some ways, that's what you see in '80s and '90s in anime this separate from body and a really fixation on youth too. And there's something about Japan feeling like a child, many people have written about, many artists talking about Japan like child who is looked over by this watch dog, this parent figure in US.

**Ghost in the Shell was based on a manga series from the '80s, but it was the first major Anime film made after the economy crashed, and there's a sense of melancholy lingering over the film.**

SN: Japan by the mid '90s was in a very bad recession, the post bubble decade, the lost decade, in the '80s this time of enormous economics growth and huge growth in consumer culture; that's all starting to crack in the '90s, there's this real sense among the Japanese, which is still even more obvious today, a sense of loss.

**When the debate first started about Scarlett Johansson playing Kusanagi, a few of people wrote that a Hollywood remake of Ghost in the Shell couldn't work because those themes are so specific to Japan.**

**But other people argued that Ghost in the Shell was meant to be a blending of East and West. The film was co-financed by a British company. The city in the movie is not Tokyo. It's based on Hong Kong, with English signs everywhere.**

**Susan Napier always thought the director, Mamoru Oshii (mo-MO-roo O-shee), had modeled the film after Blade Runner.**

SN: And when I met Oshii, I asked if he was influenced or inspired by Blade Runner he said, well of course! That goes without saying.

**In turn, his movie was a big influence on the Wachowskis, who pitched The Matrix to Warner Brothers by showing them scenes of Ghost in the Shell and saying, we want to do that.**

**The Matrix is still a Hollywood movie where computers are the bad guys. But the green digital numbers in the opening credits are a direct homage to**

**Ghost in the Shell, along with the image of people plugging cables into the back of their necks.**

EY: It's also dealing with ideas of being alienated from yourself and your body because of tech and because of a network, these character physically plug into network do surveillance, find criminals, in a way that predates our notion of the Internet by years and also addresses the feeling of alienation and not knowing where you are when you are plugged into this network, it predicted concerns we're talking about now.

**In fact, Ghost in the Shell was so influential -- if you see it today for the first time, you might feel like you've already seen it before.**

**But Emily Yoshida is most interested in how Ghost in the Shell uses the racial ambiguity in Anime. Take the main character herself.**

EY: She's a human person of most likely Japanese origin, she grew up Japanese we are to assume, so she hadn't lived in her own body for what we can assume are years, at least her whole professional life as a security officer.

**The movie cleverly plays with this idea by making the cyborgs look like typical Anime characters with big blue eyes or blonde hair. In contrast, the humans are unmistakably Asian. And when a Caucasian American character shows up, Kusanagi asks, who's the white guy?**

**Emily's mother is Caucasian. Her father is Japanese. She was born in Japan and raised in the U.S. When she was in high school, she was thrilled to discover Anime because it was something she could claim as her own that the other kids thought was cool.**

EY: Especially in the '90s you're not seeing any representation of Asian people in any other popular media, maybe if the anime characters don't have physical faces of Asian people but they speak Japanese, they have Japanese last name, I thought last name was weird and now here's something where the entire credits weird names like mine. You know? (laughs)

**That's why Emily wrote an article for website The Verge on why Scarlet Johansson's casting is troublesome for her – and not just because of the issue of whitewashing.**

EY: I'm not unhappy with casting because she's Caucasian, I think you could cast anyone of any race and I think it would read thematically. I think what strikes me about Kusanagi she's supposed to be huge, she's supposed to be this super powerful, her body is created to fight crime and chasing down criminals, she's a machine, and so I think of SJ even though a stunt double does her martial arts work for her in Avengers movie, I think petite not this broad shouldered Amazon of woman that I think you're supposed to understand Motoko to be.

*You said in the article I can't imagine anyone playing her but me, see yourself?*

EY: I always felt tall, and I think said that specially because I feel tall growing up, my dad was tall for Japanese guy, and my mom was Caucasian, I'm half Asian but none things stereotypically Asian don't embody any of them. I mean my mom used to coordinate exchange group with high school kids from Japan, so I would spend summers with Asian teenagers, all girls, so 40 high school girls, I remember being a foot taller, so awkward, even though younger than them, I was like oh my God, I'm such a beast, this character Japanese but had this enormous body (laugh) that why it resonates with me.

*I could totally chase criminals.*

EY: I should get good at running – oh wait.

*And leaping off buildings backwards.*

EY: Get good at backflips, then I might have a career.

**In the end, Scarlett Johansson could give a great performance. This type of character is definitely in her wheelhouse. At least her casting has made more people aware of whitewashing. We'll see if it made a difference. There are many more live-action adaptations of Anime films is the works, including a live action version of Akira. At one point, Chris Evans and Joseph Gordon-Levitt were going to play the leads. They are no longer attached to the project.**

**One of the things that I like about Anime is that back and forth cultural flow – where you're not sure what is uniquely Japanese or Western. When it's done right, it doesn't feel like cultural appropriation. It feels like a two-way street. And I love visiting a place where everything feels so familiar and so foreign at the same time.**



**Well, that's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Roland Kelts, Susan Napier and Emily Yoshida.**

**Starting this week, Imaginary Worlds is now on Patreon, which is a crowd funding website. I can use all the help I can get in making this podcast financially sustainable. Plus, I have a couple cool rewards up there too.**

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