

Heidi in Japan

What do *anime* dreams of Europe mean for non-Europeans?

Examining mechanisms through which *anime* narrative became naturalised in non-Asian countries teaches us much about how non-Hollywood, non-Western cultural globalisation happened. Before *anime* became cool, it had braved knee-jerk dismissal and it frequently did so by entering the international market via traditionally underrated genres such as children's television, with stories set in Europe or adaptations of European children's books. However, as Cobus van Staden explains, this strategy was also prefigured by a long tradition of Europhilia in Japan, which significantly complicated the reception of *anime* both in Japan and abroad.

Cobus van Staden

TAKAHATA ISAO'S ANIME ADAPTATION of Johanna Spyri's 19th century novel *Heidi* is a good example of both Europhilia in Japan and acceptance of *anime* outside of Asia. *Heidi, a Girl of the Alps* (*Arupusu no Shōjo Haiji*, Japan, 1974) became a hit in Japan and ended up dubbed and syndicated around the world, including South Africa, which is where I first encountered her.

Heidi retains a potent nostalgic power that is fundamentally related to its depiction of an Alpine life most audience members have never experienced. However, the meaning of this European setting becomes highly unstable in different contexts, an instability I hope to describe in this article.

Heidi in Japan

The fashion for European settings was sparked in the 1970s by the 1972 *Shōjo* (girls') manga hit *The Rose of Versailles*, and its anime adaptation (*Berusa no Bara*, Nagahama Tadao and Dezaki Osamu, Japan, 1979). The same decade brought *Sekai Meisaku Gekijou* (World Masterpiece Theatre) a series of anime adaptations of Western children's classics produced by Zuiyo Eizou (later Nippon Animation.) It represented a major Japanese move into the European market and included *Moomin*, *The Dog of Flanders* and *Anne of Green Gables*. Takahata's *Heidi* was a particularly successful part of this series.¹

Subsequently, European settings have shown up in anime regularly, varying from relatively realistic depictions of Victorian England (*Emma – A Victorian Romance* [*Eikokukoi Monogatari Ema*, Kobayashi Tsuneo, Japan, 2005]) to using 19th century Europe as a setting for a robot invasion (*Steamboy* [*Suchiimuboi*, Ōtomo Katsuhiro, Japan, 2004]). These depictions also vary in terms of geographic specificity. Whereas, for example, Miyazaki Hayao's *Kiki's Delivery Service* (*Majo no Takkyūbin*, Japan, 1989) is set in a bricolage-Europe, seemingly assembled from bits of European cities all the way from Helsinki to Naples, *Heidi's* Alpine setting is very specific. In fact, Miyazaki Hayao worked as a background designer on *Heidi* and even went on a research trip to Switzerland in order to render the setting accurately, a detail which was used in the marketing for the series in Japan.²

'Everyone's beautiful, enchanted country'

It is worthwhile asking why European settings retain such power, compared to the relative scarcity of American settings in *anime*. While I don't want to opine on how Japanese people relate to Europe, it is interesting to compare depictions of Europe in earlier Japanese pop culture to its depiction in contemporary *anime*.



In 1927, and again in 1947 and 1957 revivals, the all-female Takarazuka theatre troupe put on a revue called *Mon Paris*. A travelogue with scenes depicting exotic locales from Tokyo to Paris, the show epitomised what Jennifer Ellen Robertson characterises as Japanese orientalism. Most of the scenes were set against exotic backgrounds such as Ceylon and Egypt, portrayed less as societies and more as a series of static essences (the Egypt section, for example, featured a Cleopatra-like queen). When the travellers reach Paris, they find bustling crowds, the dynamic modernism contrasted with sleeping Asia. They decide to take in a revue, only to find that *Mon Paris* is also on in Paris – the French have imported Takarazuka. One of the travellers remarks that Paris and the whole of France is like Takarazuka – 'everyone's beautiful, enchanted country; a country of dreams smoldering since childhood.'³



How did *Heidi's* portrayal of Europe and its cultural specificity relate to its popularity? When I put this question to those I interviewed, I received diametrically opposed answers. On the one hand several respondents felt the power of the Afrikaans dub made people feel that the series was their own. Marida Swanepoel, who was involved in the acquisition of children's programming, said the series gave one the feeling that it had originally been made in Afrikaans. That was certainly what I thought as a five-year old Heidi fan. On the other hand, several respondents also suggested that the European setting was a crucial contributing factor to its popularity. Kobus Geldenhuys, who translated the script, felt that the setting appealed to Afrikaners' cultural roots. Rina Nienaber suggested that Afrikaners of the era didn't really feel that they were living in Africa at all. Due to the overwhelming Eurocentrism of apartheid education, the Alps felt much less exotic than South Africa's neighbouring states.

It seems to me that *Heidi's* success is related to Afrikaners' conflicted relationship with Europe. At the exact moment when Western Europe was leading the campaign to isolate the apartheid regime and to dissociate itself from its colonial creation, Afrikaners were using dubbing to insert themselves into a 19th century European landscape. The theme tune, which fused Afrikaans lyrics with mock-Swiss yodeling became a symbol of apartheid's attempts to proclaim itself as simultaneously



Europe's heir and peer – much to the distaste of actual Europeans. The irony of course is that this was facilitated by Japanese animation. An additional irony is that several of the people I interviewed did not actually realise *Heidi* is Japanese. Several of them assured me that the series was actually German.

Anime dreams of Europe

How is it possible for one *anime* series to evoke such wildly divergent meanings? I think the non-European audience's encounter with this onscreen Europe is less related to their knowledge of actual Europe than with their perception of this setting as 'beautifully past'. This is a version of what Arjun Appadurai has called 'nostalgia without memory'. The power of Europe in this series lies not on the level of intelligibility but on the level of appeal. It functions by building atmosphere and providing background. Appadurai has argued that this nostalgia – not driven by actual experience but rather by its lack – is fundamental to contemporary marketing:

"Rather than expecting the consumer to supply memories while the merchandiser supplies the lubricant of nostalgia, now the viewer need only bring the faculty of nostalgia to an image that will supply the memory of a loss he or she has never suffered. This relationship might be called armchair nostalgia, nostalgia without lived experience or collective historical memory."⁶

I believe that the power of Europe in *anime* should not simply be understood as the continuing power of Europe itself in the imagination of the world. It is worth asking whether fictional Europe's power as 'everyone's beautiful, enchanted country' might not point to the power of capitalism to create the illusion of memory out of the absence of memory. In that case, contemporary Europeans might be as alienated from – and yet strangely connected to – these images as the rest of us.



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Notes

1. Yamaguchi, Y. 2004. *Nihon Anime no Zenshi: Sekai wo Sei Shita Nihon Anime no Kiseki*, Tokyo: Ten-Books
2. Oshiguchi, T. 'Interview with Hayao Miyazaki' in Ledoux, T. (ed.) 1997. *Anime Interviews: The First Five Years of Animerica Anime and Manga Monthly*, San Francisco: Cadence Books
3. Robertson, J.E. 2001. *Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan*, Berkeley: University of California Press
4. This point was first brought to my attention by the Swiss scholar Alain Bihl and I later also encountered it in Hunt, P. et al (eds). 1996. *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, London: Taylor & Francis
5. See <http://www.tvsa.co.za/forum/archive/index.php?t-6094.html> (last accessed on April 25 2008)
6. Appadurai, Arjun. 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

While the regularity with which European settings recur in *anime* would indicate that Europe retains an emotional power in Japan, two important differences emerge between *Mon Paris* and *Heidi*. Firstly, in *Mon Paris*, Europe represents burgeoning modernity and Asia sleepy timelessness (with Japan symbolically making the passage from one to the other.) However, in *Heidi* and the vast majority of *anime* series with European settings, the site of timelessness is Europe, not Asia. There are very few *anime* depictions of contemporary Europe. Mostly, Europe is treated as a changeless Ruritania, where the use of historically European detailing and landscapes designates the setting as 'beautifully past.'

Secondly, the Takarazuka revue depicted the implied validation of Japan in Europe through the fantasy that Takarazuka is also popular in big, modern Paris. *Heidi* however, doesn't mention Japan at all – it doesn't need to. The characters might speak about their yearning for the Alps, but they do so in idiomatically correct Japanese. Even the very European class divisions between the characters are principally expressed through the use of different politeness registers in spoken Japanese. There is no need for an explicit Japanese presence in *Heidi* because it is infused with 'Japaneseness' from within. The *anime* version of *Heidi* represents a remaking of a European children's classic in Japanese terms. Johanna Spyri's original novel was a standard of Swiss primary school curricula. Its representation of the Alps as a life-giving force and Heidi's decline after being taken to Frankfurt was used to strengthen Swiss self-identification in relation to its powerful neighbour.⁴ The anime adaptation, however, does not demand such specific knowledge about Europe. For example, it doesn't even emphasise that Frankfurt is in a different country than the Swiss Alps. Switzerland has changed from an actual place with its own politics to a fantasy territory, primarily created for the pleasure of Japanese consumers. The evolution from *Mon Paris* to *Heidi* offers a coded snapshot of how Japanese attitudes vis-à-vis European power changed against the background of Japan's own economic ascendance during the 1970s.

Heidi in Africa

The story of Heidi's consumption in South Africa is intimately linked to apartheid-era local content law, which demanded equal broadcast time in English and Afrikaans. This led to a burgeoning dubbing industry. Because the history of popular culture and dubbing in South Africa is largely undocumented, I base my discussion of *Heidi* in South Africa on a series of interviews I conducted in 2008 with people who were directly involved in the dubbing of *Heidi* into Afrikaans.

When *Heidi* was originally broadcast in 1979, it became a South African phenomenon. Rina Nienaber, who provided the voice of Peter the Goatherd described how she was approached for interviews by several magazines and was featured in a special inset on *Heidi* in *Huisgenoot*, South Africa's most popular weekly magazine. On a web discussion forum dedicated to South African pop culture, I found the following comment from an anonymous contributor: 'Heidi – it was on Tuesday night at 7 o'clock. Even our school never arranged anything for Tuesday nights because no-one came as everybody was watching Heidi. Lol'.⁵ Heidi wasn't just popular with children – it became a multi-generational hit. Nienaber told me she heard the rumour that B.J. Vorster (South Africa's Prime Minister from 1966 to 1978, whose reign saw the bloody suppression of the 1976 Soweto Uprising and the killing of Steve Biko) never scheduled meetings on Tuesday nights because he was watching *Heidi* with his grandchildren.



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