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The Two-Way Cultural Street

The influence of US popular culture in the Korean Wave and Japanese *anime* and viceversa

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Abstract

The history of colonization has been marked by the Orientalist rhetoric used by Eastern empires to justify the invasion and colonization of the West. In the 20th century, the United States recycled this rhetoric to exercise their own version of imperialist rule through military occupation. Two of the earlier examples of this new form of imperialism are South Korea and Japan. As a result of the United States' domination, these countries' societies were remodeled according to the American ideal. They also received a constant flow of American culture that came to influence their own cultural productions. Today, thanks to their knowledge of US popular culture, Korean and Japanese cultural industries are able to manufacture products that specifically target US audiences, but differ in their strategies. On the one hand, Korean products portray their country as an outcome of US influence, by introducing references to US culture along with allusions to the Korean one. Depicting Korea as culturally hybrid has resulted in an acceptance that can be seen in the widespread popularity of Korean products, a popularity termed "The Korean Wave". In the US, the most famous product of this Wave is K-Pop, as represented by the success of the band BTS. On the other hand, Japanese products are culturally odorless, i.e. they lack any trace of their Japanese origin. This is the case of *anime*, whose characters and themes have a transnational nature that favors self-identification regardless of nationality. Because of this, *anime* shows were very popular in the US and have become a major influence for the evolution of American cartoons. These went from mere copies of *animes,* to original *anime*-influenced productions, as displayed by long-term franchises like *Voltron*. Nowadays, these products flow into US markets through the connection established during occupation days, effectively turning US cultural relations with South Korea and Japan into a two-way street.

Keywords: American Imperialism, Japan, Korea, culture.

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1. Introduction: Orientalized visions of South Korea and Japan

Throughout history, Eastern empires used an Orientalist rhetoric to justify the invasion and colonization of the West. The Palestinian-American professor Edward W. Said argued that the 'Orient' was an artificial concept that encompassed everything non-Western. Thus, the Oriental became a negative image of the Westerner, an enemy to be defeated and dominated (2-5). From their power position, colonizers continued to make use of this discourse to fabricate essentialized images of the West. These images would become embedded in the Western psyche and changed over time, depending on what the West required of the Orient: a source of inspiration for the Romantics, savages to be civilized for colonialists, etc. (5-7).

The same Orientalist discourse was recycled by the US in the 20th century, as it exercised its own version of imperialist rule. Despite its lack of colonies strictly speaking, the United States have managed to exert their influence in other countries through military occupation. Hence it is no wonder that the territories classified as 'Oriental' have had a truculent military history with the US. These include countries such as Afghanistan, Vietnam, China, Indochina, Korea[1] and Japan. Of these, South Korea and Japan are perhaps the earliest examples of the American[2] imperialist rule. The imperialist nature of US occupation lies in the representations of these countries produced by the US. These representations have clear Orientalist undertones, given that they varied depending on what the US required of Japan and South Korea.

In the case of Korea, 20th century accounts by American travelers described Korean society as disgusting because of its contrast with the US. Korean citizens were presented as penniless dog-eating barbarians (Lee 2-3). After WWII, the US military occupation of South Korea established an alliance and Koreans came to be seen under a paternalistic light: they might have sunk in insecurity due to their recent history, but deep inside, they are respectable people (Lee 13-16). Although "*positive* in its bias" (Lee 4), this representation of South Koreans still served American purposes: emasculation and weakening of the Others was necessary to guarantee the superiority of the Ones.

[1] In this paper, the names 'Korea' and 'South Korea' will be used interchangeably.
[2] In this paper, the word 'America' will be used to designate the United States of America.

As for the perceptions of Japan, they are much more complex. Initial stereotypes of East Asians in the mid-19th century, presented them as job snatchers with alien cultures and languages. During WWII, the US propaganda dehumanized Japanese citizens by representing them as a sneaky and murderous simian race (McKevitt 18-31). But once both countries became allies, what happened in Korea repeated itself: to satisfy the American delusions of grandeur, the Japanese were portrayed as subservient, vulnerable and in need for US' assistance in modernizing the country. However, in the 1990s the downfall of American economy was blamed on the consumption of Japanese products. A wave of anti-Japanese rhetoric, termed "Japan bashing" or "Japan panic", recycled WWII propaganda that depicted the Japanese as subhuman (McKevitt 3-4), racist, anti-democratic and culturally incompatible with Americans (McKevitt 31-34). At the end of the 20th century, this panic and its negative views of Japan vanished into thin air as the downfall of Japanese economy rendered it harmless for American hegemony (McKevitt 15).

The dominant nature of US occupation can also be seen in the changes that affected South Korean and Japanese societies. The US imperialist agenda included remodeling local societies according to the American ideal and introducing American culture. Because 'Americanness' was equated with high status, US popular culture became a major influence for local cultures. This knowledge would be used later on by Korean and Japanese cultural industries to manufacture products that specifically target US audiences. These products would flow into US markets making use of the connection established during occupation days, effectively turning US cultural relations with Korea and Japan into a two-way street.

In this sociocultural context, this paper is aimed at analyzing the way in which Korean, Japanese, and American cultures converge in the products of mass entertainment produced by Korea and Japan. Mass entertainment has been deemed the best subject for this analysis, because it is where this convergence is the most evident, and because of the power that this medium has in shaping our societies.

As for the reasons why I have chosen these countries in particular, there are three. Firstly, because despite their differences, they share the bond of being two of the first countries subjected to waves of US culture during a period of military occupation. Secondly, because although their cultural products are heavily influenced by American

popular culture and are specially manufactured to appeal American audiences, they have chosen strategies that are diametrically opposed but equally successful approaches. And thirdly, because although the strategies are different, the outcome remains the same, that is to say, South Korean and Japanese pop cultures have influenced American culture in an unprecedented way for a country that used to be under US' imperialist rule.

This paper will be divided in two blocks, one dealing with the Korean and other with the Japanese case. Each block will include the historical and cultural backgrounds for the relationships between the US and the corresponding country. Finally, the general analysis will deal with the manifestations of popular culture that I consider more popular in the US, with their corresponding representative cases. On the one hand, I have chosen BTS as a representative for the Korean Wave, because currently, they are the most successful K-Pop band in the US. The analysis will address the group's lyrics, dancing moves, garments and imagery from the perspective of their cultural origins. On the other, I have opted for the *Voltron* franchise as a representative case for *anime*, because its broadcasting history spans the latest 40 years, which renders it ideal to study the change in the trends of American animation. This part of the work will be devoted to analyze the cultural influences that determined the characters and plotlines of the first and last installments of this franchise.

In this way, I hope to prove that South Korean and Japanese cultural elements have become an important part of American popular culture and that it is their knowledge of the US that allowed them to do so.

2. The case of South Korea: The Korean Wave

2.1. What is the Korean Wave?

The term "Korean Wave" or *Hallyu* was coined in the 1990s by the Chinese press, to denote the popularity of South Korean popular culture abroad (Oh 53). Unlike its Japanese counterpart, this was a result of premeditated measures that the Korean government implemented to revive its economy. After the 1998 economic crisis, cultural industries were given priority in the government budget (Kuwahara 1-2). In order to stimulate foreign interest in Korean culture in a non-threatening manner, the Korean government fabricated their cultural products, such as film and television, with international audiences in mind (Walsh 13). These products were distributed and

consumed by said audiences, thanks to the Internet and social media, especially YouTube (Kuwahara 1-5).

From the successful broadcasting of television dramas in China, interest in Korean popular culture has recently shifted to music, a shift termed “Second Wave", which is characterized by “group performances driven by dance music and groomed music agents” (Kuwahara 2-3). Korean pop music or K-pop is influenced by American culture, such as hip-hop and the star making system they inherited from Hollywood (Kuwahara 5).

In this way, the “Brand Korea” was created: “a worldwide brand comprising national image and identity as well as traditional Korean popular culture elements” (Ter Molen 155). Nevertheless, the products of the Korean Wave are considered inauthentic essentializations of Koreanness, because they depict Korean culture as a mere receptacle of Western influences (Oh 54). Indeed, they adopt multiple elements from American media, recreate them to appeal a greater audience and promote them under the label “Korean” (Kuwahara 3-7). In the most Orientalist fashion, producers of K-pop and K-dramas represent a Korea based on American’s own vision of what the country is: a subject to US’ soft power.

2.2. American Imperialism and Korean Media

The first time the US interfered in Korea on a large scale was in 1882, attracted by the island’s natural resources and its susceptibility to being Christianized (Kuwahara 6). Relationships were broken during WWII, due to US’s support of the Japanese invasion of Korea. But they were reinstated once again after the war, in the shape of military deployment. US troops were supposed to prevent the spread of the communist regime that had already been established in the north of the country. But when the North attempted reunification by invading the South in 1950, US forces joined the South in the civil war against the North. At the end of the Korean War in 1953, American troops were stationed in the border with the North as a preventive measure. Diplomatic relations between the US and South Korea were stable through the 1970s, as the US provided economic aid and instructions to help Korea overcome its economic crisis (Ter Molen 150-152). The implicit payment was Korea’s military support in the Vietnam War (Lee 49). Once the country grew economically and militarily, American assistance was no longer needed. Hence, in the 1990s South Korea was demilitarized. This was

also a result of the incipient anti-American sentiment, which sprang from the failure of American authorities to punish the crimes carried out by the troops stationed in Korea (Ter Molen 152-153). Nevertheless, as economy collapsed the US assisted its ally again economically, under the condition that Korea liberalized its markets and reshaped its economy following the American model (Ju 34). Thus, Korea overcame another crisis and diplomatic relations between both countries remained peaceful.

As a result of US-Korea diplomatic relations, Korean society underwent a series of changes. American values such as democracy, the American dream and the myth of "rags-to-riches", contributed to dismantle the Confucian society that established an unbreakable hierarchy, by eliminating the different strata (Lee 21). Because they were aware of US' role in lifting their country out of poverty by providing economic help, Koreans came to see everything American as a symbol of status (Lee 57). Besides, the American media became a source of ideas for Korean media. For instance, Korean radio stations used the US as a source of inspiration and in fact, the most popular radio program in the 1960s was based on the American quiz show "What's My Line?". Through the radio, the Korean youth came in contact with American hits and sent requests to play American musicians' songs, such as Elvis Presley and Simon and Garfunkel. US television basically became the blueprint for the creation of Korean entertainment shows and the cinematic archetype of the rebellious teenager, represented by James Dean and Marlon Brando, led to the creation of a new movie genre in Korea: "youth movies". However, the influence of American culture was not always seen with keen eyes. Many were disapproving of the liberal values the US products depicted, because they violated Korean traditional values. In order to make American movies and shows more fit to Korean morality, authorities resorted to censorship (Lee 71-80).

Thus, through its many contacts with Korean society, American imperialism reshaped Korean pop culture, by enforcing consumption and recreation of their cultural products. Nevertheless, the difference in values between both countries made it necessary to modify said products, so that they became more acceptable to the general public.

2.3. The Korean Wave in the US

It has already been acknowledged that the American cultural hegemony in Korea in the second half of the 20th century was the finger that triggered a reinvention of Korean

culture, thus giving birth to a new cultural and national identity, a version of Koreanness which reconciles Confucian and Western values. Such transformation was brought about by diverse economic, cultural and military policies that the United States imposed on the Korean government, which allowed the free circulation of American cultural products (Ter Molen 154). While this permitted that American power over Korea was maintained even after demilitarization, it also propitiated the entrance of Korean products into the American market.

Among other ways, the Korean Wave arrived to the US in the shape of cinematography. American scholar Ter Molen identifies Koreans stationed in the US from the 1970s onwards, as the first consumers of "premium cable and satellite channels, bootleg DVDs, and electronic file sharing" (159). With time, the target-demographic diversified as Korean films and TV shows became popular among non-Koreans too. Perhaps the most evident proof is the vast amount of Korean dramas - often referred to as K-dramas or *doramas* – that are available on the online streaming platform *Netflix*: as of January 4th 2019, the website *What's On Netflix* lists 435 K-dramas on *Netflix* (Robinson n.p.). It has also licensed numerous Korean movies and even invested in the film *Okja*, an American and Korean coproduction ("*Okja*" n.p.).

Netflix is also involved in a series of projects related to Korean animation. For instance, it intends to produce a live action of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (Hernandez n.p.), a cartoon animated by outsourcing Korean studios ("Avatar: The Last Airbender" n.p). Thus, Korean animation has managed to make a place for itself in American television with excellent results. For instance, the sequel of the aforementioned *Avatar, The Legend of Korra*, scored 8,4 in *IMDb* ("The Legend of Korra" n.p.). Such success has been partly attributed to the favorable portrayal of its female bisexual lead character, who is in a relationship with another woman (Baker-Whitelaw 5-10). This may be considered a triumph for members of the feminist movement and the LGBTQ collective. In this way, Korean animation has become one of the many channels through which the new generation of US youth receives new ideologies.

But *Netflix* is not the only path through which Korean cinematography has found its way into American markets. One of the earliest examples is that of *Il Mare* (2000), which reached the US in the shape of a rather profitable remake. *The Lake House* (2006), starring Sandra Bullock and Keanu Reeves, produced revenues of around $52

million in the US alone ("The Lake House" n.p.) and went on to become a classic in American popular culture: it has been referenced repeatedly in US TV shows, i.e. *The Big Bang Theory* or *Community*. Since then, the US has continued to remake and screen Korean films. For instance, the Korean film *Old Boy* enjoyed a moderate success in the US ("OldBoy" n.p.). But on the contrary, its American remake by Spike Lee flunked in the box office ("Old Boy" n.p.). Finally, the most recent instance, *Train to Busan* (2016), has grossed more than $2 million in the US ("Train to Busan" n.p.). In fact, *New York Times* reporter Jeannette Catsoulis chose it as her "*New York Times* Critic's Pick" and according to *The Hollywood Reporter*, it was the subject of "a bidding war for the English-language remake rights" (Kit 2).

According to this data, Korean movies seem to be increasing in popularity among Americans. This increase coincides with the year in which the Second Wave hit America, almost as if K-pop sparked an interest in Korean productions. For instance, British journalist Pickles notes that enrolment in Korean courses in universities has grown by around 14% between 2013 and 2016, and attributes this change to the desire to understand Korean lyrics (1-3). Additionally, in an interview with Sung Kim of the Korea Tourism Organization titled "Visit Korea: American Tourism to South Korea on the Rise", *Korean Kontext* broadcaster Janna Gibson points out that "more Americans than ever want to go and visit Korea" (00:01:09 - 00:01:12). According to Kim, 1 million American tourists were expected to travel to Korea in 2018, drawn by an interest in local culture, which is in turn motivated by the rise of K-pop. They also comment that more and more stores are selling Korean beauty products, among them CBS and link this tendency to the popularity that K-pop is starting to enjoy in the US (00:02:47 - 00:08:09).

In popular culture, K-pop artists have been added to the very long list of celebrities caricaturized in *memes*. Many idols have achieved the status of music and film superstars because of their appearance in US talk programs, films and so forth. In this field, Korean singer and dancer Rain is considered a pioneer. He became well known to the general public because of his pretended rivalry with American comedian Stephen Colbert. After Rain was positioned over Colbert in *Time* magazine's "100 Most Influential People Who Shape Our World" in 2007, the presenter of *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* performed a parody of one of Rain's music videos and challenged him

to a dance-off. This mock feud for the title of "best dancer" was covered by other talk shows apart from Colbert's, including *Larry King Live* and *The Today Show* (Ter Molen 164). But it was not until 2012 that K-pop itself became widely known, as PSY's "Gangnam Style" made it into the US music charts (Ter Molen 164) and his music video inspired a series of parodies, including one "Obama Style" (Seungeun Lee and Kuwahara 106). In the following years different bands caught the attention of American media – i.e. Big Bang and Girls' Generation were in *Rolling Stone*'s list of "10 K-pop bands most likely to make it big in the US" (Rolling Stone 6-7). But as of today, it is the band BTS that is considered the new face of K-pop in America.

The group is formed by seven members aged between 21 and 26: Jungkook, V, Jimin, RM, J-Hope, Suga and Jin. Each member has varying singing style and register, which propitiates that their songs blend different genres: indie, R&B, pop, techno, rap, hip-hop, etc. BTS has managed to penetrate into the mainstream because of their many breakthroughs: they are the first K-pop group to speak in the United Nations, to top the US album charts, to perform in the American Music Awards, to attend the Grammy Awards, etc. (BBC 46-56). This infiltration into the American music market has been so intense, that it has induced many celebrities into becoming ARMYs, the name of BTS' fans. These include Shawn Mendes, Halsey, Ellen DeGeneres, Ansel Elgort, Camila Cabello and even wrestler John Cena (Bruner 3-14). They have also collaborated with various US enterprises such as Mattel in the creation of BTS dolls.

The reasons for BTS' unprecedented success are varied. On the one hand, their lyrics encourage self-love and self-care. In a country where "an estimated one in five … children and teens has a diagnosable mental disorder" (Krans 8), it is no wonder that such morals are appealing for teenagers. Others argue that what hides behind such appeal is their androgyny i.e. they frequently wear gender non-specific clothes and make up (Wilson 5-8). Much like other bands, BTS' members break the pretty/beastly dichotomy, which classifies them either as emasculated subjects to the dominant white men or hypersexualised Asian machos (Anderson 124). But what seems to be the most logic explanation, is their ingenious use of "hibridity", or in other words, the depiction of themselves as a convergence of different cultures, races, genders, sexualities, etc (Ter Molen 150). However, it is the cultural dimension of this convergence that is of most interest to us, because it may explain why K-pop enjoys a particular popularity in the

US. BTS has been chosen as the case study because it is considered the maximum exponent of this popularity.

The interweaving of the American and the Korean is a useful strategy to attract the attention of US audiences. It invites American fans to identify with the symbols of their own culture that they spot in BTS' products. Simultaneously, this Americanness acts as a sort of frame for Koreanness: it accompanies but does not overshadow Korean culture. Thus, it is still possible for the receiver to feel attracted by the exoticism of the Oriental. This strategy is reminiscent of Said's theory of Orientalism, which defends that the Orient presented to us is a mere "representation" that has nothing to do with the real Orient (21). Said adds that past versions of such representations were controlled by the West because the Orient was deemed incapable of producing their own (21). But BTS's success is proof that a reality in which the East decides how to depict itself in the media, is no longer a utopia. In a brilliant exercise of subversion, BTS turns Orientalism against the Orientalists, by consciously showing the one version of Korea that is attractive to them: that which allows them to see their own hand in the creation of current Korean culture.

As it has been said, this blending of cultures expands over different dimensions. For instance, in the linguistic field BTS sings mostly in Korean, but it also includes several verses in English. Since such verses tend to appear in the choir, they are sung repeatedly and thus, are easily remembered. Usually, they also convey the main message of the song – i.e. "You can't stop me loving myself" (BTS, "IDOL") and "You've shown me I have reasons / I should love myself" (BTS, "Answer: Love Myself") -, which can flow towards the American listener, unhindered by the language barrier. Apart from these general tendencies, it is easy to locate more specific examples of the aforementioned blending in their dancing, clothes and symbolism of their videoclips.

Regarding their dancing style, BTS' combines movements from both American and Korean cultures. For instance, rappers RM, J-Hope and Suga imitate the hand gestures of American hip-hop artists and rappers like Jay-Z and Kanye West. Additionally, the band introduces other hints of their dual cultural influence in their choreographies. On the one side, during the choir of "IDOL" the members give an air kick similar to those typical of Taekwondo, a Korean martial art. Shortly afterwards,

they point their right index fingers upwards, in a diagonal movement reminiscent of Tony Manero's iconic pose in *Saturday Night Fever*. Moreover, right before the next choir, we can briefly appreciate Jungkook twerking - a dance move originated in the US and popularized by YouTube videos. It consists on squatting and shaking ones buttocks or hips backwards and forward. Towards the end of the performance, Jimin dances briefly with a fan used in *Buchaechum*, a traditional Korean dance. On the other side, the initial dance move of "FAKE LOVE" looks similar to the American illustration *March of Progress*, which shows the stages of human evolution. Finally, in the choir the dancers cover their ears, eyes and mouth, adopting stances similar to "The Three Wise Monkeys". This image symbolizes the principles of "hear no evil", "see no evil" and "speak no evil" and is linked to Confucianism, the ideology that regulated pre-war Korean society. Right afterwards, they join their palms in a praying gesture typically associated with Christianism, a religion closely related to the origin of the US.

BTS also includes references to Korea and the US in their outfits. Allusions to the US include sport clothes, as the New York basketball shirt J-Hope wears in "DNA", or Jimin's New York Yankees cap in "IDOL". They also wear American clothing, such as Suga's Converse sneakers in "FAKE LOVE" and frequently, their outfits include imagery from American popular culture. For instance, in "IDOL" J-Hope and Suga wear jumpers featuring Bugs Bunny and Snow White. Among this imagery, pictures and emblems of American music bands are particularly prominent. For example, in "FAKE LOVE" Jin wears a hoodie with a picture of Iggy Pop and in "RUN", Suga and V wear the logo of the bands The Rolling Stones and Nirvana. This overwhelming presence of the US in BTS' wardrobe somewhat eclipses Korea's. However, it is important to point out that it is difficult to find elements that are confined to a certain country, because fashion trends are yet another subject to globalization. Nevertheless, there are some elements that are particularly *in vogue* in Korea. For instance, recurring accessories in their outfits are mouth masks and long and intricate chain earrings. Apart from these, it is more complicated to find clothes that are exclusive to Korean culture among their garments. But actualized versions of the traditional Korean attire, *hanbok*, do appear in "IDOL".

As if to compensate the lack of presence of Koreanness in their clothing, BTS includes features that can only be understood by those familiar with Korean culture. For instance, the music video of "IDOL" includes the word "love" written in Korean's two

writing systems: *hangul* and *hanja*. The title of the song itself has a special significance for those knowledgeable of Korean society, since 'idol' is a term used derogatorily to refer to K-pop singers. Idols are often criticized for being too commercial and hence, not real musicians. In an attempt to eliminate such connotations, BTS chooses to identify with this term. The same music video also includes references to Korean folklore, namely towards the 'moon rabbit', symbolized by the shadow of a rabbit on the moon. This popular belief is based on the existence of rabbit-shaped markings on the satellites surface. Another reference to folklore is the figure of the tiger, a recurring motif in BTS' productions and in Korean iconography, being associated with a wide arrange of significations such as divinity, protection and rebellion (Seeley and Skabelund 475). Other videoclips, like "Blood, Sweat and Tears", include symbols associated with Korea's history. On the one hand, in a scene RM and Jungkook lie in a room similar to an opium smoking den, which alludes to Korea's role as opium exporter during Japanese occupation (Jennings 795). On the other, J-Hope appears practicing archery, one of Korea's most prominent techniques in warfare (Kim 1).

In conclusion, Korean dramas, cartoons, films and music have exercised a greater influence on American pop culture than could be noticed at first glance. Facilitated by Internet access and online communities, Korea is more present than ever in US society. While it could be argued that the influence of K-pop bands and Korean actors do not seem to be reaching further than the younger generation, one must take into account that it is this generation that will inherit the current United States and shape their society and culture using the tools that shaped them themselves. The fact that they get across the country to listen to songs whose language they don't even speak or spend hours searching the internet for pirated versions of their favorite K-dramas is, in this author's humble opinion, sufficient proof that Korean culture is one of these tools.

3. The case of Japan: Japanese animation

3.1. Brief history of *anime*

In Japan, *anime* is a shortening of the English word "animation", used to refer to any animated images. However, in this paper the term *anime* will be used following the American trend, that is to say, to refer to Japanese animation in particular, which is almost always an adaptation of a comic book or *manga* (Kelts 5).

The first examples of animation date back to the beginning of the 20th century with *Katsudo Shashin* (around 1907) and *The Crab and the Monkey* (1917). Throughout the first half of the century *anime* was subject to the censorship of the Japanese totalitarian regime and was employed as a propagandistic medium to serve Japanese interests in the WWII. After the war and led by Toei animation, the *anime* industry managed to advance in the bosom of the economic crisis. The animating process was economized by reducing the photograms per second, repetition of backgrounds and limitation of the characters' vocal articulation (Vidal 23-27). In 1963 the first regular *anime* series was produced with great success: Osamu Tezuka's *Astro Boy*. Tezuka became the flag bearer of the *anime* style as we know it (Kelts 41). Although greatly influenced by American animation, Tezuka's *anime* differed greatly: the graphic design was different, had no demographic boundaries and introduced more complex stories (Napier 16-17). As Japanese-American scholar Roland Kelts writes, *anime* was a "medium ideally poised to explore our contemporary sensibilities", such as apocalyptic fears (Kelts 40). In 1977, *anime* experienced its first great success in America: the series *Battle of the Planets,* based on the Japanese *Kagaku Ninjatai Gatchaman*. This rewritten version suppressed the most complex subplots of the series to satisfy American censors, affiliates and sponsors (Kelts 11-13). Since then, a*nime* has become increasingly popular abroad and in the US in particular. For instance in 1996, Disney became the distributor of Studio Ghibli's animated films such as *Princess Mononoke* and *Howl's Moving Castle.* What is more, their director, Hayao Miyazaki, won the Academy Award for *Spirited Away.*

Nowadays, *anime* is more widespread than ever thanks to the Internet. Online streaming platforms like *Netflix* and *Crunchyroll*, guarantee access to non-Japanese audiences. Additionally, there is a vast network of online sites where users may share bootleg versions of series, often subtitled by fans themselves. Nevertheless, such popularity would not be possible if it was not for the great variety of genres available. As time advanced, archetypical characterizations and simple plots involving adventures, love, friendship and bravery - such as those featured in *Astro Boy* - evolved into more mature, philosophical and existential themes as those featured in *Ghost in the* Shell. In order to classify these new themes, the range of genres was expanded. From the *mecha* genre with its characteristic giant robots, to the complex psychological stories like *Death Note*, *anime* is suited for all tastes, ages, nationalities and needs.

3.2. American Imperialism in Japan

During WWII, US-Japan relations went through a rough patch owing to the fact that both countries were in opposite bands. After its defeat, Japan underwent a 6-year period of occupation by the Americans, whose intention was to demilitarize and democratize Japan (Matsuda 19). During this time, Japan received waves of cultural influence from the US that would reshape its society. The endeavors to reconstruct and democratize Japan were a joint venture between US and Japan. In order to avoid to be labeled as imperialist, the US placed special emphasis in the concept of the "two-way street", that is to say, the idea that the cultural influence was in no way one sided. But in practice, American influence was overwhelmingly superior and as a result, it was Japanese society that was changed the most by this international relationship. Thus, the feudal-like system established by the totalitarian regime during the war was abandoned (Matsuda 2-5). The US strived to modernize the country by encouraging the study of American culture. They also "corrected" Japanese beliefs such as the emperor's godhood and Japanese early history, which was greatly influenced by myths (Matsuda 20-22).

Post-occupation relations became sour in the 1960s, due to the so called "Nixon shocks", which aimed at stabilizing American economy. It was argued that Japan's economic growth was at the US' expense, for while US products' flow into Japan was constrained, Japanese ones were widely available in American markets. Thus, Japan was coerced into opening its domestic markets to US goods, a measure that was also implemented in Korea. Ultimately, Nixon's attempts at improving US economy implied the stop of Japan's economic growth, as the country was no longer under American protectorate (McKevitt 14).

Nevertheless, during the 1970s and 1980s the Japanese economy continued to thrive due to innovations in the production of electronics, automobiles, etc. (McKevitt 15). Aware of the American consumer culture, Japanese products were frequently targeted at American citizens. But this indiscriminate consumption of Japanese products proved to be a double edged sword for the Japanese. After observing the difference between US and Japanese economy, American leaders blamed the economic crisis on the Japanese. It was the birth of the already mentioned "Japan Panic, a moment of intense, uncertain, and ultimately fleeting fear of and fixation on Japan" (McKevitt 3).

But in the 1990s Japan's bubble burst and Japanese exports diminished. The decline in Japanese economy rendered those people inoffensive and thus, the Japan Panic had no longer a *raison de être.*

Nevertheless, by the end of the century Japanese products had already become inherent to the American way of life and Americans had forgotten the alleged Japanese threat. Once this fear was left behind, Japanese culture has experienced a renovated popularity among Americans, an interest in the "'eccentricities', spastic zaniness, and libertarian fearlessness of Japan's creators of popular culture" (Kelts 6).

3.3. Japanese trends in American animation

In the 1960s, American cartoons started to feature traces of Japanese influence. What is more, many of the cartoons considered American were in fact re-editions of a*nime.* The US scholar Andrew C. McKevitt notices that the *anime* of those years could be rendered American cheaply, by editing out any reference to Japanese culture (180). The final product of this edition was broadcasted to US children, who inadvertedly and indirectly became consumers of Japanese animation. By the same token, the subsequent generations of children have continued to consume *anime,* either directly or indirectly, to such an extent, that "Now American children seem to make no distinction between Japanese *anime* and US cartoons" (Kelts 92).

The primary reason why *anime* was deemed so convenient, is the fact that Japanese products are "culturally odorless", that is to say, they lack references to the country's ideology and symbolism (McKevitt 181). Instead, they tend to portray universal values such as "duty and sacrifice, war and peace, love and personal relationships, good and evil" (McKevitt 183), which ensures that a wider range of spectators can identify with the characters and issues depicted, regardless of their nationalities. Moreover, from the aesthetical point of view, the *animes* that were chosen to be modified and broadcasted in the US did not feature characters that looked particularly Japanese. For instance, the characters in *Battle of the Planets* – adapted from *Kagaku Ninjatai Gatchaman* – look undoubtedly like Westerners. These stories, McKevitt explains, were specially made by the Japanese so that they would be transnational aesthetically, thus making them appealing for various demographic groups (182). Like *Battle of the Planets*, many of said *animes* belong to the science fiction genre, which was of particular interest because of the tropes it depicts. For instance,

they tend to present centralized global governments where nationalities do not matter, but which are nevertheless constituted by white characters. Under Caucasian command, humankind fights against a common enemy that embodies evil. For many Americans, this trope might have been an allegory of the real Cold War world. Could the said embodiment of evil be the communist threat that humankind needs to face by leaving behind their differences? Are the white leaders from the US, the maximum exponent of capitalism and the only global power that can stand up against the tyranny of the Soviet Union?

Anyway, it remains unknown whether or not this was a motivation for the preference of the science fiction genre. But nevertheless, it cannot be denied that such preference existed and still exists, and that Americans seem to feel a fascination for the futuristic narratives produced by Japan (Kelts 5). Because of this, I have chosen to analyze a science fiction franchise, in order to study the influence that the Japanese animation has had on American productions, as well as the way in which it has been reimagined to fit past and modern American audiences. The production that I have chosen as the study case is *Voltron*, a franchise that began in 1983 and is still ongoing.

The first series of the *Voltron* franchise, *Voltron: Defender of the Universe,* was shown between 1983 and 1985. The series was divided in three seasons, each of them created by editing a different Japanese cartoon. However, the third season was never broadcasted – perhaps a side effect of the Japan Panic, that made Americans distrust anything Japanese – and the second one was based on an *anime* that had nothing to do with the original plot. Hence, we will only focus on the first season, which was based on the *anime Beast King GoLion*. This show presented a giant robot named GoLion, punished for his arrogance by the Goddess of the Universe and subsequently divided into five giant lion-like robots, that would remain hidden in planet Altea until they were reawaken to fight evil. Years later, five space pilots return to Earth after a mission, only to find that their planet has been destroyed by a WWIII of nuclear origin. Suddenly, they are ambushed and enslaved by the Galra Empire that has invaded Earth. However, they manage to escape and land in Altea, which has fallen victim to the Galra Empire. After discovering the mechanical lions, the five protagonists are recruited by Princess Fala of Altea and begin to fight the Galra Empire as pilots of the five lions, which combine to form GoLion. The plot of the American version remained more or less

unchanged. Nevertheless, it underwent a series of editions to make it suitable for American viewers.

Just as McKevitt explains, editors devoted themselves to eliminate any source of Japanese culture from the product – a decision that was probably influenced by the already mentioned Japan Panic. Indeed, the erasure of its Japanese origin was behind the Anglicization of the characters' names. Thus Akira, Takashi, Isamu, Tsuyoshi and Hiroshi became Keith, Sven, Lance, Hunk and Pidge. Even the name of the robot was Americanized to Voltron, for GoLion (*go* being the Japanese word for 'five') was too Japanese sounding. Afterwards, the editing team went on to modify plot points that were deemed too dark for cartoons, whose main target audience was children. These points included scenes of torture and deaths, such as that of Takashi/Sven and the elimination of the nuclear WWIII, which in the middle of the Cold War, probably sounded more as a possible future than as fiction. Instead, the Earth remains undestroyed and is the headquarters of a *Star Trek*-like federation of planets. The five pilots are sent to a devastated planet called Arus, where they find the Altean princess Allura, the counterpart of Fala. As in the original series, they assemble the giant robot and use it to fight the Galra Empire. Interestingly enough, this new narrative eliminated the existence of the Goddess of the Universe. Why was it necessary to eliminate this element? It is possible that the editors wanted to erase any track of religion altogether. However, it is also possible that their own beliefs were unnerved by the introduction of a deity different from the Christian God, who furthermore, was female. Luckily enough for the editors, changes were not necessary when it came to the character design, since none of them 'looked' quite Japanese. In fact, if anything, they looked like Westerners and even Americans, one could argue. For instance, if we take into account that the said federation of planets is supposed to include humans from around Earth, why do they all look so white? This becomes even more obvious if we look at the characterization of Allura. Although she is an alien, she is designed in the style of the Western beauty standards: a white blonde princess with a stylized body waiting for a team of strong men to save her, Allura matches unequivocally the archetype of the 'damsel in distress'. To the Japanese-American author Roland Kelts, this is far from being a coincidence. In his book *Japanamerica,* he explains that Japan is in a privileged position "to decipher the psyche of their former conqueror" (22) because of the years under US occupation. This allowed them to produce narratives that would be appealing for American audiences,

such as that of an American-looking team that protects the universe from evil. For a country that even now has a tendency to create whitewashed and self-centered visual products, a group of white Americans as representatives and protectors not of humankind, but of all forms of life in the universe, is an attractive proposal.

Although more series and films were produced throughout the years, none seemed to prosper. But in 2016, the online streaming platform *Netflix* collaborated with Dreamworks Animation, to create the latest installment of the franchise: *Voltron: Legendary Defender*. The plot remains more or less loyal to the original American version, but also introduces modifications, that often contradict the erasing and editing present in *Voltron: Defender of the Universe.* Thus, the main plot points remain unchanged, but the show introduces a series of narratives and sub-narratives that make the story much more complex than the original. The plot goes as follows. Initially, the earthlings are oblivious to the existence of life beyond their own planet, but do carry out explorations in space with a technology that is almost ridiculously inferior to the alien one. The story begins with the abduction Takashi "Shiro" Shirogane – who has recovered its name from the original *anime* -, one of the soon-to-be pilots, now called Paladins. A year later, Shiro comes back to Earth to warn them about an upcoming attack by the Galra Empire, but is restrained by human scientists that fear that he is dangerous. Nevertheless, he is rescued by the remaining future Paladins: Keith, Lance, Pidge and Hunk. After Shiro wakes up, the Paladins search for the reason why the Galra are attacking Earth: the legendary weapon known as Voltron. Instead, they find just one of the lions, which they use to travel to Arus and find princess Allura and her advisor Coran, the sole survivors of the Altean people. The five protagonists become the Paladins of Voltron, each of them piloting one of the lions, and go on to live adventures and fight the Galra Empire. Apart from that, the show also includes more mature themes like racism, imperialism, PTSD, etc. This comes as no surprise for anyone familiar with American cartoons. After series like *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy* proved that they are not only for children, these 'dark' elements do not seem so outrageous. In short, producers have adopted several aspects inherited from *anime*, to come out with a more attractive story. At the same time, they have introduced details that make the story more suitable for the present day US.

Japanese influence in *Voltron: Legendary Defender* easily strikes the eye, thanks to the character designs, 'big eyes' and colourful palettes traditionally associated with *anime*. Of course, elements typical of *anime* that were already present in the first *Voltron* have been maintained, such as the giant robot similar to Mazinger Z. This proves that producers are no longer concerned about hiding their Japanese influence. The new show counts with intricate battle scenes rarely seen in American cartoons – i.e. the complexity and animation of the fight between Shiro and Keith featured in the fifth episode of season six, is undoubtedly influenced by *anime* tradition -, as well as plot points heavily influenced by Japanese culture. For instance, the secret organization known as "Blade of Marmora" seems to be formed by a sort of alien ninjas: their missions include infiltrations, sabotage and assassinations as a way of stealth resistance to the Galra Empire; they undergo special training to strengthen their minds and loyalty to the cause, and to master sword fighting with a blade that is exclusive to the order; and finally, their garments are specially designed to cover their identity. Moreover, following the already mentioned tactic typical of *anime*, characters have become more complex psychologically speaking. For instance, the new princess Allura maintains the kindness that characterized her counterpart, but is also allowed to express a wider range of emotions and is no longer a flawless character. This is notable in episode nine of season two, when the Paladins have just discovered that Keith is half-Galra, which leads Allura to distrust and look down on him. However, as the show progresses, Allura overcomes such racism and evolves so that she no longer distrusts Galra characters because of their race. This, along with her active participation in physical fights, means that she no longer fits into the archetype of the 'damsel in distress'. More importantly, it is through her sacrifice that the Universe is saved ultimately.

On the other side, as already explained there are aspects that have been included specially to appeal to American audiences. The most obvious one is race. The original characters were almost overwhelmingly white for a globalized society. This sat well with the society and the media of the 1980s, when racist attitudes and behaviors may have been considered natural and acceptable. But condoning such treatments is no longer tolerable for a significant percentage of US population. According to the US Census Bureau's estimations for 2018, 23.4% of the population - around 76.5 million Americans - is non-white. Thus, introducing characters of different ethnic origins seems logical, if our objective is to ensure that an ethnically varied audience can identify itself

with them. The showrunners might have had the same in mind, for the Paladins do belong to different ethnic groups and races: Shiro is Japanese – perhaps yet another tribute to the Japanese origin of the series -, Keith is American, Lance is Cuban, Pidge is Italian and Hunk is Samoan. Variety is present even among alien species, which are no longer anthropomorphic as a rule and which include different races. For instance, both Coran and Allura are Alteans, but Coran is white and Allura is black. The introduction of diversity can also be seen in the fields of gender and sexuality. For instance, in the first season it is revealed that Pidge is in fact a girl in disguised named Katie, making her the second female Paladin together with Allura – who eventually becomes one too. Yet, long after the secret is discovered, the character holds on to their disguise as male and is still referred to as Pidge. This made fans theorize that the character might actually be transgender. As for sexuality, the series features three queer couples: one female-female and two male-male. The show also depicts the first on-screen gay wedding in western cartoons, between Shiro and his boyfriend Curtis.

In short, the first and last installments of the *Voltron* franchise are good examples of the different stages of Japanese-inspired animation. Initially, US producers obtained the broadcasting rights of *anime* and simply modified and erased those elements that were not considered typical of an American cartoon. In other words, they carried out a process of Americanization of *anime*. But Japanese influence in nowadays' American cartoons does not stem from the remnants of editions of *anime*. On the contrary, they are intentionally introduced by showrunners in American-made animations and combined with original elements that make the finished product more suitable for modern American audiences. As a conclusion, it seems that the Japanese influence is no longer something to be erased and hidden in shame, but something to be introduced to boost the popularity of a production - almost a silent acknowledgement of the Japanese expertise in producing quality narratives and animation.

4. Conclusion

After WWII, the US became the new hegemonic power. As such, it felt obliged to reach the level of the extinct empires that used to rule the world. But the war had changed the rules for the formation of empires, so that colonialism and conquest were no longer acceptable. Thus, the US searched to become an empire through military occupation and the communist threat provided a perfect excuse for it. Indeed, the US assumed the

role of the "builder and keeper of a new world order" (Matsuda 15). The western front was protected from the spread of communism by European forces, but the east one remained exposed. Because of this, China fell victim to socialist ideas and Korea and Japan became vulnerable due to their geographical position. The US had to do something about this.

During occupation, the US helped postwar Korea and Japan transition into modernity by exposing them to American culture. By placing its own society as a model of perfection, the US reshaped Korean and Japanese societies, so that anything American came to be regarded in the best of lights. Following such model, Confucian hierarchical social structures were dismissed, new democratic governments were introduced and the markets were liberalized. All these changes were aimed at turning these countries into Americanized versions that would be of service to its "big brother". Nevertheless, cultural influence was a two-way street. US leaders underestimated the influence that Japan and Korea would have over its own culture. The products born from this influence could have been ignored fifty years ago, as they were consumed by a reduced percentage of American population. But nowadays, East Asian cultural trends such as the Korean Wave and Japanese animation, enjoy a significant success in the US, precisely because they present local audiences with symbols of Americanness.

On the one hand, the Korean cultural products of the Korean Wave camouflage their culture with the American one, so that it can be easily accepted. It is because of this that *doramas* are so widely watched in online platforms such as *Netflix.* But this attraction is more evident in the success of K-Pop bands. Idol groups such as BTS - the most famous K-Pop group in the US at the moment – manage to attract US attention by presenting themselves as a product of American popular culture without renouncing to their own identity. They do this by presenting themselves as culturally hybrid, that is to say, by combining American and Korean clothing, languages and dance moves. In such a way, they arouse an interest in Korean culture that brings US audiences to learn Korean or visit the country.

On the other hand, Japanese animation follows a different strategy: they present a version of Japan that is attractive to US audiences, because it lacks any reference to Japanese culture altogether. For instance, characters in *animes* look more Caucasian than anything else, which eases US' self-identification. Because of this kind of

transnational characters, Japanese cartoons were a cheap alternative to American-based productions. As a result, in the second part of the 20th century American cartoons were frequently *animes* that had been modified to fit US audiences. This is the case of the *Voltron* franchise, whose first installment was a mere re-edition. But with the turn of the century, US cartoon producers went one step ahead. Instead of showing simple modifications, they created their own *anime* inspired cartoon: *Voltron: Legendary Defender*. This last installment does not hide the Japanese origin of the story. The Japanese influence can be appreciated in the aesthetics of the characters, in the mature themes and the psychologically complex characters that characterized the original *anime.* Moreover, it combines these elements with new ones, introduced specifically to appeal US audiences, namely, characters of different ethnic groups, races, genders, and sexual orientations.

Ultimately, the United States underestimated South Korea and Japan, by assuming any cultural influence would be unidirectional. But as it has been proved in this text, East Asian cultural currents are becoming wider and stronger, and have gone on to diversify and enrich the American one, in such a way that certain foreign elements have become inseparable from the local culture. And the chances are that with globalization, Japanese and South Korean cultures' popularity will only increase.

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