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Orientalism, Resistance or Global Harmony? Entangled Strands in the film *Isle of Dogs*

Markets, Globalization & Development Review

Film Review

Orientalism, Resistance or Global Harmony? Entangled Strands in the film Isle of Dogs

The Post-2016 World

The world after the 2016 U.S. presidential election is nothing like before — not because of climate changes in politics or economic transformations (positive or negative) around the world, but because the world population is inescapably exposed to a glossary that should not be used in public discourses ever so widely and frequently. Misogyny, anti-Semitism, racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, white supremacy – and (unfortunately) the glossary can go on, with longer lists of such disturbing vocabulary.

Constant “othering” is the mantra that colonialism and cold-war era ideologies used to employ, to sustain their respective systems (Duncan, 1993; Jervis, 1999). Part of the consequence is that othering, as a socio-politico-cultural practice, was haphazardly adopted as the ultimate tool to claim one’s identity. It is objectively understandable in principle because ontological insecurity (cf. Giddens, 1991), as a “pathological symptom” in humanity, has never been escaped by any means. It is the everyday struggle for many living in modern times and spaces. In practice, however, othering hurts or kills people (and animals), as witnessed numerous times in history. Putting others (including animals) in danger to gain or develop things and maintain the system has almost (stay optimistic!) been normalized. The magnitude and scope of the practice have become so troubling that most of us should at least ponder why we need to hear and learn those unnerving words in the glossary every day. Yet, hardly a day goes by without the plague of such a toxic glossary.

The Fable and Metaphor

Isle of Dogs (2018) is a polemic from Wes Anderson on the bigotry currently widespread worldwide. The movie bluntly brings discrimination and hatred issues to the screen. Via animation, it portrays and projects what has been witnessed globally — mostly from immigration and refugee issues — to the politically and culturally exotic context of Japan, where collectiveness and exclusivity coexist (e.g., Rupp, 2003). The story begins by depicting a dystopian city in Japan, Megasaki City, in some unknown future. Mayor Kobayashi signs a despicable decree that exiles all dogs to Trash Island due to a virus outbreak among dogs (dog flu or snout fever) that imperils humans as well. We have heard and seen almost identical stories in recent news: We are told that immigrants bring only crime to the host country and deportation is not a matter of choice. Perhaps Trash Island represents construction of a wall, a consequence of industrialization, or a model of modern segregation. More upsetting, the fictional outrage in the movie, in fact, has taken place in the reality we experience and continues despite expert opinions and concerns.

Later in the movie, Atari, the orphaned nephew and ward of Mayor Kobayashi, flies to Trash Island because his bodyguard dog, Spots, was the first expelled to the island. On arrival, Atari meets five dogs that assist in rescuing Spots. Each has a different history and experience. A black dog, Chief, offers a unique element to the story as a stray before he came to the island. Conceivably, the director's intention was to underscore diversity and social class issues by assigning different backgrounds to the dogs that together face the dire task of survival. Meanwhile, the storyline does not deviate much from the familiar cultural formulae embraced by most movies: Atari is the stranger in an unknown town full of characters, one of whom (Chief) initially performs as adversary but, over time, the antagonism becomes friendship. The politicized anthropomorphism in an unfamiliar context, however, presents a novel cinematic approach to the complex issues.

While little happens among the dogs and Atari on the island, the mayor manufactures a story that the dogs will be executed for having kidnapped Atari. It appears to signify the typical workings of propaganda in actual political scenes. In our precarious reality, such practices are sometimes allowed to replace reasoning and rhetoric, and techno-, aristo-, and plutocratic narratives often overshadow the truth – such as the wide use of the phrase ‘fake news’, first in the U.S. by its president and then globally, especially by autocratic leaders. Meanwhile, a female dog, Nutmeg, with whom Chief falls in love, persuades him to help the other dogs and Atari. At that point, perhaps unsurprisingly, the movie strikes its audience with a conspiracy accompanied by cover-ups and crimes. Although Professor Watanabe, the head of the Science Party, successfully develops a cure for the epidemic, he is killed by poison wasabi. It is quite menacing to imagine the murder can also reflect reality because many of the movie's other scenes and elements render a mirror image of the world in which we live: poisoning of dissidents and opponents has been in real news as well.

The dogs and Atari begin their journey to find Spots. When separated from the group, Chief and Atari learn that Chief is in fact white, not black, and the two start developing a friendship. The ostensible contrast between black and white well envisages how the story will unfold. Manifesting the Chinese philosopher Mencius's theory that human nature is fundamentally good (see Puett and Gross-Loh, 2016), it is a reprocessing of Anderson's *The Ugly Duckling* as Chief remembers he was one of a litter. Atari and Chief soon find the group and carry on the dangerous journey together. Spots makes his first appearance amid an attack from Mayor Kobayashi's henchmen, against which Spots and his tribe — once alleged to be cannibals — successfully defend. Spots remembers and recognizes his brother Chief. Spots wants Chief to protect Atari because of his status as the leader of the tribe and a married dog.

Amid the chaos, the movie also introduces an American exchange student, Tracy Walker, who performs the crucial role of investigating the death of Professor Watanabe. Tracy tries to challenge the political scheme. It is almost impossible to ignore that her presence symbolizes prototypical American heroism — even messianic visitation prevalent in many popular culture genres, including

in the Indiana Jones films. Maybe the character embodies the current public hope for transparency.

The story approaches its climax when Mayor Kobayashi decides to extinguish all dogs and send robot dogs to the island. However, at the Kobayashi's re-election ceremony, Tracy reveals the secret that a cure exists and the last vial is available. Tracy faces deportation, which sounds far too familiar in our daily lives. But Atari and others arrive on the mainland and prove the cure is effective. Atari reads a Haiku (a traditional form of Japanese poetry) to Kobayashi about the long-standing close relationship between humans and dogs, which ultimately moves Kobayashi to undo the outrage.

However, one villain always replaces another. Major Domo, loyal to Kobayashi, disobeys his boss and presses the button to exterminate all dogs on the island. But a friend of Tracy at school hacks into the system and controls the weaponized poison to backfire at the mayor and his group. Kobayashi, Major Domo, and the remaining followers are imprisoned, and Atari becomes mayor by law. During the transition, Kobayashi further demonstrates his repentance by giving his kidney to Atari, who had been seriously injured during the battle against robot dogs. Atari and Tracy become a couple; Chief and Nutmeg grow closer; and Spots raises a beautiful family. Most of all, dogs and humans mingle with each other as they used to.

Homage, Mise-en-Scene, and the Symbolic

Isle of Dogs displays a great deal of tribute to Japanese movies and directors, Akira Kurosawa and Hayao Miyazaki in particular, as the movie director, Wes Anderson, indicated in an interview. The film's sociocultural backdrop refers to many elements and ideas in movies by such Japanese directors. Trash Island shares its image and concepts with *Dodes'ka-den* by Akira Kurosawa, in which a boy who shows symptoms of general learning disability witnesses and profoundly experiences the desolation of post-war Japan. The character Nutmeg, general pessimism, the protagonist's use of an airplane, and the environmentalists' tone and manner seem transplanted from *Porco Rosso* by Hayao Miyazaki. Unmistakably, the dystopian atmosphere and narratives remind us of *Neon Genesis Evangelion* – a Japanese mecha anime television series produced by Gainax and Tatsunoko Production, and directed by Hideaki Anno.

Many scenes directly connect the movie to the works of Akira Kurosawa. Some of his famous movies, such as *Stray Dog* and *Seven Samurai*, tell us why this movie appears and feels somewhat too familiar to many people. For example, *Isle of Dogs*'s character Chief is based on Detective Murakami in *Stray Dog*, and the group of dogs eventually becomes, like the samurai, seven in number. What we hear in the movie also adds to the homage as the music in the movie predominantly features taiko (traditional Japanese drum).

The movie's artistic expressions and visual themes also borrow much inspiration from Japanese *ukiyo-e*, a special type of woodblock printing and painting prevalent until the end of Tokugawa Bakufu, the last military government in Japan that lasted until the late 19th century. This specific style became the basis of Japonesque or Japonism found in Impressionism and Art Nouveau.

Without much disappointment, the movie succeeds the artistic legacy through the bold and exaggerated expressions (of *ukiyo-e*) that shocked even van Gogh and Monet who, in fact, collected such art pieces, and were influenced by these prints.

The name of the city, Megasaki, easily relates to an actual city in Japan, Nagasaki — where Fat Man (codename for the nuclear bomb) devastated the entire region for far too long. The movie also depicts a canine concentration camp and agonizingly delivers a plan to massacre all dogs with poison wasabi, which recalls the old demons of World War II to the current political landscape. Nationalism and far-right politics resulted in unspeakable transgressions, such as the wrongdoings (experimentations on humans) by Unit 731 and the Nanjing Massacre.

The sarcasm that persists throughout the story does not exempt Atari. It is somewhat obvious to see his succession to the mayorship as blatant mockery and satire of the typical Japanese political scene. The seemingly top-down relationship between humans and dogs shown in the movie also palpably ridicules the Japanese authoritarianism that ironically coexists with democracy (e.g., Kersten, 1996).

“I Don’t Fetch,” but “I Bite”

The film’s foci appear to be nature, love, and friendship; but – in the movie – the practice of “othering” manifests into an even more politicized version of Orientalism (Said 1978). It is not necessarily different from the old ideology — Japan has to be the space and context for cynicism towards scientification, objectification of subjects (political opponents and dogs), and fetishization of material objects (i.e., robot dogs). Japanese politics, culture, symbolism, and aesthetics are coopted for the movie at the expense of their original intentions and significances. A Western (i.e., American) context might have served better than Japan for a location where all the barbaric motives and appalling actions come together in an almost apocalyptic *déjà vu*. Understandably, however, the context cannot be American or another familiar Western context. That would de facto signal an unprecedented upheaval transpiring in the Western hemisphere. While the movie need not be a documentary film such as those by Michael Moore, it seems cowardly and self-perpetuating at best, recognizing the substantial and painful issues the movie covers. It is unclear if the director aimed to paint a mirror image of America; perhaps that could well have been his initial inspiration. In any case, the movie’s execution is still subject to the critique that it exercises “othering” to challenge that same centuries-old pseudo-ideology and malpractice (cf. Said, 1978).

The outward incomprehensibility of the East, portrayed in the movie via the setting of ‘exotic Japan’, is the quintessence of Orientalism – promulgating the idea(l) that enlightenment is still an ongoing project in the East. While it is almost inconceivable that the director deliberately, yet implicitly, signals the superiority of the West, viewers might find the overall message as just that — the West is an absolute necessity to save the East. A viewer might even interpret the movie in a sense that at least such barbarism has no place in the West. It is also possible to argue that this very review unnecessarily Occidentalizes the whole

movie and the director's intent. Unfortunately, however, history provides far too many opportunities and reasons for the East and the rest of the world to become paranoid, and this "hard-earned" disorder is still at play. Poignantly, the movie in the end seems to send a critical message that we can achieve a balance and symbiosis in the social and political domains of our lives when the disorder is treated with love, rather than by destructing the cause.

The movie addresses fundamental issues in humanity lightheartedly. It deftly challenges the unfortunate status quo, the very root of the disorder that the "intersectionals" in the world have been experiencing. The highlight of the movie is not the last scene about the defeat of the villain and the subsequent live-happily-ever-after, but Chief's line, "I don't fetch", but "I bite". What he says in context is so acute and relevant that the grassroots resistance to the immeasurable socio-politico-cultural oppression and the consequences in domestic and global contexts is certainly valuable and indispensable for incremental but consistent transformations. Me-too, Black Lives Matter, and LGBTQX movements, to list a few, are exemplified individual as well as organizational endeavors seeking exactly what Atari and his friends fight for in the movie. Perhaps the director's intent was to tell the public that individual voices and practices can yield a significant difference, as in the workings of rhizome (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983, 1987), regardless of the historical, political, and cultural baggage humanity has long dragged along. If so, the movie deserves more than it appears to be. And, if not, we still learn that "fetching" and "biting" are not mutually exclusive.

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