The Monolithic Mode: Anime Auteur Mari Okada's Unusual Career

Abstract

This article challenges the notion that anime is a monolithic mode of cinema by analysing the career and work of the often-overlooked screenwriter and director Mari Okada. The paper begins by analysing perceptions of anime both within Japan and overseas, emphasising how Orientalist attitudes have hindered anime directors' ability to achieve auteur status. I then begin looking at her status as othered in Japanese society as a female hikikomori (someone who withdraws entirely from society), before moving onto her early low culture work writing pornography scenarios and television episodes. From these beginnings, she has become one of anime's exceedingly few female auteur figures. My primary case study, her feature directorial debut *Maquia: When the Promised Flower Blooms* (2018), demonstrates both a commitment to depicting the experiences of women through a personal lens, and the use of Europe as an otherworldly setting from a Japanese perspective. By investigating Okada's career and interrogating what it means to be an anime auteur, this article seeks to deconstruct both the prototypical figure of the auteur filmmaker as a white Western man who begins in a high cultural context, and the treatment of anime as a monolithic mode with few acknowledged individual creators.

Perceptions of Anime Within Japan

Unlike in the West, where anime tends to be viewed as a niche interest confined to the realms of fan cultures and cinephiles, the viewership of anime in Japan is far more mainstream. Until recently, the highest grossing film of all time in Japan was Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* (2001) – it was only recently displaced by another anime film, *Demon Slayer* (Sotozaki 2020), with the Hollywood hit *Titanic* (Cameron 1997) sitting in third place (McCurry 2020). In fact, as of 2021, five of the top ten highest grossing films in Japan are anime films, and the *Doraemon* anime series (beginning with *Doraemon: Nobita's Dinosaur* (Fukutomi 1980)) remains the highest grossing film franchise (Kogyo Tsushinsha 2021). Clearly, this indicates that anime is widely consumed by a large portion of the Japanese population, even more so than many live action Japanese films. However, from an aesthetic point of view, the popularity of these films also suggests that the appetite for anime is not just restricted to a single genre or target audience. Although three of the films were made by Hayao Miyazaki, *Spirited Away* is a contemporary fantasy, *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004) is an adaptation of a British novel, and *Princess Mononoke* (1997) is a historical epic that contains scenes less suitable for young audiences. Similarly, of the other two highest grossing anime features, *Your Name* (Shinkai 2016) is a high school romance, and *Demon Slayer* is a violent dark-fantasy period film adapted from a pre-existing manga series. Although all these films tend toward fantasy, possibly because of animation's inherent capacity to depict what cannot be replicated in real life, they also diverge enormously in generic terms, and have significantly different themes and narrative structures. This implies that rather than viewing anime as a genre of media separate to that of live action film, Japanese audiences group anime within the context of any other kind of popular narrative cinema, watching it for a variety of reasons not strictly related to that of its medium.

Anime and Orientalism

While consumption of anime outside of Japan might suggest a Western desire to understand Japanese art on a deeper level, questions surrounding how the global popularity of anime has flourished often seem to arise from an Orientalist perspective. To clarify, the use of the term "Orientalist" here refers to Edward Said's theorising of the cultural phenomenon in which the West is granted a "detached superiority", meaning that Eastern cultures can essentialised and

disregarded for colonial gain (Said 2014 348). Scholar Ian Condry suggests that investigations into the transcultural appreciation of Japanese works imply "that there are some general, overall characteristics of Japanese popular culture that explain its success, regardless of whether success is defined in terms of aesthetic excellence, market achievements, or impact with an audience" (2013 19). Although the colonial relationship between Japan and areas like Western Europe and the United States is more complex than Japan being a formerly conquered land, particularly due to Japan's involvement in World War II, this attitude still reflects Orientalist perceptions of East Asian art. There is particular relevance to anime filmmakers with regard to Said's theory of the way Arabs were (and are) depicted in Western media: "the Arab is always shown in large numbers. No individuality, no personal characteristics or experiences" (Said 2014 286). Though this is referring to a different ethnic group, I believe that this can be applied to Orientalist perceptions of people like the Japanese, and that by "othering" a group as different, all other individual traits are disregarded. I argue that this assumed lack of individuality is often applied unconsciously to Eastern creators by Western critics as a contemporary form of Orientalism, and that this has contributed to a tendency to view both anime and anime filmmakers as a monolithic group not worthy of more nuanced analysis. Similarly, Andrew C. Mckevitt, referring to American anime consumption, states that the "most early U.S. anime fans accepted a mediated Japan through the consumption of anime texts", emphasising that "it was possible to be an anime fan and have never met a Japanese person" (2010). While Mckevitt acknowledges that contact with Japan cannot inherently stop someone from "reproducing the most malevolent strains of Orientalism" (2010), it does mean that many Westerners consume anime with no real knowledge – or acknowledgement - of its creators.

Interestingly, anime is often considered in terms of its position as a Japanese cultural export and positioned as an alternative to Western forms of animation, as opposed to a mode of animation within the broader framework of global animation history. For instance, recent articles on the topic of anime's global popularity often refer to it as "unique" or as "far more aesthetically-pleasing and eye-catching than American animation" (Salemme 2019), with some going as far as to say that it serves as "a window into what life is like on the other side of the world" (Smith 2020). By implying that anime is a homogenous product that is intrinsically separate to Western (specifically American) animation, articles like these often reproduce Orientalist views of Japan, suggesting that the state of being Japanese is a category of art unto itself. This is reflected in the categorisation of anime on streaming sites such as Netflix, in

which it is placed in a section unto itself, rather than the films being dispersed among other genres such as horror, romance, or science fiction. Although one could argue that the assertion of anime's superiority negates Orientalist implications, I believe that this reasserts another form that Orientalism takes: fetishism. Toshiya Ueno's theory of "techno-orientalism" is highly pertinent here, particularly with regard to the academic tendency to loosely connect anime works to false notions of Japanese culture, leading discussions to become "deeply caught in cultural essentialism" (Ueno 1999). He explains that "Japanimation [or anime] is defined by the stereotype of Japan as an image of cybersociety" (1999), using the Orientalist cyberpunk aesthetic of an American film like *Blade Runner* (Scott 1982) as an example of how the essentialist Western perception of Japan has evolved. Although the west may be "seduced and attracted" (1999) by these images, their homogeneity encourages a wholesale rejection in favour of the perceived variety of the West. For those who do not reject this image, there remains a fundamental misunderstanding of what constitutes Japanese culture, exemplified for Ueno as "the illusory image of Samurai which never existed", but that gained popularity as a singular image of Japan in the West. It is within this essentialist misunderstanding that fetishism arises, with fetishism in most senses referring to the "displacement of fundamental values" onto a surrogate object (Tanaka 2011 134). In the case of anime, one can argue that the Western viewers who view anime works as a "window" onto Japan are perhaps displacing a sense of purpose and awe onto the "object" of Japan, with anime as the mediator of their concept of the nation's culture.

Regardless of any psychoanalysis, however, the misconceived appreciation of anime's Japanese qualities for Western viewers appears to be somewhat contradictory, especially within the passionate Western fan cultures that anime has acquired since the rise of the internet age. This is exemplified by the term *otaku*: while it translates from Japanese literally to "your house", derogatorily referring to individuals who don't leave their homes, it has been reappropriated by Western anime viewers to indicate a high level of dedication to watching anime and being involved in anime subcultures. In a way, this use of language can serve as a metaphor for fans with Orientalist perceptions of anime and Japan, the misuse of the word from its original context representing a fundamental lack of understanding of the culture they purport to be experts in. Scholars of anime have extensively researched the *otaku* phenomenon, with Annalee Newitz arguing that "they eagerly watch an anime because it comes from 'far away.'", and "because it allows them to feel as if they have specialized knowledge ordinary Americans do not" (1994). Therefore, one can extrapolate that the Western *otaku* culture is highly

dependent on the possession of a centralised Western gaze – they are, in effect, a modern version of the colonisers discussed by Said, who set out to distant lands in order to recover "mysterious" and "unknown" treasures. This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that, within Japan, *otaku* typically identify themselves with a prefix that describes their niche interest, from "anime *otaku*" to "motorcycle *otaku*" (Newitz 1994). This suggests that *otaku* within Japan are focused on niche interests that are not defined by their relationship to their home country, whereas Western *otaku* define themselves upon a scrutinous gaze upon Japan, or in some cases East Asia more generally. As *otaku* are one of the primary groups of anime consumers in Western regions like the UK and US, I believe that this contributes significantly to the view of anime as a singular genre. Although individual *otaku* will likely have preferences regarding the anime they consume, they are united in their interest in the mode as a whole, a generalised stance that may cause those unfamiliar with anime to assume a level of uniformity.

The Existence of Anime Auteurs

Rather than referring to themselves as fans of particular directors, screenwriters, or actors as is common amongst Western cinephiles, self-proclaimed "otakus" often refer to themselves simply as fans of anime itself. Although this, in a way, reflects the heterogeneity of the mode – discussions around anime are rarely limited to a single genre – it also means that the creative voices behind anime are often left out of the conversation, particularly in the context of film studies discourses. Auteur theory, defined here not necessarily as the supremacy of the director over the screenwriter but as "considering a work in terms of the artist" (Staples 1966 3), can be considered flawed in its apparent dismissal of artistic collaboration. However, I believe it can serve effectively in an analysis of anime filmmakers by acknowledging the artistic labour behind anime features, rather than attributing their aesthetic merit to a mystical Japaneseness apparently imbued into all anime in the eyes of many Western viewers. Additionally, similar to the way auteur theory was initially used to legitimise the artistic value of works that emerged from the well-oiled machine of Hollywood, much of anime scholarship is focused upon anime as an industry, rather than an expressive mode. Though unintentionally, this leads to an Orientalist interpretation of anime as a homogenous category defined by its post-production relationship to the West, rather than the Japanese individuals behind its initial creation.

Because auteur theory insists upon the acknowledgement of those who make film, as opposed to the mechanisms that distribute it, it allows for a foundation of ground-up filmic analysis. While auteur theory is often criticised for its privileging of the director beyond all other collaborative partners, I argue that the use of this framework functions differently in the context of anime scholarship, as it unambiguously reframes anime as an artistic rather than solely a commercial product made by a nameless mass of people. In addition, another common criticism of auteur theory is the way that it affords genius status only to the most societally privileged directors, typically white canonized men like Alfred Hitchcock and Stanley Kubrick (Grant 2008). Though this is problematic, I don't believe that a wholesale rejection of the theory is an effective solution; instead, the canonising power of the label "auteur" should be extended to those who are not typically afforded this luxury (in the context of this dissertation those who create anime). This is particularly important in the context of Orientalism; here, auteur theory has the power to return a sense of individuality to those who have been denied this by a Western Orientalist gaze. This strategy has also been adopted within the realm of video games in order to give the medium more academic credence as an art form – for instance, scholar Jules Patalita posits in their thesis that Hideo Kojima is an auteur of video games with an "immediately identifiable" mark (2018). However, I would also like to clarify that my application of this label is not just reserved for directors who are entirely distinct or unique in their field – rather, I aim to highlight the similarities and nuances within their own filmographies to demonstrate the value of their artistic contributions beyond broad generic categorisation.

Mari Okada's Prolific Career

Mari Okada is a highly active screenwriter of anime, primarily known for her work on youth drama series, who began working in the late 1990s and has recently begun directing her own feature films and TV series. However, scholarly explorations of the filmmaker and her filmography are scant, with only interviews and non-academic articles covering her and her work currently. One of the few well-known female directors amongst a "scarcity of women at the highest levels in Japanese animation" (Scateni 2020), her distinct catalogue of work can certainly – and somewhat subversively - be viewed in the context of auteur theory. Within Japan, partially due to the release of her best-selling memoir *From Truant to Anime*

Screenwriter: My Path to "Anohana" and "The Anthem of the Heart" (Okada 2018), Okada is known as a filmmaker as much for her personal struggles as for her creations.

Her story is one with particular resonance and relevance in Japan: she grew up with an abusive mother and suffered from severe social anxiety, leading her to quit school and become a reclusive *hikikomori*, a Japanese youth who rarely, if ever, leaves their home. As a relatively recent phenomenon within Japanese society, reported on as a social problem by news outlets from the 1990s onwards (Suwa and Suzuki 2013 191), Okada's story (and recovery from this condition) makes her somewhat representative of this group. Beyond this social context, however, it is important to note that many of Okada's most popular stories draw upon her troubled youth, particularly the series *Anohana: The Flower We Saw That Day* (Okada 2011), which features a protagonist who doesn't leave his house. Additionally, both *Anohana* and the film *The Anthem of the Heart* (Nagai 2015), which Okada wrote the scripts for, take place in her hometown of Chichibu. This is interesting in the context of auteur theory, and in particular the criticism that it disregards the collaborative nature of filmmaking – even in these projects that were not "100% Okada anime" (Morrissy 2017), elements of her creative process and biographical influence are clearly identifiable.

Okada's career trajectory up until now has been somewhat unusual, and a far cry from the high cultural value that the label of auteur typically implies. For example, among the various writing jobs she took up early in her career was a position writing scenarios for direct to video pornography, which she credits with helping her learn to write things that she had "never experienced" (Zatat 2018). She even stated that directing a short pornographic film gave her the experience necessary to direct her anime feature debut *Maquia: When the Promised Flower Blooms* (2018), as it taught her about technical considerations like "the position of the camera" (Zatat 2018). This demonstrates the unorthodox approach Okada takes to her work, and reveals how her inspirations and background stretch beyond the more conventional literary and filmic inspirations utilised by anime auteurs like Hayao Miyazaki. This background in pornography, though brief, also shows Okada's willingness to work within a "debased low culture genre" (Attwood 2002 93), marking her rise to the status of auteur more dramatic and unusual. She then began working freelance transcribing interviews, at which point she received a job typing up an anime writer's handwritten manuscripts – she was asked to contribute her own ideas, and *DT Eightron* (Amino 1999-2000), directed by her future collaborator Tetsuro Amino, became her first written anime work (Morrissy 2018). This entrance into the anime industry is

considered unusual, as directors typically begin by making connections through assistant or journalistic work (Morrissy 2018) – Okada could not participate in this socialising due to her severe anxiety. Again, this suggests that Okada's auteur persona is that of an outcast or underdog, an ostracised woman who works within a globally othered mode of filmmaking – in the context of her work, this gains deeper significance. Popular female *mangaka* (authors of manga) have existed for decades, and female anime directors like Naoko Yamada and Saya Yamamoto who also emerged in the 21st century have seen success with films like *A Silent Voice* (Yamada 2016) and series like *Yuri!!! On Ice* (Yamamoto 2016). However, Okada is a rare creator within anime, receiving considerable budgets to create works that are, broadly speaking, by women and for women.

Although Okada's work possesses several thematic similarities with popular male anime directors like Hayao Miyazaki, particularly her use of young female protagonists and fantastical European imagery, these stories are typically categorised solely as belonging to the *shoujo* tradition for young girls rather than as a part of Okada's own original vision as an auteur filmmaker. This reflects an ongoing issue with media targeted towards teenage girls as an audience, in which these creative works are typically disregarded as unfit for critical or academic analysis. Feminist scholar Catherine Strong identifies that "in Western societies, cultural products associated with girls or women, either as the creator or the main audience, have often been positioned at or near the bottom of the cultural hierarchy" (2009 1), and I argue that the perception of anime is no exception. For instance, Wendy Ide writing for the Guardian described the melodrama present in *Maquia* as "overwrought", "sentimentalised", "screechy", and perhaps most revealingly as "neutered" (Ide 2018), suggesting an innate aversion to stories coded as more stereotypically feminine in nature. Therefore, an appraisal of Okada as an auteur is important – not just to further legitimise the study of anime through poetics, but to also reassess the perception of work overtly created with women's stories in mind.

Okada As Auteur

A significant criticism of auteur theory is that it is most often deployed in reference to white Western men who create live action cinema. Discussing this phenomenon in her essay 'Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema', scholar Claire Johnston describes how "some developments of the auteur theory have led to a tendency to deify the personality of the (male) director" (2004 186). However, she still emphasises the power that this method of analysis

holds in challenging "the entrenched view of Hollywood as monolithic" – a forebearer to my current analysis of filmmakers working in the anime industry. While Johnston is discussing misogyny in the American film industry here, I believe that it applies effectively to the creation of anime being seen as mechanical or monolithic, an idea only worsened by Western racist and orientalist perspectives. Okada herself represents several traits that often hold filmmakers back from the deification of the auteur title; she is a Japanese woman who has worked in television and pornography, and whose work occupies a realm of melodrama intended for a young female audience. Okada is also relatively unique within her own industry even after becoming a prolific screenwriter, saying in an interview that "it's not normal in the animation industry for a writer to become a director" (Brady 2018); indeed, both Hayao Miyazaki and his fellow Ghibli founder Isao Takahata began their careers as animators. Okada's own public airing of her personal issues and visibly humble beginnings also sets her apart from directors like Miyazaki and Takahata, who are each often referred to in deifying and reverent tones as "the father of anime" (Priddle 2015).

While Okada's directorial career is still relatively young, as is her possession of a high degree of creative control in her work in general, there are still a few distinct traits that can be marked out in her work, particularly her personal, autobiographical style of storytelling. Okada favours entirely original stories of her own creation, imbuing them with her own experiences, and in some cases using them to work through her own personal trauma. For example, when writing the mother character in the series *Hanasaku Iroha* (Okada 2010-2012), she chose to base her on her own abusive mother in an attempt to understand her having reached a similar age to her mother when she was raised (Morrissy 2018). In choosing to include some of the more traumatic moments of her life in her work, much of it therefore enters a realm of emotional intensity and aesthetic exaggeration typical of that of melodrama. This is assisted by her use of narrative hyperbole and metaphor for dramatic purposes – for instance, *The Anthem of the Heart* centres around a protagonist who, upon witnessing her father having an affair and telling her mother, resulting in the divorce of her parents, finds herself symbolically "cursed" and completely unable to speak out of guilt and fear. Beyond common narrative features, Okada does favour certain aesthetic choices, often describing scenes in great visual detail in her screenplays and using photographic references to capture the desired feeling of a scene when working with designers (Chapman 2018).

Though Okada's work isn't necessarily overtly feminist in content, I would still argue that she utilises the *shoujo* category to make work explicitly for a female gaze, that assumes a female viewership, with P.A. Works CEO Kenji Horikawa stating that Okada "may be leading a new wave of anime narratives in which female roles and life stories are at the centre" (Kelts 2018). Many anime films and series made by male creators feature young female protagonists that serve at least partially as spectacle for a male viewer, such as the *Sailor Moon* anime series (Tomita 1992-1997), which features young girls in skimpy school uniform style outfits that scholar Anne Allison argues follow a trend of the "infantilisation of female sex objects" in Japan (2006 133). Similarly, while Miyazaki's films are lauded for their "courageous young female characters" that function as "role models" (Ting 2021 312), one can also argue that this still holds these young female characters beyond the realm of more down to Earth relatability, the flawlessness of the girls not reflecting the lived reality of the viewers. In contrast, Okada features *shoujo* protagonists who are notably flawed in ways that reflect her own experiences (as discussed earlier), and who often struggle to live up to the ideals of femininity that society places on their shoulders, from responsibilities like motherhood to more image conscious roles like that of the demure schoolgirl. The latter is depicted in *A Whisker Away* (Sato 2020), a film written by Okada which features a loud and clumsy female protagonist who gets in physical fights and is repeatedly turned down by her crush for her brash behaviour. This gives the impression that Okada is not merely depicting these female characters, but intentionally presenting them to an audience of young women in order to represent their worries and struggles in an emotionally resonant way. As stated by writer Roland Kelts in an interview with Okada, he believes that *Maquia* in particular seems to be "grounded in a woman's experience", with Okada's life and background being central to the unique successes of her work. This is significant from the perspective of feminist theory, specifically that of the "female gaze" defined by Lisa French as "the communication or expression of female subjectivity" (2021 67). Where male anime directors are able to depict female characters in a respectful manner with a high degree of critical success, it is directors like Okada who bring their own subjectivity and nuanced perspective on womanhood to their work, and who therefore have a greater ability to faithfully depict the condition of being a woman.

Maquia: When the Promised Flower Blooms

In Okada's feature directorial debut, she takes the concept of a youthful protagonist to an extreme, creating a distinctly melodramatic fantasy clearly influenced by Western European

fantasy and mythology. *Maquia: When the Promised Flower Blooms* (2018) features an original fantasy world of Okada's creation, in which a legendary near-immortal people known as the Iorph are attacked by humans, resulting in the young orphan protagonist Maquia's separation from her own kind in the land of humans. She comes across an orphaned human baby immediately after the attack, whom she adopts and names Ariel; the film then follows her and Ariel's life up until and after his death, during time which she retains the appearance of a young teenager, despite nearly a century passing. Though based on an entirely original story by Okada, the film fits clearly within several genre tropes, particularly that of the fantasy epic – the narrative spans across the course of a century, and takes place in multiple fictional nations and landscapes. The scale of this work stretches far beyond many of Okada's previous ventures, likely due to the fact that feature anime films tend to have larger budgets than anime TV series, known for their cost cutting style (Hu 2010 138), and because these budgets don't need to be stretched across the animation of more content.

Okada has utilised a variety of Western aesthetic inspirations throughout her career and has kept these influences consistently as she gained more creative independence in the anime industry. While her directorial career is still young, having only directed *Maquia: When the Promised Flower Blooms* so far, her next project *Alice to Teresu no Maboroshi Kojo* currently has a teaser trailer that alludes to similar Western aesthetics (Beltrano 2021). *Maquia* is arguably her most Western work visually and in terms of world building, as can be seen in the opening scenes, which establish the Iorph and their world. The Iorph themselves are characterised by long blonde hair and draped white clothing, reminiscent of elves from influential European fantasy texts such as within J.R.R. Tolkien's "legendarium" (Tolkien 1977), who are similarly immortal and live in a paradise away from other fantasy races. Additionally, while dragons are a significant part of Japanese folklore, the dragons present in *Maquia* have traits that distinguish them as aesthetically Western European: they are winged and have legs, in contrast with East Asian dragons that are more serpentine in appearance (Zhao 1992 38). Although Okada has cited no particular European influence in interviews, she has stated that the fantasy setting exists to serve the melodrama: "if we tried to convey these deep relationships in a real city or our world, it might seem fake because the emotions are so deep" (Chapman 2018). This reflects Cobus Van Staden's theory of Europe in anime as distant and "beautifully past" (2009) – although *Maquia* takes place in a more literal world of fantasy, the concept of Europe as a place beyond our world in Japan is still pertinent. This also makes *Maquia*'s status of an anime work, while still valid, somewhat less stable – though aesthetic

conventions of anime are utilised within the large eyed characters and dynamic camerawork, her use of European references questions the innate Japaneseness that many attribute to anime, as does her own insistence upon the universality of "strong emotions" (Chapman 2018).

Arguably, the high fantasy world of Okada's creation is primarily used to encourage a greater suspension of disbelief in the viewer and therefore increase the impact of the more emotional scenes, instead of to construct a fictional society for the purpose of allegory or for other stories to take place there in future media. For example, a close analysis of the scene immediately following the Mezarte nation attack on the Iorph reveals that while the destruction of their land is an interesting spectacle, the focus remains on Maquia's personal response to this traumatic event. After hearing audio of her friends calling on her to join them from an earlier scene, Maquia contemplates jumping from a cliff and ending her life, a moment that undercuts the sense of relief felt from her escape. The stillness of the wilderness backdrop contrasts with the chaos that immediately preceded the scene, and encourages the audience to meditate on the ramifications of the violence, instead of moving onto the next visual set piece. Maquia then moves along to a site full of tents, tripping over a civilian murdered by bandits and wailing in shock before discovering that a baby is in the arms of the corpse. In addition to introducing a theme of sacrificial motherhood, that will later be questioned and subverted, this sequence once again combines the horrific realities of war with the intense emotions of melodrama. This is exemplified by Maquia forcing back the stiffened fingers of the corpse to retrieve the baby, these closeups juxtaposed with an extreme closeups of Maquia's teary eyes with each break. This editing pattern creates a connection between the tragic physical destruction of a mortal being and Maquia's misery, a grief that is heightened by her near endless lifespan and the vulnerable teenage appearance she has throughout the film in spite of her actual age. This small physical gesture having a greater narrative impact than the widespread destruction of her home also reveals the focus on interpersonal relationships and intimate emotions that the film will prioritise, despite its generic appearance as a fantasy epic. As an early scene in the film, this moment also sets a precedent for the melodrama to follow, implying with its placement in the text that later moments will only become increasingly intense.

Another significant yet subdued scene that occurs later in *Maquia* is one in which she reveals her strength and resilience as a mother after searching for and finding Ariel on the rainy city streets. After a period of roughly a minute that features only Maquia from voyeuristic angles wandering the roads in distress and calling his name, she eventually finds him and breaks down

in tears, before promising to Ariel that she won't cry again and repeating a gesture of her friend Mido (who earlier in the film who taught her the basics of parenthood) by triumphantly banging her chest. As well as demonstrating the cyclical nature of motherhood being taught and enacted, this scene also functions to foreshadow the pain Maquia will later endure when she loses an adult Ariel, and to reinforce the impossible standards of motherhood on women. The climax of the film further reveals the precedence of melodrama and emotion over action-oriented spectacle – while there is a battle sequence towards the close of the film, the true moment of climax comes at the point of Ariel's death as an old man. This scene marks when Maquia breaks her promise as a mother to Ariel, finally bursting into tears in grief as she leaves his home, and revealing her natural imperfections as a mother. This micronarrative within the film of Maquia's promise reasserts the central theme of accepting one's own shortcomings and struggles, and the final scene demonstrates Maquia's growth by reversing the missing Ariel scene; her son is gone, and despite breaking her promise, she is able to walk away confidently to the next stage of her life, no longer stumbling in the dark.

Okada's previously stated preoccupation with motherhood, partially based on her own past, is explored thoroughly throughout *Maquia*, as are the emotional struggles that arise from the roles women have historically been required to play in society. The character of Ariel presents an interesting interplay between masculinity and femininity – Maquia even names him without knowing that Ariel is a name typically reserved for women, simply viewing it as pretty. His initial closeness to his adopted mother is ultimately hindered by Ariel appearing to be the same age as his mother – one interpretation of this difficulty could be how men are typically seen as more authoritative than women their own age, and that Maquia's own authority over him is harder to handle in a world that creates these roles. The primary reason for their physical ten-year separation is also his becoming a soldier for the very country who attacked Maquia's homeland, fulfilling a societal expectation of him as a young man while simultaneously severing the connection he previously had with his mother figure. As well as presenting another instance of the grief of motherhood – ultimately losing your child to the rest of the world – Okada also suggests that societally prescribed masculinity as a barrier to meaningful and functional relationships between men and women. By presenting this issue within a *shoujo* style *bildungsroman* narrative, Okada is presenting problems specific to women's experiences to the presumed target audience of young women and girls, and positioning herself as an artist imparting her experiences onto a younger generation. This sense of subjectivity is reinforced by the fact that Maquia is a character who plays a conventionally feminine role, rather than "a

girl who happens to take on a role conventionally performed by a boy" (Kelts 2018). Although depicting this kind of gender nonconformity can certainly be used for feminist ends, the exploration of feminine roles in *Maquia* functions to present the trials inherent to fulfilling these roles, rather than to depict a rejection of them. This interpretation is supported by one of the more significant subplots of the film – Maquia's friend Leila is captured and forced to bear the child of the prince of Mezarte, a struggle specific to her womanhood that runs parallel to Maquia's own. Though subjectivity and autobiographical inspiration is by no means unique to Okada as a director, the specificity of her experiences as a Japanese woman are relatively unique within the world of anime, and particularly of animation globally. While it is unfair to characterise Okada as an auteur purely for these labels, they no doubt have a broader impact on the presumptions surrounding what it means to be an auteur filmmaker.

To elaborate somewhat on the subject of *shoujo*, Maquia herself can be theorised as a *majokko*, or Witch Girl, a popular character centred subgenre in *shoujo* anime. Kumiko Saito defines this genre as series or films in which "the female protagonist's superhuman power derives from her pedigree as a princess of a magical kingdom or a similar scenario", and 'she wields her power to save people from a threat while maintaining her secret identity' (2014). However, Okada seems to be mobilising these tropes in order to subvert them, perhaps suggesting the realities of being a young woman are more complex than the "cute power" of this genre may usually suggest, particularly at the conclusion, in which Maquia returns to her homeland with no more son to care for. Rather than encouraging "girls to envision marriage and domestic life as a desirable goal once they have passed the adolescent stage" (Saito 2014) as *majokko* works often do, Okada presents an alternative, implying that while motherhood has deeply affected Maquia, it is by no means the end of her story, with her eternal adolescence suggesting that this open approach to the world never has to end. Additionally, Maquia as a character is never presented in a sexual light; she is covered up, wears simple clothing, and while beautiful, is unique for her determination in living in a foreign land. This contrasts with *majokko* protagonists, such as Cutey Honey, whose "eroticism" serves to visually undermine her other abilities (Saito 2014). Though one cannot say with certainty that Okada's female directorial gaze is the reason for this alternative take on the *shoujo* tradition, the lack of any sexual objectification of her female characters can be seen to directly correlate with the director's own insertion of female subjectivity.

Expression and Resolution

Both within the anime industry and beyond, Okada may not be the most conventional model of an auteur, but I argue that her unusual and unique journey to becoming a director has added to the broader impression of her as an artist with a distinctive and personal vision. Her use of a distinctly feminine subjectivity is unusual in her field, and functions to redefine and re-evaluate many of the conventions of *shoujo* anime that have become commonplace for male directors, placing them under a new lens and therefore changing their significance. Although scholar Jennifer Slobodian is not referring to Okada specifically here, her analysis of non-white and non-English speaking female auteurs is pertinent, specifically the idea that they are "straddling/dismantling the borders of the cinematic world" (2012 16). Here, Okada faces the additional challenge of working outside of the dominant live action cinema, another barrier to being more widely accepted as an auteur. By acknowledging her and explicitly naming her as an auteur director, one can significantly challenge the perception of not just anime filmmakers, but of female centred media in general. Additionally, many more anime creators can be studied through this lens, to reveal a high level of individuality and originality in their work that often remains unacknowledged within film criticism and academia. This can therefore contribute to a broader decolonisation of film studies as an area of research, diversifying the hegemony of Western live action film and legitimising the artistic value of popular anime works through the rigorous study of their creators.

References

Allison, Anne. 2006. *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Amino, Tetsuro, director. 1999-2000 *DT Eightron.* Fuji TV.

Attwood, Feona. 2002. ‘Reading Porn: The Paradigm Shift in Pornography Research’, *Sexualities* 5, no. 1.

Beltrano, Jei. 2021. ‘MAPPA's 'Arisu to Teresu no Maboroshi Koujou' original anime film announced, directed by Mari Okada’, Aniradio Plus. <https://www.aniradioplus.com/post/mappa-s-arisu-to-teresu-no-maboroshi-koujou-anime-film-announced-directed-by-mari-okada>

Brady, Tara. 2018. ‘Mari Okada: from teenage recluse to anime superstar’, The Irish Times. <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/film/mari-okada-from-teenage-recluse-to-anime-superstar-1.3536408>

Cameron, James, director. 1997. *Titanic*. Paramount Pictures.

Chapman, Jacob. 2018. ‘Interview: Mari Okada on Maquia - When the Promised Flower Blooms’ Anime News Network. <https://www.animenewsnetwork.com/feature/2018-08-10/interview-mari-okada-on-maquia-when-the-promised-flower-blooms/.135233>

Condry, Ian. 2013. *The Soul of Anime: Collaborative Creativity and Japan's Media Success Story*. Durham: Duke University Press.

French, Lisa. 2021. *The Female Gaze in Documentary Film: An International Perspective*. New York City: Springer International Publishing.

Grant, Barry. 2008. *Auteurs and Authorship: A Film Reader*. New Jersey: Wiley.

Hu, Tze-yue G. 2010. *Frames of Anime: Culture and Image-building*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Ide, Wendy. 2018. ‘Maquia review – impressive anime spectacle’ <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jun/24/maquia-review-impressive-anime-spectacle>

Johnston, Claire. 2004. ‘Women’s Cinema as Counter-Cinema’, *Film Theory: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Kelts, Roland. 2018. ‘Motherhood in modern anime’, The Japan Times. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2018/07/22/general/motherhood-modern-anime/#.W1WocdgzbYW>

Kogyo Tsushinsha. 2022. ‘All-time box office top 100’, *Cinema Ranking Communication*. <http://www.kogyotsushin.com/archives/alltime/>

McCurry, Justin. 2020. ‘Demon Slayer kills big-name rivals to become Japan's highest grossing film’, The Guardian. < https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/28/demon-slayer-kills-big-name-rivals-to-become-japans-highest-grossing-film>

Mckevitt, Andrew C. 2010. ‘“You Are Not Alone!”: Anime and the Globalizing of America’, *Diplomatic History* 34, no. 5.

Miyazaki, Hayao, director. 1997. *Princess Mononoke*. Studio Ghibli.

Miyazaki, Hayao, director. 2001. *Spirited Away*. Studio Ghibli.

Miyazaki, Hayao, director. 2004. *Howl’s Moving Castle*. Studio Ghibli.

Morrissy, Kim. 2017. ‘How Mari Okada Went From Shut-In To Anime Director’, AnimeNewsNetwork. < https://www.animenewsnetwork.com/feature/2017-09-06/how-mari-okada-went-from-shut-in-to-anime-director/.120417>

Nagai, Tastuyuki, director. 2015. *The Anthem of the Heart*. Aniplex.

Newitz, Annalee. 1994. ‘Anime Otaku: Japanese Animation Fans Outside Japan’, *Bad Subjects*, no. 13.

Ogi, Fusami, Berndt, Jacqueline, and Nagaike, Kazumi. 2019. *Shōjo Across Media: Exploring "Girl" Practices in Contemporary Japan*. New York City: Springer International Publishing.

Okada, Mari. 2018. *From Truant to Anime Screenwriter: My Path to “Anohana” and “The Anthem of the Heart*. J-Novel Club.

Okada, Mari, director. 2011. *Anohana: The Flower We Saw That Day*. Fuji TV.

Okada, Mari, director. 2013. *Hanasaku Iroha.* P.A. Works.

Okada, Mari, director. 2018. *Maquia: When the Promised Flower Blooms*. Showgate.

Patalita, Jules. 2018. ‘Auteur Theory in Video Games: Recognising Hideo Kojima and ThatGameCompany As Auteurs in the Video Game Medium’, Master’s Thesis, Ball State University, Indiana.

Priddle, Natalie. 2015. ‘Hayao Miyazaki: The Father of Anime’, Japan Info. < https://jpninfo.com/26047>

Ricker, Ko. 2018. ‘Interview: ‘Maquia’ Director Mari Okada On The Challenges Of Being A First-Time Animation Director’, Cartoon Brew. <https://www.cartoonbrew.com/anime/maquia-director-mari-okada-on-the-challenges-of-being-a-first-time-animation-director-162083.html>

Said, Edward. 2014. *Orientalism*. New York City: Vintage Books.

Saito, Kumiko. 2014. 'Magic, Shōjo, and Metamorphosis: Magical Girl Anime and the Challenges of Changing Gender Identities in Japanese Society', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 73, no. 1.

Salemme, Erika. 2019. 'The Rising Popularity of Anime', *The Sandbox News*. https://sandbox.spcollege.edu/index.php/2019/10/the-rising-popularity-of-anime/>

Scateni, Ren. 2020. 'Women Make Anime', Sight and Sound. < https://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/features/women-make-anime> [accessed 5 August 2021]

Shary, Timothy. 2005. *Teen Movies: American Youth on Screen*. London: Wallflower Press.

Shinkai, Makoto, director. 2016. *Your Name.* Toho.

Slobodian, Jennifer. 2012. 'Analyzing the Woman Auteur: The Female/Feminist Gazes of Isabel Coixet and Lucrecia Martel', *The Comparatist* 36.

Smith, James. 2020. '9 Reasons Why Anime Is Experiencing A Huge Growth In Popularity', Nerdly. <https://www.nerdly.co.uk/2020/03/12/9-reasons-why-anime-is-experiencing-a-huge-growth-in-popularity/>

Sotozaki, Haruo, director. 2020. *Demon Slayer.* Toho.

Staples, Donald. E. 1966. 'The Auteur Theory Reexamined', *Cinema Journal* 6.

Strong, Catherine. 2009. '"...it sucked because it was written for teenage girls": Twilight, anti-fans and symbolic violence', *Annual conference of The Australian Sociological Association*. ANU, Canberra: TASA.

Suwa, M., and Suzuki, K. 2013. 'The phenomenon of "hikikomori" (social withdrawal) and the socio-cultural situation in Japan today', *Journal of Psychopathology* 19.

Takahata, Isao, director. 1988. *Grave of the Fireflies*. Studio Ghibli.

Takahata, Isao, director. 1999. *My Neighbors the Yamadas.* Studio Ghibli.

Takeuchi, Naoko. 2011. *Sailor Moon 1*. New York: Kodansha USA Publishing.

Tanaka, Masakazu. 2011. 'Fetishism: A Double Denial', *ZINBUN*, no. 42.

Tilly, Chris. 2018. 'How New Anime 'Maquia: When the Promised Flower Blooms' Upset Mothers in Japan', Fandom. <https://www.fandom.com/articles/how-new-anime-maquia-when-the-promised-flower-blooms-upset-mothers-in-japan>

Ting, Grace En-Yi. 2021. 'Gender, Manga, and Anime', *The Routledge Companion to Gender and Japanese Culture*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Silmarillion*. 1977. Crows Nest: George Allen and Unwin.

Tomita, Sukehiro, director. 1992-1997. *Sailor Moon*. TV Asahi.

Truffaut, Francois. 1954. 'A Certain Tendency in the French Cinema', *Cahiers du Cinema.*

Ueno, Toshiya. 1999. ‘Techno-Orientalism and media-tribalism: On Japanese animation and rave culture’, *Third Text* 13, no. 47.

Van Staden, Cobus. 2009. ‘Heidi in Japan: what do anime dreams of Europe mean for non-Europeans?’, *International Institute for Asian Studies: The Newsletter*, no. 50.

Wyss, Johann David. 1812. *The Swiss Family Robinson*. Johann Rudolph Wyss.

Yamada, Naoko, director. 2016. *A Silent Voice.* Shochiku.

Yamamoto, Sayo, director. 2016. *Yuri!!! On Ice.* MAPPA.

Zatat, Narjas. 2018. ‘Anime pioneer Mari Okada on how she went from writing porn scripts to feature films’, indy100. < https://www.indy100.com/discover/mari-okada-anime-porn-scripts-films-8384281>

Zhao, Qiguang. 1992. *A study of dragons, East and West*. Pieterlen: Peter Lang Inc.