

**Dis/Locating Audience**

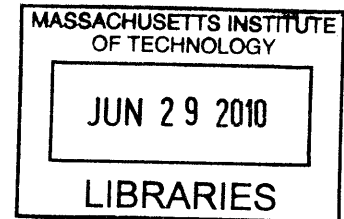
*Transnational Media Flows and the Online Circulation of  
East Asian Television Drama*

by

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B.A. Comparative Literature  
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**ARCHIVES**



SUBMITTED TO THE PROGRAM IN COMPARATIVE MEDIA STUDIES IN PARTIAL  
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## **Dis/Locating Audience**

### *Transnational Media Flows and the Online Circulation of East Asian Television Drama*

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Xiaochang Li

Submitted to the Program in Comparative Media Studies on July 31,  
2009, in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Masters  
of Science in Comparative Media Studies

#### **ABSTRACT**

It is commonly accepted that media and communication technologies play pivotal roles in the complex processes of what is broadly termed “globalization.” The increasing speed, volume, and scale of transnational circulation has been one of the most dramatic development in the media landscape, creating what Appadurai has dubbed global “mediascapes” that are reshaping the way we understand cultural formation. While the rise of massive global commercial media enterprises leads to renewed discussion of the dominance of the “West” upon the “Rest,” the increasing portability, transmitability, and reproducibility of media has helped to generate a grassroots globalization of migrant populations who circulate and engage with media from the “homeland,” creating deterritorialized social imaginaries that transcend national boundaries.

In examining the flourishing online fandom around the circulation of East Asian television drama, however, the established models of transnational media audiences prove insufficient. With the emergence of internet technologies, these mediascapes have now become *networked*, increasing the visibility and complexity of transnational media flows and the audiences around them. No longer are we seeing transnational media flows through only commercial markets or diasporic audiences seeking to connect with a virtual “home.” In the online circulation of East Asian television dramas, fans with a broad range of cultural, ethnic, and national backgrounds are consciously working to shape audience engagement with these transnational television texts through fansubbing, content aggregation and curation, and the production of vast reservoirs of information, discourse, and meta-data that is constantly being expanded. More importantly, they are doing so publicly, collaboratively, and outside the domain of commercial television markets. enabling individuals to participate in the selection, (re)production, and circulation of texts and images that shape the very social imaginaries they inhabit.

This work draws on insights from work on globalization, diasporic media use, fan and audience studies, and new media and employs various ethnographic, textual, and theoretical strategies and stances in an effort to illuminate key dimensions of these collaborative *grassroutes* of transnational media. What manner of cultural encounters are taking place within the interplay between diasporic conditions and fan practices? How do the circulation and consumption practices afforded by new media technologies inform, and can in turn be informed by, the conditions of global media audienceship? From there we may begin to remap some of complex social, technological, and textual entanglements of cultural negotiation in an increasingly global media age.

# Dis/locating Audience

Transnational Media Flows and the Online Circulation of  
East Asian Television Drama



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# Introduction

## Networked Mediascapes

*“The two extremes, local and global, are much less interesting than the intermediary arrangements that we are calling networks.”*

Bruno Latour

Consider a clip from the Japanese variety show *Arashi no Shukudaikun*, running just over three minutes, that recently made its way onto YouTube<sup>1</sup>: a small group of Japanese pop singers are challenged to eat a “surprisingly large” hamburger named after a city in the Ibaraki prefecture, joking about how “Super American” the situation is -- they suggest that the burger inspires them to don overalls and grow “amazing” chest hair -- while Bruce Springsteen’s “Born in the USA” blares in the background. The clip was then subtitled in English by two fans based in Australia, and circulated based on its appeal to English-speaking audiences of the “Jpop” performers and as an embodied spectacle of Japanese popular culture. From there, various versions of the clip were then distributed through message boards, blogs, and online forums, including fan communities on Livejournal, a Russian-owned social blogging platform with offices based in San Francisco. From these sites it was then viewed by fans who in turn blasted the link out to friends via facebook, twitter, del.icio.us, and other social media sites, the material getting

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uE6E2Fd2uzg>

recontextualized, reformatted, re-subtitled, and diverted into new, sometimes unexpected, audiences at every step along the way.

The YouTube version of the video received a respectable -- though unexceptional -- amount of attention, reaching somewhere around 11,000 views in a couple of months. It wasn't anywhere near the most-watched of that day or week or year, though the YouTube channel run by the translators did make it into the top 15 of that month's most subscribed channels. It never achieved the wild popularity or broad viewing necessary to be considered an unprecedented "viral" success, but in some ways, its mediocre viewership numbers is what makes it representative of our particular media moment. That is to say, what makes this video notable isn't that it performed exceptionally or received special attention. What makes this video, and the many others like it, notable is that the criss-crossing paths back and forth across numerous national, linguistic, and cultural boundaries are becoming perfectly *common*.

Communications technology has long been considered one of the driving forces of globalization. The increasing speed, volume, and scale of transnational circulation has been one of the most dramatic shifts in the media landscape, creating what Arjun Appadurai has dubbed global "mediascapes" that are reshaping the way we understand audiences at a moment in which the role of the nation-state in the production of cultural spaces is being called into question. In this context, then, the *Arashi no Shukudaikun* clip illuminates three key characteristics in the examination of transnational media flow. The first is that despite the unprecedented scale of media migration across geographical borders, or perhaps more accurately *because* of it, the significance of the nation, of the national, far from being disappeared, is being revitalized in new and unexpected ways. That rather than being done away with, the national, regional, and local are being reconfigured and re-articulated through the transnational movement of texts. The second is that with digital and network technologies, distribution is becoming more visibly *circulation* in the sense that the dissemination of media is ever increasingly and ever more



explicitly not between producer and consumer, but through multi-stop routes in which the practices of production, distribution, and consumption are being reordered and becoming increasingly blurred. Texts like *Arashi no Shukudaikun* are being picked up from the end of one distribution chain for entry into others, are diverted and adapted at various points into new routes, by a variety of parties with a diverse range of motivations and goals. As a result, it is increasingly the processes of circulation, in addition to sites of production and consumption, that radically shape the movement and *meaning* of media as it travels globally. Finally, audience practices are being facilitated by networked digital technologies that are creating new flows of transnational content through tasks such as subtitling, distribution, and content curation that reveal audiences to be active beyond acts of textual interpretation. As a result, we are seeing the formation of new spaces and of participation, collaboration, and collectivity with which to think through the relationship of media *use* and cultural citizenship.

It seems appropriate, then, to take this opportunity to reboot thinking around transnational flows and audiences in light of these tectonic shifts in the media landscape. As we settle into an era in which the channels of media transmission are greater in number and more diverse and easily accessible than ever before, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the routes of cultural exchange are becoming more complexly entangled, fragmented, and collaborative. While the rise of massive global commercial media enterprises leads to renewed discussion of the dominance of the “West” upon the “Rest,” the increasing portability, transmittability, and reproducibility of media has helped to generate a grassroots globalization of migrant populations, pop cosmopolitans, and other groupings that do not fit so neatly into pre-given categories. These newly visible media *users* are themselves circulating and engaging with media across political borders, market segments, and language barriers, creating deterritorialized social imaginaries that not only transcend national boundaries, but signal the emergence of new discursive spaces of audienceship that cannot be adequately described by the established models of global media culture.

### ***emergent networks and global media: central questions***

Since Appadurai first suggested that media technology is enabling the “conditions of collective reading, criticism, and pleasure . . . [that create] a ‘community of sentiment’ . . . a group that begins to imagine and feel things together” which, in turn, challenges the monopoly of nation-states over the project of modernization (1996: 8), we have seen dramatic changes in media and communications technology. Among these are the falling costs of personal computing and networked communications, a factor that has lowered the barriers of access to the tools of communication, production, and distribution. These changes have given rise to what Yochai Benkler dubbed the “networked information economy,” an environment that radically “increases the extent to which individuals can become active participants in producing their own cultural environment” (2006: 130). Elsewhere, this phenomenon has been called “participatory culture,” describing a set of practices in which individuals and communities are actively engaging and interacting with the cultural materials that make up their media environment and, perhaps more importantly, with one another as fellow participants, in ways beyond interpretation at the point of consumption (Jenkins 2006).

Whatever terms we choose to describe these emergent network practices that have come to characterize the so-called “new media” landscape, they compel us to take another pass at the established paradigms around media and globalization and question the cultural implications of new systems of transnational media circulation within these developing environments. What happens, in other words, when we stack Benkler’s networked economies atop Appadurai’s transnational mediascape? What do these communities of sentiment and deterritorialized social imaginaries look like in a time when people have significantly increased access to not only media materials worldwide, but also the capacity for media production and distribution and, by extension of that, to one another? How has the increased visibility and complexity of

transnational media flows and the audience practices around them complicated the models of diaspora, global media, and audienceship? Through this we see the emergence of a new problematic: what happens when the destabilizing transnational mediascapes become radically *networked*?

Rather than try to answer any of these questions definitively, I have instead attempted merely to ground their provocations in a specific set of media practices: the online circulation of East Asian TV dramas in the US amongst young, web-savvy, predominantly female audiences. The “Dis/locating” in the title refers first more generally to an acknowledgement of how the transnational circulation of media is creating communities of sentiment with a shared cultural frame of reference and a sense of collective sentiment across geopolitical boundaries, thus fostering cultural collisions and emergent subjectivities. But in the context of this project’s particular goals, it more specifically refers to an effort to intervene upon and perhaps jar loose the stability and primacy of some of the established models of transnational audiences, while simultaneously signaling an attempt to situate and reground these communities of sentiment and models within the conditions and practices that enable them.

### ***locating audience(ship)***

Although one of the central premises of this work is that audiences, texts, and the interplay between the two within the networked media landscape are becoming increasingly diverse, we must nevertheless try to carve out some measure of specificity within the “practiced, embodied, and lived reality” (Dasgupta 2005: 437) of these media circulations. While there is certainly space and potential for all manners of engagements, it does not change the fact that there have emerged standards of popular circulation practices, prominent audience members and groups, and specific types of texts that gain the most traction. That is to say, though as a whole the online circulation of East Asian drama can be seen as a sort of “alternate” media space full of

divergent and sometimes conflicting modes of audiences participation and cultural engagement, there are nevertheless those within it that can be understood to be *popular*. Rather than trying to track down the reason or motivation or some explanatory system, I want to investigate the consequences of how some of the most visible modes of engagement shape the so-called community of sentiment that forms around some of the most widely circulated texts.

In situating audience practice and media flows within their “embodied reality,” however, I am not looking to define a type of audience, but rather what might perhaps be thought of as formations of *audienceship*, of encounters between audiences and texts. Broadly, whereas an “audience” is typically defined in terms of subject position, of the context of the viewers, “audienceship” describes a context for the viewing process. Audienceship thus helps steer us away from the audience as a category of person, and towards audience as a situation that describes particular sets of practices and engagements with texts and cultural materials. This is not to understate the importance of historically situated understanding of audiences and media engagement, but to interrogate the prospect of any absolute alignment between any single factor or condition and how texts are viewed and meanings made. As Aswin Punathambekar suggests in discussing Shanti Kumar’s “unimaginable communities” of electronic capitalism, “[a]t the very moment we define audiences – in terms of nation, language, race/ethnicity; in medium specific ways (film or television); in varied demographic clusters (family, youth, fans, etc.) – our definition breaks down” (Punathambekar 2008). That is to say, no single vector of identity can sufficiently describe the range and complexity of audience engagements with any particular form of media, so that trying to define audience identities runs the risk of filtering understanding through pre-established limits, even as new practices and connectivities are forging audience identifications that do not fit within these categorizations.

Thinking through modes of participation and affiliation, through audienceships, helps to remind us that we can slice an orange many ways and reveal vastly different patterns of formation, and

we cannot determine at the outset which historical factors or cultural resonances are most relevant in any particular instance. This becomes especially useful in the cases wherein participants negotiate across multiple audienceships, often simultaneously, producing both rich synergies and contentions. This is especially true as media moves across national and cultural borders, resulting in increasingly complicated negotiations of cultural identity and citizenship. The notion of audienceship seeks therefore to orient the discussion around not simply *who* the audience is, but *how* it is -- the practices, encounters, the discursive processes through which audiences are formed.

I have sought to employ a blend of ethnographic and literary strategies, given that the project deals with the circulation of specific media content as well as the movement and destabilization of audiences and the categorical definitions of the communities forming around these materials. I want to be clear, however, that this is neither a fully ethnographic nor textual account (nor, perhaps more accurately, an accounting *for*) of online drama fandom. I am neither trying to interpret people through texts and deploying literary processes to attain social conclusions nor am I treating the media materials being circulated as mere artifactual evidence. The former is not only problematic in terms of representation, but also fails to address the crucial question of how these practices might create new types of cultural spaces and encounters. The latter, in using the texts as simple evidence of the social systems they circulate in, runs the danger of presuming them to be static objects and neglects the complex interpretive patterns that inform the social imaginaries that shape these “communities.” Thus, I would emphasize again that rather than seeking to create causal relationships, I am asking how text and context might be mutually informing, how an understanding of their use beyond those imagined by their producers might help us construct new frameworks through which to read the media that circulates. This project therefore seeks to meaningfully depict the richness of the complex moving parts and many social, cultural, and textual entanglements in the online, English-

language circulation of East Asian television dramas by tackling the phenomenon from three major angles of approach.

Chapter 1 traces an historical precedent of the online circulation of dramas through an overview of the grey market circulation of unauthorized, or “pirate,” VCD reproductions of popular (predominantly Japanese) dramas throughout Asia and into diasporic communities in the US and Canada in the 1990s. In tracking the shift between VCD distribution markets and online circulation, I hope to draw the discourse away from questions of analogue versus digital media and legal versus pirate systems. In tracing circulation through two dubiously legal and digital forms (though one is, admittedly, still tied to a physical media object), I hope to better isolate the social and cultural logics that are typically swept under a focus on the technological shift. Similarly, because both forms are ambiguous violations of legal regulations around the transnational flow of content, looking more closely at their similarities and differences may give insight into what other forces might be at work in shaping the flow of content, and where the stakes and anxieties lie in the regulation of media within and across geopolitical boundaries.

If Chapter 1 gives a sense of where the current practices came from, Chapter 2 seeks to map out what those practices are and their implications for how we think about modes of audienceship. It follows the shift from the market-driven distribution through piracy networks and broadcast channels to socially-motivated online circulation, incorporating interviews with participants who play significant roles in directing the flow of content. In Chapter 2, I break down the system of circulation into three main steps: production, aggregation, and curation. In discussing production, I outline the process of fansubbing (the practice of amateur subtitling) that has been central to the exponential rise in popularity and availability of East Asian dramas, looking at how it has changed with the shift to online circulation and developed standards of practice. From there, I consider the major sites and forms of aggregation of drama content as the main nodes within the circulation process that, more directly than production, shape both the

technological and social practices that constitute the East Asian drama “fandom” or community. Finally, I look to sites of content curation -- review and recap blogs, recommendation sites, and “primer” or “pimp” posts, which significantly direct both the reach and popularity of content, but also influence the discourse around it.

In addition to scholarly literature around these topics, Chapter 2 relies heavily on participant observations gained through my experience in the East Asian drama community as well as interviews with key members within the community. This is by no means a full ethnographic account of online circulation, but rather an attempt to ground observation and theory in real practice through the adoption of certain ethnographic strategies. To this end, rather than interview a representative collection of “typical” fans and participants, I’ve focused on individuals with key gate-keeping positions -- fansubbers, maintainers of aggregator sites, forum moderators and prominent drama bloggers -- that heavily structure the interactions and movements of texts within the community. I conducted formal interviews with a total of 10 individuals for between 2 to 20 hours each through a mix of telephone, email, and chat. Most had multiple roles, and of the people interviewed, four were involved in fansubbing, three were maintainers and moderators on the largest drama torrent tracking site (including the founder) and four were drama bloggers/reviewers and two considered themselves general fans. Additionally, two of the individuals interviewed were the founders of Dramafever<sup>2</sup>, a commercial site dedicated to streaming licensed versions of East Asian dramas in the US. I’ve also spoken more informally to a number of drama fans regarding their experiences.

Due to the limited time and resources available to this project, I have chosen to focus on participants whose efforts most visibly shape the development of drama fandom not only because of the specific nature of the insights they can offer into the structure and practice of drama circulation. I also selected them because by focusing ethnographic interventions through

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<sup>2</sup> At the time of this writing, Dramafever is still in closed beta.

the types of activities and roles, I can better ensure that my exclusions are transparent and categorical. In other words, I feared that if I were to select individual “fans” or general participants along categories such as nationality, diasporic/nondiasporic, or their “level” of engagement with the material as I have seen in other studies dealing with fan practices, I would run the risk of predetermining the nature of their investment in being drama fans, thus making value judgements about their participation -- the very presumptions I hope to complicate in my work. Ultimately, in chapter 2, I hope to suggest that new modes of audienceship which do not fit pre-given categories emerge when audiences more visibly control aspects of the cultural materials they encounter.

Finally, Chapter 3 moves forward from the suggestion in Chapter 2 that, as new cultural encounters make visible new forms of audience identification, East Asian drama audiences online become “unimaginable” in significant ways. It is in this chapter that my selection bias towards individuals who inhabit key roles in drama circulation -- fansubbers, forum moderators, bloggers, and aggregation-site owners -- becomes a critical concern. These individuals are not “casual” fans. The intensity of their commitment to drama viewing and drama fandom, which is evidenced in the amount of personal time and labor they put into drama circulation, potentially speaks to cultural attachments and social investments that are not necessarily representative of the larger community. However, insight into how individuals in these key roles consider the texts being circulated remains useful because it is often these individuals who heavily influence the selection, curation, and interpretation of these texts through their interventions. That is, the consumption spaces that potentially remap the relationship between media, culture, and national and transnational identities arises out of the practices of circulation that these individuals facilitate and shape in powerful ways. I therefore examine how these fans talk about the relationship between their media consumption and cultural affiliations, suggesting that the meanings and identities they forge are dependent not only upon their individual social determinations and the texts they are using, but also the social practices around acquiring and



sharing these texts. From there, I proceed to discuss of the formal and thematic appeal of East Asian television dramass, using audience discussions and insights to construct a lens through which to view *Hana Yori Dango*, one of the most popular dramas amongst the online English-speaking community. I focus on the elements of fantasy most often cited by fans as one of the central appeals of dramas and how the melodramatic organizing structures within the text allow transcultural audienceships to discursively construct East Asian dramas as a genre encoded through and allows for resonance across articulations of cultural difference.

***a note on the texts: “East Asian” Drama as a genre***

As I hope to illustrate in Chapter 3, specificity regarding the texts that are being circulated, and not just the systems of circulation, is equally important in considering the transnational movement of media. Though I have been speaking more broadly in terms of the East Asian drama, I am referring in this context more specifically to predominantly Japanese, some Taiwanese, and in recent years Korean, primetime dramas. Even more specifically, my work focuses on the most prominent dramas across online circulation nodes. These fall loosely into the category of “post-trendy”<sup>3</sup> dramas (sometimes also known as “pure love” or *ren'ai* dramas) which center on “youths’ love affairs, friendship, and working life in urban settings” (Iwabuchi 2004: 9). While they maintain many of the aesthetic markers of the “trendy” drama developed in the late 1980s and early 1990s which featured “depictions of stylish urban lifestyles and trendy nightspots . . . extravagant designer clothes and accessories . . . chic interior designs . . . the latest pop music” (Iwabuchi 2004: 9), the post-trendy drama was known for being “more story-oriented, sympathetically depicting young people’s yearnings for love, friendship, work, and dreams, even though . . . popular idols, consumer trends, and the Tokyo setting were still vital factors” (Iwabuchi 2004: 10).

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<sup>3</sup> “Post-trendy” is the term post popular term within the Japanese television industry. According to Iwabuchi, in Chinese-speaking areas, these types of dramas are known more commonly as “idol” dramas. Additionally, the post-trendy drama in a broader delineation in Korea than it is in Japan.

In Japan and around Asia, these dramas were targeted primarily at young, female audiences in their 20s (Tōru 2004: 70) and while I have little hard demographic information on fan audiences online, there are indications that the online audience -- at least those engaged in the spaces that I am examining for this project -- tends to lean towards this demographic as well. For instance, according to the founders of Dramafever, a website streaming Korean dramas, 75% of their current registrants are female and the quantcast analytics for the largest distribution websites also skew female and heavily towards users between the ages of 18-34 (Park and Bak phone: 3 Feb 2009). Additionally, the individuals that I interviewed in the course of this research were, with the exception of the founders of D-Addicts and Dramafever, women in their 20s and 30s.

Notable in my description of these dramas is a slippage between the use of East Asian dramas and Japanese dramas in particular, and it is worth taking a moment to discuss the use of “East Asian” as a denotation of genre, rather than to either refer to dramas based on their country of production or to use the industry genre classification of “post-trendy” to describe these dramas. I fully recognize the problematic nature of -- and have many reservations about -- folding three distinct national media production cultures into a single classification based on regional proximity. Taiwanese, Korean, and Japanese dramas have -- sometimes very self-consciously<sup>4</sup>-- developed different and distinctive aesthetic and narrative styles and conventions, and choosing not to discuss these differences in depth within the scope of this project results in a loss of textual specificity. However, as Mittell suggests, “genres are not intrinsic to texts” but are rather culturally constituted, discursive practice, and thus located “within the complex interrelations between texts, industries, audiences, and historical contexts” (Mittell 2004: 9-10). As he elaborates:

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<sup>4</sup> Korean dramas, for instance, suffered criticism early in their development being too derivative of Japanese dramas and there has since been explicit efforts to differentiate themselves.

“We do not generally differentiate between shows that take place in Boston and those that take place in Chicago, but we do differentiate between programs set in a hospital and those set in a police station. Texts have many different components, but only some are activated into defining generic properties . . . This diversity of definitional criteria suggests there is nothing internal to texts mandating how they are to be generically categorized — in some instances, the same text becomes ‘regenrified’ as cultural contexts shift” (Mittell 2004: 8).

In approaching genre classification from this view, “East Asian” becomes the most appropriate description as a discursive category produced at the sites of circulations that serve as the focal point of this project. The major aggregation sites -- D-Addicts for torrents, MySoju.com for streaming content, and Jdramas@Livejournal -- all organize dramas according to the country of origin, suggesting that, unlike the shows taking place in Boston and Chicago in Mittell’s description, location and origin of production are the key components activated into generic properties as East Asian dramas circulate online. Additionally, these sites all currently carry content across East Asia -- Japan, Korea, and, to a limited extent, Taiwan and Hong Kong -- as their main categories, despite having been formed with the intent of focusing on only one country. MySoju.com, for instance, appears to have been formed as a Korean-focused site, given its name and the fact that it links out to only Korean pop culture sites. However, it also carries over 100 more Japanese dramas than Korean ones (337 and 221 series, respectively), as well as a more modest number of series from Taiwan (81) and Hong Kong (39). Similarly, despite claiming to be a site for the purpose of “feeding your drama addiction,” MySoju.com also carries a limited number of films from these regions, suggesting that the East Asian component is more central to defining the content they provide than even the media format.

Moreover, in interviewing fans about their drama consumption, several discussed moving back and forth between Japanese, Korean, and sometimes Taiwanese dramas without distinguishing themselves as Jdrama or Kdrama or TWdrama-specific fan, but rather as general fans of

dramas<sup>5</sup>. And while they made note of stylistic differences among them, sometimes suggesting that they watch dramas from one country or another depending on the type of entertainment experience they are in the mood for, it was all encompassed within a framework of general drama viewing and fandom. Therefore, though these dramas come from distinct production systems and share other thematic and generic factors in coming generally out of the “post-trendy” drama, in their online circulation, it is the shared regional origin that becomes the most defining genre descriptor.

Ultimately, I hope this example provides a robust inroads into these questions because the circulation of TV dramas internationally has long been considered for a predominantly diasporic audience, with both legally and illegally (re)produced materials passing through ethnic groceries and neighborhood sites. As transnational media flows move online with P2P<sup>6</sup> technologies and practices such as fansubbing, we are no longer looking at such a neat alignment between the national origins of the audiences and media, allowing us to ask where established discourses surrounding displacement and representation within a global context begin to break down or change in light of emergent media. What are the ways in which the circulation of content might act as a tactical intervention in establishing cultural identity and community affiliation and what new models emerge when we take into consideration the interplay between diasporic communities and fandom communities and how might the two be mutually informing? In short, East Asian drama circulation provides us with a specific and grounded set of conditions and practices through which to examine how audiences and social imaginaries are being constructed through the circulation of media in a time of cultural and technological flux.

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<sup>5</sup> One notable exception to this was javabeans, the creator of the dramabeans blog, who deals almost exclusively with Korean content. She considered Kdrama fandom as distinct from Jdrama fandom, but her view was seemed to be more exceptional amongst the fans contacted.

<sup>6</sup> P2P refers to “Peer-to-Peer,” a form of computer networking in which the work (in the cases that I discuss the uploading and downloading of large video files) is distributed through the entire network of peers, rather than a centralized collection of servers.

## Cultural Routes: Transnational Media in Context

*“Now the media are nothing else than a marvelous instrument for destabilizing the real and the true”*  
Jean Baudrillard

### **1.1 Becoming Globalized**

Globalization, as a term which rose in popularity through the 80s and 90s, has now become so ubiquitous as to be almost meaningless, a catch-all that evokes images of dystopian homogeneity and benign pluralism in equal measure. It is a term that has become so broad and all-encompassing that to say that we're in a period characterized by profound globalization is to say everything, and nothing at all. But for all the fuzziness in its usage, what the word makes clear is that globalization is viewed as a continuing work-in-progress, rather than an already accomplished fact. That however globally-linked our everyday lives may seem, they will only become ever more so in coming years and, it is suggested, at ever greater speeds. Which then begs the question of what processes, specifically, are implicated as we become more global and where, if anywhere, do we envision the end point?

One of the most crucial aspects of globalization rests at the dimension of culture. It has been frequently suggested that globalization has sent many contemporary modern societies into a state of national identity crisis as exposure to other cultures increases. That is to say, if the nation is indeed an imagined community as Benedict Anderson famously suggested, the transnational movement of information, texts, images, and populations is radically expanding the horizons of our imaginations. Media culture, as the material of representation, thus becomes crucially important as a central site for the (re)construction of identity.

As Stuart Hall reminds us in speaking of cinema, “we have been trying to theorise identity as constituted, not outside but within representation; and hence of cinema, not as a second-order mirror held up to reflect what already exists, but as that form of representation which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects, and thereby enable us to discover place from which to speak” (Hall 1998: 237). Media culture, therefore, while common, is far from trivial in constructing “alternative forms of subjectivity, collectivity, and practice” (Lowe 1998:17). Rather, it is precisely media representation that invites the complex cultural encounters through which the processes of becoming globalized are being most evocatively rendered, new identities are being forged, and the role of the nation rearticulated. Though it does not and cannot take the place of political action and governance, media culture -- “the image, the imagined, the imaginary -- . . . direct[s] us to something critical and new in global cultural processes: *the imagination as a social practice*” (Appadurai 1996: 31, emphasis in the original).

One of the central questions in understanding what it means to globalize, to become more global, is the question of which representations, subjectivities, imaginations are being produced. *Whose* cultural materials are being transmitted and what parties are controlling the spaces of transmission and, consequently, the flow of information networks? This, of course, leads to a concern that the growing influence of transnational corporations and global capitalism gives way to globalization as “Westernization,” with American culture leading the way as a

homogenizing and imperializing cultural force. The cultural imperialism take on globalization, however, while based in the very visibly disproportionate range and penetration of American media around the globe, overstates the efficacy of western media in dominating local cultures in a way that “is more inclined to reinforce Western cultural influence by taking it as given” (Sinclair et al 1996: 176). To begin with, in an era of global capitalism, major media conglomerates are emphatically multinational organizations, with international investors, distribution markets, and joint ventures. The iconic Hollywood production firm MGM Studios, for instance, was acquired by Sony Corporation of America, a subsidiary of Japanese-owned Sony Corporation, in 2005. Despite multinational ownership, however, there remains a strong perception of Hollywood as culturally, if not necessarily financially, American. Japanese media scholar Koichi Iwabuchi suggests, in discussing Japanese investment in Hollywood, that “Japanese ingenuity in hardware production and American genius in software go hand in hand because (Japanese) consumer technologies work as ‘distribution systems’ for (American) entertainment products (Berland 1992, 46). These Japanese companies strengthen American cultural hegemony by investing in the production of Hollywood films and by facilitating their distribution all over the globe” (Iwabuchi 2002: 37). So we must take into account that not only is so-called American media transnationally owned and, thus, far from being a monolithic entity, but that financial investment doesn’t necessarily correlate cultural influence. Rather, the realities of transnational media flows are considerably more complex than a broad media-effects model wherein the overwhelming presence of Hollywood leads directly to Americanization of the globe.

Furthermore, using the example of television, Sinclair, Jacka and Cunningham remind us that “although US programs might lead the world in their transportability across cultural boundaries, and even manage to dominate schedules on some channels in particular countries, they are rarely the most popular programmes” (1996: 176). But even in instances where foreign programming does achieve comparable popularity or ubiquity, we must be careful not to equate

the consumption of American or Western media with a direct transference of Western cultural norms and values. This view “assumes media have uniform effects, but overlooks the extent to which the media continue to be produced in and directed at a variety of distinct places . . . which are likely to make profound differences to the ways in which people respond.” (Gillespie 1995: 16). In fact, as countless media scholars and globalization theorists have pointed out, increasing an presence of the “global” in many ways facilitates rearticulations and renewed investment in the local rather than supplanting it. According to Morley and Robins, “the particularity of place and culture can never been done away with . . . [and] globalisation is, in fact, also associated with new dynamics of re-localization” (Morley and Robins 1995: 116).

### ***cultural indigenization***

One of the most visible “dynamics of re-localization” is the process of appropriating transnational cultural materials and formats for local purposes, a process that far from encouraging a more culturally homogenized world has instead “given birth to new cultural meanings at the site of production and consumption” (Iwabuchi 2004: 5). This indigenization of foreign (mostly Western/American) cultural materials is particular prevalent in Asia. Iwabuchi in fact argues that in Japan, where American popular culture enjoys widespread exposure and influence, the ability to assimilate western culture has been constructed as something that “does not simply articulate a process of hybridization in practice, but it is strategically represented as a key feature of Japanese national identity itself” (Iwabuchi 2002: 53). That is, the very capacity to absorb and remake western media, the indigenization process itself, preserves something that is seen as uniquely Japanese by Japanese audiences, regardless of the origins of any particular cultural products or forms.

Take, for instance, the BIGgu-ri burger clip from *Arashi no Shukudaikun* introduced in the beginning, a clip that seems particularly suited to a discussion about the indigenization of



Western, and specifically American, culture given that fears of cultural homogenization are frequently represented in terms of “McDonaldization” and “Big Macs and Coca-cola.” While the sequence itself is saturated with American pop culture materials — Bruce Springsteen’s iconic anthem, hamburgers, repeated reference of “American” fashions — the engagement with these materials maintains an undeniably parodic dimension. Every aspect is over-the-top: the hamburger is made of 2.6kg of beef and the background music is “Born in the USA,” and eating the hamburger induces one of the show participants to declare a sudden desire to don overalls. At every step, the participants in the show self-consciously boast a series of exaggerated deployments of “American” cultural symbols that serve to suggest a sense of mastery and familiarity of the material, while simultaneously highlighting their position as something distinctly non-American.

This is most prevalent towards the end of a clip when, as one participant eats his portion of the burger with “Born in the USA” playing in the background, the others comment on his choice of dress — a leather jacket — and how “it is very fitting” and consequently dubbing him “Today’s Super American” (*BIGgu-ri burger (eng subs) 2009*) The leather jacket then gets passed on to another participant while the music is temporarily stopped until someone else has put on the jacket back on. The music, and thus the evocation of being “Born in the USA,” in other words, is tied directly to fashion, to Americanism as a costume that can be easily used and removed. In wearing it, they never become merely Americanized, but “Today’s Super American,” that is, they are temporarily transformed into exaggerated, embodied reenactments of American culture. In the end too, even the burger eaten in the clip, though acknowledged as a categorically American symbol, is in fact already indigenized. It is, after all, not a Big Mac but a BIGguri Tsukubaaga (“surprisingly big Tsukuburger”), named after the city of Tsukuba, in a move that first acknowledges its culturally hybrid condition in keeping the English “BIG” intact, but in naming the object itself both linguistically domesticates the “burger” into “baaga” and, with the addition of the “Tsuku” portmanteau, re-replaces its origin within Tsukuba, Japan.

Furthermore, this very explicit effort to reenact “American” culture is then framed and represented through two distinctly Japanese entertainment formats. It is, first of all, a clip from a Japanese variety show, a format featuring a mix of musical performances, interviews, contests, games, comedic sketches, and other spectacles that popular variety show host Kyosen Ōhashi famously claimed “only exists in Japan.” Thus, whether or not it is an accurate assessment of its formal qualities, that the variety show is distinctly and fundamentally Japanese in nature appears therefore to be essential to the discursive understanding of the form. Moreover, this particular variety show is hosted by a group of *aidoru*, or “idols,” young entertainers recruited and trained as multimedia performers “who are skillful at ‘domesticating the west’ in Asia” (Iwabuchi 2002: 105). They sing Japanese songs in American genres like pop and rap that are generated by some of the same Swedish songwriting teams behind American teen stars such as Britney Spears, wear international designer fashions, and otherwise “appropriate Western culture . . . to the extent that the hierarchical relationship cannot be discerned between the original and the indigenized” (Iwabuchi 2002: 105) and thus literally embody something that is “is neither ‘American’ nor ‘traditional Asian,’ but something new and hybridized . . . An ‘indigenized (Asianized) West’” (Iwabuchi 2002: 105). All of the American cultural materials are contained within and deployed in service of formal structures and industrial systems that are perceived to be purely Japanese.

More intriguing than this instance of cultural indigenization, however, is the fact that this use of American cultural symbols to articulate local meanings in local formats is merely one node within a multi-stop circuit of transcultural flow. We cannot forget that my initial viewing of this clip was not on Japanese broadcast television, where it originally aired, but online, subtitled and circulated through unofficial channels on YouTube and Livejournal by fans of Japanese pop music and idol groups. Thus, American cultural symbols are transformed through use in a Japanese variety show, which is then recirculated through American and other English-speaking

communities online as Japanese cultural symbols. While there are certainly important considerations regarding the consumption of cultural commodities as novel entertainments decontextualized to varying degrees from any grounded cultural understanding, this example nevertheless suggests a shift in the logic of how cultural materials circulate across borders. The questions of who exports culture commercially and how local cultures might indigenize foreign material are now only one vector in a much more entangled process of transformation and exchange that is multi-stop, multi-directional, and in operation through both commercially authorized distribution channels and ad-hoc peer-created circulation systems.

### ***globalizing technologies***

In addition to strategic indigenization practices that appropriate and transform pervasive transnational content for local media, the rise of new technologies have given rise to distribution practices that cater to increasingly diverse audiences. It is not simply the internet, “but also the humble video, have been instrumental in the fostering of such international niche markets, or ‘global narrowcasting’” (Cunningham and Sinclair 2000: 3). That is, rather than resulting in a more homogeneous audience, the rise of transnational media networks has resulted in the emergence of new markets composed of “minorities too small to be catered for in national contexts” (Park and Curran 2003: 8).

Moreover, the circulation of the *Arashi no Shukudaikun* clip reminds us that as established broadcast corporations are rearticulating local cultures using Western media materials, English-speaking fans are in turn subtitling and circulating the clip as globally conscious media consumers and pop cosmopolitans seeking to promote a shared interest in Japanese or Asian culture. In other words, with the rise of the internet, more people have access to the technologies of media transmission and are contributing to the flow of transnational media content in a very direct and visible manner. As a result, the convoluted cultural criss-crossings and negotiations

involved in these transnational media encounters are being facilitated not only by multinational media conglomerates, but increasingly through (frequently unauthorized) grassroots efforts of individuals and communities online. Thus, even as the rise of multinational telecommunications and broadcast networks consolidates the economic reach of a handful of corporations, the channels of communication they open allow for the transmission of cultural materials that are adopted, adapted, appropriated, refashioned, and redistributed through alternative, and sometimes unauthorized, networks and marginal communities for their own ends. Similarly, the spaces of transmission are not as limited a resource as they once were and modern communications technology has not only given way to the circulation of more and more varied texts, but also increased methods and practices of circulation.

We must be careful that, in constructing these audiences as radically active and productive, we do not overlook the structural asymmetries that necessitate these media flows in our celebration of the tactics that enable them. The temptation in this case is doubled between Fiske's producerly audience interpretations and the still-lingering technoutopianism in regards to the internet's potential to facilitate more democratic media spaces. Audiences online are, undoubtedly, visibly active not only in their interpretations of texts, but in their use and remaking of media content in highly productive ways, and in many cases the lowered technological and economic barriers of entry facilitate much more diverse and distributed systems of media production and circulation. However, many of the systems, while far-reaching, are by no means a free-for-all: they are shaped by organizing structures that emerge out of the set protocols and practices of economically and legally authorized channels that they operate outside of. Fansubbers in some cases will cease to subtitle series that have been licensed in the US, to avoid persecution for copyright violations or under the ethic of only providing content that cannot be otherwise accessed (rather than being "pirates" who siphon profits from major media outlets). Similarly, media corporations can issue DMCA take-downs and copyright claims in order to remove content from websites. We must consider also that though the technological

barriers to participation are lowering, they are not disappearing altogether. The so-called “digital divide” between those who do and do not have access to and literacy for engagement in these spaces becomes increasingly definitive and the internet becomes more and more central to practices of audience participation. So that while the power for audiences to create their own cultural spaces through their own media selections is empowering and worth interrogating seriously, we cannot overlook the structural limits that in many ways determine them.

The “micro/macro problematic . . . [of] the structural limits to the possibilities of cultural democracy à la Fiske” (1996: 140) as described by Ang remains, however, one that is fundamentally about hegemony. The practices and cultural spaces being created by audiences online confronts the tensions between structural power and individual agency not only in terms of the power relations between media owners and audiences, but within these active audiences as well. In looking particularly at the transnational flows of media across boundaries, the directions in which these boundaries are transcended remains an important consideration, since “[a]s the Mexican performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña notes, referring as does Anzaldúa to the Mexican/US border, ‘Crossing the border from the North to the South has very different implications than cross the same border from South to North . . .’ (1996: 9)” (Ang 1998: 16). Thus, though we celebrate varied cultural encounters in these transnational media flows, we can’t overlook the potential for these encounters to articulate and further reinforce power imbalances -- the translations of Asian material for Western consumption, especially in so far as it strives to maintain the “cultural odor” of the texts, runs a blurred distinction between cultural appreciation and orientalist consumption while simultaneously giving access to audiences more traditionally conceived of as diasporic and minority.

Therefore, examining audience practices in the online circulation of East Asian dramas and their cultural implications and potential for social change is not to suggest that there isn’t a highly visible unevenness in the distribution of control over transnational media spaces. Nor is it

suggest that the existence of *grassroutes* -- unsanctioned or otherwise alternative routes of exchange and regulation -- somehow undoes the asymmetrical relations between those that transmit and those that receive transmissions. On the contrary, these various practices of cultural negotiation simultaneously highlight and complicate these imbalances, often bringing them more forcefully into contact and contention. This thus helps us articulate the possibility of a vision of globalization that suggests not a singular process, but a dense, intricate lattice-work of generously overlapping flows of information, commodities, capital, and populations. Meaning, representation, knowledge, and power are being negotiated not only the sites of production, but increasingly at those of distribution and consumption, spaces which are opening up and being reconfigured in dramatic ways through the emergence and use of new technologies. Thus, rather than being a coherent, teleological process propelling us towards “a single society and culture occupying the planet” (Waters 1995: 3), contemporary globalization exhibits increasing signs of what Arjun Appadurai characterizes as “certain fundamental disjunctures between economy, culture, and politics that we have only begun to theorize” (1996: 33).

What is becoming apparent is that not only does the presumed distribution of power and influence between economic “centers” and the margins require reexamination, but that the very models themselves no longer hold, that “the new global cultural economy . . . cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models (even those that might account for multiple centers and peripheries)” (Appadurai 1996: 32). This shift is frequently attributed to the dramatic “deterritorialization” of culture. The materials and practices of culture, especially popular culture, have of course never been containable within territorial bounds, often unavoidably subject to appropriation and reappropriation, adaptation, transformation, and other forms of cultural mixing. However, the pervasiveness of extensive telecommunications networks and the increasing scale and ease of movement of people and information across geopolitical borders have made direct access to cultural materials from around the world a daily

fact. I can watch clips from Japanese variety shows, Australian reality programming, and Brazilian telenovelas with a few keyword searches. Moreover, as the opening description of the YouTube video might suggest, it is increasingly difficult to extract that which operates at the level of the local or regional from larger transnational processes. We must, therefore, shift attention from a broad “globalizing” of culture to its *transnational* movement, directing attention to the negotiation across and between borders, and examining the specific destabilizations of power enacted by the forces that shape how media moves. To do so, “increasingly we must think in terms of communications and transport networks and of the symbolic boundaries of language and culture -- the ‘spaces of transmission’ defined by satellite footprints or radio signals -- as providing the crucial, and permeable, boundaries of our age” (Morely and Robins 1995: 1). While Morely and Robins were writing in a moment in which these “spaces of transmission” were dominated by transnational media conglomerates and centralized distribution and broadcast networks, they were nevertheless correct to emphasize the importance of media *flow* in shaping cultural production. Particularly as we move from a model of centralized broadcast “networks” towards one of the networked information economy, of networked individuals that are radically decentralized, it is precisely these spaces and practices of transmission that are in flux and need of examination. In other words, power is being increasingly constructed and challenged *between* production and consumption, and to understand the implications of transnational flows of media, we must consider the systems and practices that shape how media circulates.

## **1.2 Notes from the Underground: VCD Piracy and Asian Drama Circulation**

It would be difficult, perhaps, to overstate the presence of technological forces in the shaping the flow of content transnationally. The increased speed, accessibility, and visibility of both

production technologies and communications networks is dramatically reshaping both the practices of circulation and the range of participants involved. We cannot overlook, for instance, the impact of peer-2-peer software and digital video compression in reshaping the way media content is spread and accessed. But we need be careful also not to *understate* the historical contexts that frame the use of technologies and the preexisting systems and protocols that shape their deployment. Technology is neither a sole determinant of change nor merely a (neutral) instrument through which social needs and protocols are articulated and developed. Technologies are both shaped by histories of use and, in turn, shape all manner of social, cultural, and political implications. We must, as James Carey says, “dismantle the fetishes of communication for the sake of communication” (Carey 1988, 139) and keep in mind that technological change is never a purely technological matter, but rather a “process of social change in which technology is an element that is inseparable from social, economic, cultural and political trends” (Castells 2001).

The large-scale transnational circulation of East Asian dramas first emerged in the 1990s with the unauthorized grey-market of VCD reproductions of popular dramas that were distributed around Asia and, later, through largely Chinese-speaking diasporic communities to the US and Canada. Digital technologies undoubtedly played a crucial role in making content easily -- and cost-effectively -- reproducible and portable, thus enabling the emergence of complex underground distribution systems. However, looking at the regulatory and discursive forces that shaped the development of pirated VCD markets reveals an interesting relationship between national broadcasting systems and transnational audiences that helps to locate some of the cultural and social stakes of this “technological” shift and its implications for how we think about audiences and the transnational flow of media.



### ***the emergence of VCD circulation***

In 1998, Steven Metalitz, then Vice President of the International Intellectual Property Alliance, stated in *Forbes Magazine* that the VCD was “a purely Asian market, and it's driven purely by piracy” (1998). While seemingly extreme in its absoluteness, and said in reference mainly to the pirating of Hollywood-produced films in China, the statement does fairly accurately describe the practical development of the VCD market in Asia, which is “closely linked to the region’s pirating industry” (Hu 2004, 206).

VCDs, or Video Compact Discs, were developed from CD-ROM technology in 1993 as a replacement for VHS tapes, but were quickly overtaken in US and other western markets by DVDs due to the DVD’s superior video and audio quality and greater storage capacity. Another reason DVD technology was heavily promoted in these regions over VCDs, suggested by the discursive focus on the VCD as a technology of piracy, is that DVDs permitted region-locking, which prevented them from being played in DVD players sold in other regional markets, thus allowing major content producers such as Hollywood studios to continue the long-established practice of “windowing strategies and sequencing sales to different territories” (Wang 2003, 2) and controlling the timing and flow of release of materials on different formats (theatrical, DVD, syndication) in order to maximize profit. Due to a combination of the low cost of both the VCDs and VCD players due the flexibility of the technology that allowed for VCDs to be played on either a TV set or a computer<sup>7</sup>, the format quickly became and continues to be “ubiquitous in most Asian countries” (Hu 2004, 206).

Japanese dramas were one of the central staples of the VCD trade and were especially popular throughout Chinese-language communities in the 1990s, the heyday of the VCD (Hu 2004,

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<sup>7</sup> In examples given of this, the emphasis is on the cost effectiveness and convenience of platform flexibility (having to simply acquire software rather than an additional device to play a VCD) rather than the now-customary discourse of audience control and interaction in regards to watching TV on the computer. Some articles have noted to appeal to youth audiences due to the viewing privacy that watching on the computer affords them.

208). Most popular, both in Japan and throughout Asia at this time were a genre known as the “post-trendy drama” (alternately called “Japanese idol dramas” in Hong Kong and Taiwan), which were differentiated from earlier “trendy” dramas by “better organization of plots, subtle use of music” (Iwabuchi 2004, 9).

While Taiwan and Hong Kong serve as the major nodes of (re)production of pirated Jdrama VCDs, the routes of circulation and the relationship between VCD producers and distributors between these two places is fluid and often so convoluted and confusing that there is “no way for an ethnic-Chinese audience to ascertain the route the drama series as traveled” (Chua 2008: 77). VCDs are often “co-produced” between regional networks with VCDs circulating through growing crime networks and affiliate production companies throughout East and Southeast Asia, so that it is not unusual to see Malaysian produced VCDs in Taiwan and Taiwanese production in Hong Kong (Hu 2004, 214). What’s more, VCDs marketed in Hong Kong are frequently marked with the addresses of Taiwanese producers regardless of their actual origin, due to Taiwan’s symbolic capital drawn from its longer history of Jdrama piracy and access to Japanese dramas through satellite television hook-ups not present in Hong Kong (Hu 2004, 212).

It appears that the demand driving these unauthorized markets stems not from a desire for cheaper pirated content, but for access to content in general. Japan, notably, as the one place where Jdramas were readily available, was the only country that lacked a significant VCD market. Hong Kong and Taiwan, as the centers of VCD piracy production, had domestic media industries that were not meeting their needs. In Hong Kong, audiences craved greater diversity in TV content due to what is considered “arguably the worst television programming in the world . . . because its film and, particularly, its monopolistic television culture are too homogenous” (Williams and Yeh 2004, 236). In Taiwan, post-trendy Jdramas were first popularized through broadcasts on privately-owned satellite stations (Chua and Iwabuchi 2008:

3), but these offerings are limited and popular dramas in Japan frequently do not run over these stations until years after their release in Japan, if at all (Hu 2004, 215-216). This limited access was proved insufficient since “[w]ith the PRC as the nation’s antagonist constant on the political radar screen, Taiwanese youth have been favourably disposed to Japanese pop culture” (Chua and Iwabuchi 2008: 3), of which post-trendy Jdramas were a key component. In Korea, one of the main non-Chinese speaking Jdrama VCD markets, Japanese cultural imports had been officially banned up until 1998. Thus, rather than an effort to divert profits, VCD drama markets arose due, in no small part, to the failures of domestic broadcast systems to address diversely-motivated audience demand for transnational content.

Furthermore, on the other side, Japanese media companies exhibited “an initial reluctance to seek overseas markets” (Chua and Iwabuchi 2008: 3) since their domestic audience was sufficient to sustain production costs<sup>8</sup>. The reluctance was also due in part to the complexities of Japanese television production systems, wherein “a production company’s exclusive rights are quickly divvied up among other interests in order to raise necessary capital” (Leonard 2003, 40). This resulting in overly-involved licensing negotiations that require approval of a number of different interests, many of whom do not see development for outside audiences to be sufficiently profitable to be worth the difficulty. Thus, in contrast to rising anxieties from Hollywood firms over VCD piracy, Japanese production and broadcast corporations exhibited a startlingly hands-off attitude towards regulating or shutting down the circulation of pirated VCDs.

### ***VCD piracy and the question of borders***

In 1998, the Hong Kong VCD market suffered a significant stumbling block due to a piracy crackdown initiated by Hong Kong customs. Authorities, however, quickly ran into the problem

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<sup>8</sup> This is beginning to change, and Japanese producers are more aggressively exporting cultural products.

of not being able to pursue legal action without the collaboration of the actual rights owners. As

Davis and Yeh explain:

“Japanese television producers then had only a vague idea that their work circulated around Asia . . . they were “staggered” by the interest in Japanese VCDs in Hong Kong. In addition, the Japanese were unsure -- unlike Hollywood studios -- that this was a bad thing . . . This put Hong Kong authorities in a curious position. They had to educate Japanese producers first about what VCDs were, and then about the popularity and profitability of their programs within the region (Ming Pao 4 October 1998). But without a complaint, the prosecution could not proceed. The Japanese, after some hesitation, agreed to sign, allowing Hong Kong authorities to get on with their task”

(Davis and Yeh 2004, 234).

This curious account of Japanese production companies’ lack of concern over piracy of their titles is further elaborated upon by Ōta Tōru, a prominent Fuji TV producer responsible for some of the most well-received and widely circulated post-trendy dramas. In a speech given in 2001, he stated simply that despite hearing of wide viewership from all over Asia, Fuji TV had “no particular interest in developing an ‘Asian Strategy’” and that they would “continue to make dramas exclusively targeting the Japanese audience and broadcast them in Japan,” citing specifically difference in the types of stories and casting decisions made for domestically targeted TV dramas and film productions with potentially broader audiences (Tōru 2004 78). He goes on later during the Q&A to elaborate explicitly that he has not been in the practice of “producing dramas targeting at the Asian audience” and while the success of his work outside Japan has bolstered his confidence, he has “never reflected on the meaning of the success of Tokyo Love Story<sup>9</sup> in Asia, nor speculated about how it would influence Japanese television” (Tōru 2004 80). Tōru’s statements here suggest that in addition to logistical and economic complexities presented by Japan’s TV production structure and IP laws, Japanese TV production companies have an “aura of self-contained Japanese locality” (Hu 2004, 222) that articulates itself as both an ignorance, whether genuine or strategic, of Jdrama popularity in

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<sup>9</sup> Tokyo Love Story was one of the most popular Japanese dramas both domestically in Japan and across Asia, and is also considered one of the defining texts of the “post-trendy” form.

other parts of Asia and an active reluctance toward targeting outside markets for fear that it will change both the carefully calibrated and sufficiently lucrative business model as well as the narrative or aesthetic content of the dramas themselves.

It is telling as well that the crackdown in Hong Kong came through the customs office, placing the transgression not at the point of (re)production of the media content, but at the moment of transnational circulation. This, in addition to the accumulated evidence that the rights holders -- and thus the parties most likely to suffer monetary losses -- had little interest in policing Jdrama piracy, reminds us that what is at stake is not a simple matter of piracy and market value, but an anxiety over the maintenance of political and cultural boundaries. That is to say, piracy is not simply a matter of copyright violation, but a matter of control over “the flow of information to both consumers . . . and the sources of finance . . . [which is] especially significant in the global economy as it links the global and the local, and is indeed the part where boundaries are refined . . . where different networks intersect and interact with significant cultural, economic, and political implications and consequence” (Wang 2003, 2). In short, as both ambiguous routes and sources of production and circulation of VCDs and the regulatory actions taken by the state indicate, what is at stake is fundamentally a crisis of national borders, centered upon the presence of unanticipated or strategically unacknowledged transnational audiences. In this light, we might consider how the circulation of Jdrama through Chinese communities first throughout Asia and then globally calls into question the integrity of national boundaries by creating an unsanctioned, and nearly unsanctionable, deterritorialized media market.

We must be careful, of course, not to conflate the destabilization of territorial boundaries in the movement of media with the disappearance of nationhood as a significant determining factor. The national is still very much a presence, as the histories between these countries and the formation of their domestic markets as suggested previously drove and shaped the flow of content even through illegal channels that undermined regulation and policies. In a related

sense, national origin, in this case Japan, serves as both a formal descriptor for and one of the central appeals of Jdrama content. Additionally, with some variance, VCD circulation centers around specifically Chinese-speaking diasporic communities due to the “disproportionately massive ethnic Chinese consumer market” (Chua and Iwabuchi 2008: 2-3), that made subtitling in Chinese the most profitable and therefore more common practice.

This last point hints at one of the central limitations of VCD circulation as a destabilizing force. Even as it was resisting and undermining the power of national media regulations, it remains a market-driven endeavor. Thus, operating under the logic of capital, VCD piracy also kept the range of audiences limited to what was previously known to be profitable in terms of subtitling language, much in the same way Japanese media producers did not initially pursue transnational audiences because of the perceived unprofitability. With (re)production handled by a handful of media owners and distributors whose primary interest was return on investment, even in the under-regulated form of grey markets, drama circulation in this context could only ever address already known (and already known to be profitable) audiences. As a result, the global VCD of Japanese drama became functionally a formulation of what Ien Ang calls “transnational nationalism” (2001) in the sense that it is precisely the presumed certainty and coherence of the national identity of both the content and the audience from the perspective of those in charge of distribution is precisely what allows for the transnational movement of these media materials.<sup>10</sup>

What is important to note here therefore is that the flow of information and media materials between producers and audiences of these dramas is precisely where the struggle over power in

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<sup>10</sup> It is worth mentioning, of course, that the very fact of Japanese media being consumed by Chinese-speaking audiences provides an interesting incongruity, even if the national inflections of the content and audience make-up seem, in themselves, fairly coherent. This phenomenon not only touches upon issues of what Iwabuchi frequently refers to as “cultural proximity” and articulations of particularly Asian modernities but also gestures towards a more radically destabilized definitions of cultural citizenship and identity that I discuss in later chapters.

the global cultural economy, especially in so far as it relates to national boundaries, is being articulated and refined. It suggests also that as we talk about transnational flows of media, there is an acknowledgement that power sits not only at the site of production but increasingly at that of distribution.





## 2

### New Contexts, New Audiences

*These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood — singular or communal — that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself”*

Homi Bhabha

While VCD circulation along unauthorized channels hinted at the destabilizing potential of transnational audiences, it is still a practice that operates according to the logic of capital, and is thus shaped and limited primarily by a focused pursuit of profits. Accordingly, while the methods tended to vary from those of national broadcasting systems, the driving force of market capital remained consistent. It is therefore not until the adaptation of these practices into what Yochai Benkler dubbed the “networked information economy” (2006), that the circulation of Jdrama online can more visibly enable the radically participatory potential that could only be hinted at within VCD circulation through an uncoupling the circulation of Jdrama from profit-driven markets.

## **2.1 New Media, New Encounters: broadcast versus networked audiences**

Unauthorized distribution channels were, of course, not the only means through which East Asian dramas made their way westward. In the mid-2000s, broadcast corporations sought to tap into the Asian-American market through the development of cable networks running popular dramas, documentaries, music, films, and variety programming from mostly East Asian television<sup>11</sup>. Of these, one of the first and most prominent was AZN Television, a subsidiary of Comcast that promoted itself as “the network for Asia America.” Despite claims made by industry insiders that there was “a tremendous market for this type of content” (Ramirez 2008), AZN struggled and was shut down in April of 2008 after just over a year on the air, with Comcast Cable citing the reason for this closure as difficulty generating ad revenue due in part to a too-small and linguistically fragmented target demographic (Becker 2008). In contrast, unique user traffic at popular Korean and Japanese drama streaming aggregator site MySoju.com has quadrupled between November of 2007 and 2008 from approximately 20,000 unique monthly visitors to 80,000 (<http://siteanalytics.compete.com/mysoju.com/?src=dt100>), and peaking at over 132,000 unique visitors in July of 2008 with an estimated average of a million monthly hits from just US visitors (who account for roughly half the site’s traffic)<sup>12</sup>. Similarly, D-Addicts, a site that aggregates torrents for P2P downloads of both of subtitled and unsubtitled East and Southeast Asian dramas (and limited peripheral media such as soundtracks) has facilitated the download of over 79 million complete files<sup>13</sup> since its inception in 2004 according to the statistics listed on their site and boasts an estimated monthly traffic over 195,000 unique

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<sup>11</sup> It may be worth noting that unlike film and animation, the two main audiovisual imports from Asia in the US, TV dramas have always come in through channels aimed at ethnic audiences prior to online fan practices.

<sup>12</sup> all traffic and demographic data, unless otherwise noted, is taken from whois.com domain registry information and affiliate quantitative services, e.g. <http://www.quantcast.com/mysoju.com/traffic>. All data is current as of 12/15/2008.

<sup>13</sup> This number is as of April 2009. It should be noted that in a previous version of this paper, written in December 2008, the number of completed downloads was 62 million, meaning the site clocked an additional 17 million downloads within the span of just over 4 months.

visitors in the US and over 250,000 worldwide; putting it within the top 10,000 visited websites online.

It may not be strictly fair to compare the online and “traditional” distribution channels, especially given that the success of the former may contribute to the struggle of the latter and the inability of traditional broadcast and distribution models to provide the amount and diversity of content certainly influences the popularity of large aggregator websites and the responsiveness of fansubbing groups to their audiences. The data additionally isn’t directly comparable given the range of differences in everything from ideological and economic prerogatives to methods of acquiring audience metrics to legal considerations that separates official distribution channels from online ones. Broadcast cable and satellite stations, for instance, have a very different criteria and demands on what constitutes a sufficient audience-size given the much higher cost of operation and production in comparison to that of a website<sup>14</sup>. However, we can still generalize broadly that official channels of circulation for Asian television drama globally, particularly in the West amongst an English-speaking audiences, is struggling while unofficial fan-moderated circulation is flourishing.

One of the central challenges US cable networks faced in attracting broader audiences was that, like Asian broadcasters and pirate VCD producers, the drive for profit ensured that they could only target and address already known audiences. For instance, despite claims of targeting both “the fast-growing, affluent, multi-lingual and multi-generational Asian American community, as well as a broader American audience interested in the Asian experience” (NCTA.com), the perception lingered amongst audiences that Asian-content stations such as AZN television were

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<sup>14</sup> It is worth mentioning that according to NCTA data, AZN Television had roughly 14 million subscribers, a number significantly larger than the monthly unique visitors on any single drama website. However, due to lack of access to viewing metrics for specific programming from the now-defunct network and the way cable subscriptions are packaged and not sold on a channel by channel basis, it is impossible to discern what portion of that number was specific to AZN, let alone to East Asian Dramas.

not actively pursuing a diverse audience.<sup>15</sup> Commenters on drama message boards and forums frequently cite the lack of availability of broadcast channels for Asian dramas in areas that are not known for have large East Asian immigrant populations<sup>16</sup> as a tremendous oversight. Moreover, as Seung Bak, the co-founder of a new website specializing in streaming Korean dramas, notes, “Korean broadcasters in this country [believe] that their primary audience is basically Koreans, Koreans who are heavily geared toward the first generation” (Park and Bak 2009), an assumption that shapes the selection of content chosen for broadcast. Even in their own experience, they entered the online circulation world expecting a uniformly Korean or Asian-American audience, and were pleasantly surprised when that proved not to be the case.

In a strategic pursuit of the Asian-American markets, media corporations made assumptions about an imagined type of audience for Asian content that was not only unable to account for who the audiences were, but what they were watching. These Asian-content stations, in targeting a pan-Asian ethnic grouping, often ran both East Asian and South-East, and sometimes South Asian content based on the presumption at each regional group was primarily interested in content from their own region by virtue of ethnic ties. The online audience, however, has shown cross-over between various Asian and non-Asian populations viewing East Asian dramas, but only a relatively limited portion of those audiences overlap with audiences for South-East or South Asian television content, due in part to certain formal and generic attributes shared between East Asian dramas that were not present in dramas from other regions in Asia. Broadcasters presumed not only that their audience would be primarily Asian-American, but would be watching dramas and other Asian content because of its Asian origin,

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<sup>15</sup> Due to limitations on time and resources, I was unable to secure interviews with producers at these networks regarding what they imagined their target audiences to be and how they tried to address them. However, in this instance, audience perception of how these stations worked is just as important.

<sup>16</sup> For instance, *ImaginAsian*, a network similar to *AZN* that focuses mainly on “the cutting edge of urban youth culture” according to its website, while still running, is carried by only a dozen cable providers located in major metropolitan areas known for large Asian diasporic communities such as New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco.

when in reality both the audience composition and the motives and pleasures of their engagement with East Asian dramas was much more complex and nuanced. Thus, the primary cause for the struggles faced by more traditional channels seems to be that power over distribution is centered in the hands of a handful of producers and broadcasters, limiting audiences to pre-established demographic categories and already known forms of engagement.

### ***a broad overview of online drama circulation***

In contrast, one of the “key differences that distinguish ‘new media’ from existing forms of mass media . . . [is] the way in which both the production and distribution of new media have become decentralised, highly individualized and woven ever more closely into the fabric of everyday life” (Lister et al. 2003: 30). This decentralization is made possible by a “move to a communications environment built on cheap processors with high computation capabilities, interconnected in a pervasive network” (Benkler 2006: 3) that allows a wide range of participants to engage in the practices of media production and distribution, in addition to consumption and public acts of curation and criticism. In short, without pressures to raise large sums of capital in order to create and circulate media content, audiences within the networked information economy are able to more actively engage in the creation of their cultural environment for a variety of motivations beyond monetary profits. As a result, the online circulation of East Asian drama is a vast network composed of countless websites, forums, trackers, blogs, fansubbers, and aggregators. However, most of these fall into three main categories of practice that are key steps in the (re)production and distribution process.

The first is (re)production, which is primarily composed of fansubbing, or amateur subtitling by fans (usually in English, though the biggest torrent-tracking website for East Asian dramas lists over 20 languages for subtitled content). Fansubbing groups can vary greatly in expertise and size, ranging from single-person endeavors to highly-coordinated efforts by teams that will

devote upwards of a dozen people to handle the translation, editing, and technical aspects on a single drama series. For this project, I focused primarily on fansubbing efforts that fall toward the latter end of that spectrum, and spoke to key members of SARS fansubs, a highly popular Jdrama subbing group known for the quality of their output, and With S2, a prominent fansub group focused on Kdrama that was recently recruited to subtitle dramas for licensed distribution online.

Once dramas are subtitled, the video files are circulated through a wide variety of aggregation portals that fall into three categories based on format: torrents, direct download, and streaming. Torrents are a P2P technology, and tracking sites such as D-Addicts, the first and most definitive torrent tracker for Asian dramas, typically have the greatest variety of content. On D-addicts, people download the torrent files and then use a separate torrent client in order to acquire the actual video file. Anyone who has a copy of the video file, whether someone from the original subbing group or a fan that downloaded the torrent file, can also distribute it by making an announcement to a direct-download forum or community. Direct download aggregators sites such as the Jdramas@livejournal community rely on public direct download services such as megaupload, where fans upload the video files they have acquired and then post a link to the download site onto the community. Someone might also upload another version in pieces onto any number of user-uploaded video streaming sites such as Dailymotion.com, Crunchyroll.com., Tudou.com, YouTube, and so forth. Another person who came across those files might then submit links to a streaming content aggregator site such as MySoju.com, which simply aggregates lists links to streaming online video of East Asian dramas. Fans can access content from any of these locations and then make further versions, re-encoding the files into file types or compression formats, such as “ipod” versions, and then re-upload those to any of the above listed site types to be taken up by people and circulated around all over again.

The final form of intervention in the drama circulation process, which is that of curation and recommending of content. Alongside sites of production and distribution, there is a range of wikis, blogs, postings, and communities devoted to the recommendation and discussion of dramas. As with fansub groups, these range in popularity and form, but all seek to provide information, criticism, commentary, and general recommendations and direction for people interested in dramas. Additionally, given the range and volume of content available, in addition to the fact that East Asian dramas are foreign content, these sites are a crucial element of the drama circulation ecology and dramatically help shape the popular consumption and discourse.

These circulation networks are therefore a drastic change from broadcast and even pirate VCD distribution flows of East Asian drama, since they allow access to a wide range of individuals engaging in a variety of practices, flattening distribution hierarchies. The cost and labor barrier involved in contributing to the distribution and promotion of content has been so drastically lowered as to allow for a much broader range of participants, goals, and activities. While practices such as subtitling a drama series still requires a relatively significant amount of time commitment (though nowhere near as extensively as it once did), as well linguistic and technical skills, it is only one type of contribution. An act as simple as mentioning a drama or linking a torrent in a blog or discussion board comment might open up content to a whole new section of audiences. For instance, one fan recalls discovering dramas through an off-hand comment someone made in an unrelated online forum. Though the media upload community she had been searching for content in “mostly featured Western television . . . someone mentioned a Korean show (‘Goong’) and the unique synopsis caused me to look into it further” (Zerohundred email: Jun 14 2009). Starting from that single mention, Zerohundred, who did not previously have any knowledge or interest in dramas, now runs two blogs that serve to recommend and review East Asian dramas and other Asian entertainment for other fans. Therefore, we can see that digital technologies and networked information culture has aided the emergence of increasingly participatory and collective methods of circulation in which any fan given sufficient

time and inclination might intervene at multiple nodes of circulation and open up new flows of content into different, perhaps unexpected, arenas.

Again, I would like to pull back from assigning responsibility to technological affordance alone. We cannot forget, after all, that though VCD distribution relied on material objects, it was nevertheless also *digital* and thus easily and cheaply reproducible and portable, just like the fan-generated files online. The crucial difference is not only a technological one, but the way technology provided a means through which individuals driven by motivations other than profit could form circulation networks. To begin, therefore, to understand the implications of this shift, we must examine more closely each of these key processes in the circulation of East Asian dramas in order to map the ways cultures interface with technology -- that interspace of protocol and practice between technology and people -- and set the parameters for its *use*.

## **2.2 Participatory (Re)Production: Fansubbing**

Fansubbing refers to the practice of amateur (“fan”) subtitling<sup>17</sup>, and consequent distribution, of audiovisual materials that rose in popularity with Anime fans<sup>18</sup>. The first fansubs appeared in the late 1980s<sup>19</sup>, but were rare in the early days due to prohibitively high costs and time commitments of production. It is estimated at in 1986, when the first fansub was made, “the technology to fansub cost over \$4000 and the time commitment to produce a fansub stretched

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<sup>17</sup> Amateur here is not an indication of quality, since fansubbing quality ranges from individuals who sub as part of language-learning to highly organized and professional teams of specialists that work assembly-line style with extensive quality control methods.

<sup>18</sup> Although there is little documentation about fansubbing practices for Jdrama, drama fansubs grow out of the tradition of Anime fansubs and maintain many of the same conventions both in translation and circulation methods.

<sup>19</sup> The first known anime fansub appeared in 1986, while the first widely distributed releases were shown at BayCon, a fan conference in San Jose, in May of 1989 (Leonard 2005, 291)



over 100 hours” (Leonard 2005: 291). Fansubbing grew in the 1990s in part due to a shift in the fandom demographic towards more college and graduate-school populations and the rise of college-supported anime clubs. Consequently, in shifting towards a younger, more educated demographic, early usenet groups online as a means of communication between fans became more prevalent and the increased communication and the growth of clubs, resulted in anime conventions where fansubs came into high demand as a means to introduce new titles to fans. Attendees from these conventions demanded copies of the subtitled materials shown, which fansubbing groups offered by word of mouth, so that “by 1993, distribution demands ‘exploded’” (Leonard 2005: 293).

Fansubs were first circulated on a large scale in the anime community by videocassette through a system where people would mail postage-paid envelopes and blank cassettes (or nominal fees to cover postage and tape costs) to fansubbing groups. Distribution through this method was still limited, however, by “time and cost involved of mailing out a physical medium” (Hatcher 2005: 519) as well as the limited amount of times a tape could be copied before the quality deteriorated too far to be watchable. Thus distribution still centered around the fansubbing groups, who held the highest quality “original” tapes, and even there was a limit to how many times those tapes could be copied. This changed, however, with the move into digital production. Digital fansubs were at one point commonly referred to as “digisubs” (Hatcher 2005: 520), but since cassette distribution “officially became non-existent” when the last remaining video cassette subbing group closed in 2002 (Bertschy 2003), the “digi” has been largely dropped unless making comparisons between the old standards and current practice. The move to digital production greatly decentralized fansubbing practices, which previously, much like VCD piracy distribution, had multiple centers from which most content flowed out of, due to the fact that fansubbing groups had the best originals cassettes.

In the shift into digital online productions, the subtitling process itself became distributed, as digital networks allowed “many contributors [to be] geographically distant but still work on the same project” (Hatcher 2005: 521). The standard community practice thus typically involve shightly coordinated efforts by teams such as SARS fansubs, one of the most popular and prominent fansubbing groups, which has a dozen active staff members and a similar number of freelancers for project-specific tasks. The typical process, as described by SARS fansubs founder Amrayu, involves nine major tasks that proceed in a general order, though some may be switched around or done simultaneously depending on deadlines, individual staff schedules, and resources.

The process first begins with the acquisition of “raws,” or untranslated files either ripped from TV broadcasts or DVDs. The raw file then goes to a translator, usually a native speaker, who does the bulk of the dialogue and environmental translation (important signs and other written information that appears on screen). From there, a timer tracks the beginning and end of speaking times for each line of dialogue in order to synch the appearance of words on screen to when they are spoken. And editor then checks for grammar, punctuation, and spelling, while a “spot translator” looks over the translation for accuracy, consistency, and anything left untranslated. Then a typesetter takes the approved and revised translations and applies the fonts, colors, position, and effects of the subtitles on the screen. A quality checker then takes pass over the entire file as a whole to check for errors that over missed, before an encoder finally takes the typeset scripts and applies them to the final file in the preferred format (Amrayu chat: Oct 2009). These often very high production value and very polished efforts that fans generally prefer over commercial subtitling or, worse yet, dubbing take only week on average to produce for an hour-long drama episode<sup>20</sup> thanks to the distributed and collaborative effort amongst often geographically dispersed individuals.

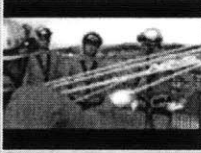


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<sup>20</sup> An “hour-long” episode is more accurately roughly just over 42 minutes, after promotional breaks are cut out.

Not only is the subbing process increasingly distributed, but subbing is also becoming more open to a wider range of participants. Amrayu recalls that when she began subbing in 2002-2003, “it was hard to get into fansub groups . . . [since] there were only a few to begin with . . . [because] raws were hard to come by” (Amrayu chat: Oct 2009). That has since changed with P2P file-sharing making the raw materials for subbing much more readily available, allowing for new groups to form or smaller-scale operations, including a handful of individuals who work independently to put out perfunctory versions of popular series as quickly as possible after they are broadcast, often in anticipation of more thorough efforts by more established teams. Even more radically distributed and accessible is the recently founded viikii.net, a website that supports piecemeal translation contributions from all registered site members on any single video clip. Modeling audiovisual translation after collective intelligence and distributed labor efforts such as wikipedia.com, viikii.net allows people to contribute translations at will without extensive technical knowledge, ensuring that subtitles will appear as quickly as mere hours after a drama episode has been aired in Asia<sup>21</sup>. Additionally, with viikii.net, viewers can watch videos that have only been partially subtitled to get a “gist” of what’s going on or view key scenes before the full translations have been completed, allowing for both a wider range of investment in both participation and consumption practices.

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21 While both independent efforts and viikii.net have some popularity, they often supplement rather than replace the standard team subtitled versions. The central appeal of these more ad-hoc versions are their turnaround speed, since they offer a more cursory and less coherent translation experience in anticipation of a more thorough version to be released by a fansubbing team.

All Videos		(more) Simplified view	
	rescue [6] (1/6)	En 99% Es 2%	Managed by nnnn747 Comments: 0 Views: 247 ☆☆☆☆☆☆
	rescue [6] (2/6)	En 80% Es 0%	Managed by nnnn747 Comments: 0 Views: 155 ★★★★★☆☆
	rescue [6] (3/6)	En 30% Es 0%	Managed by nnnn747 Comments: 0 Views: 132 ☆☆☆☆☆☆

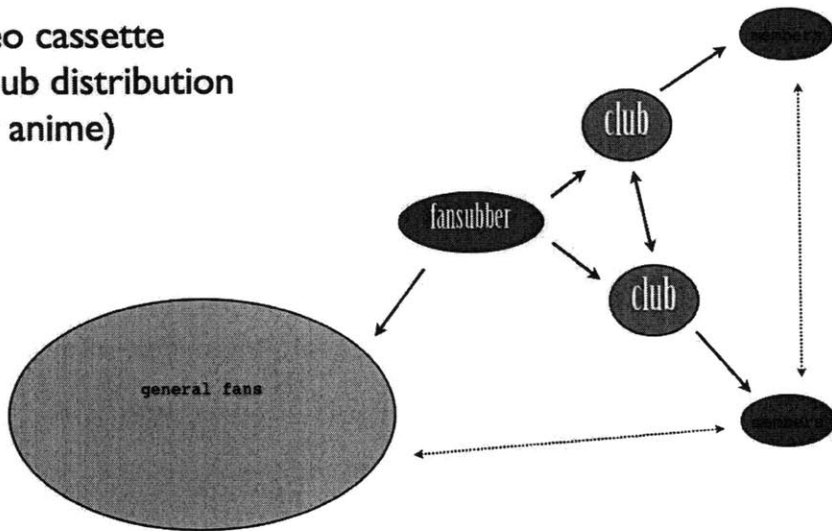
*(fig 1: Video file listings on viikii.net showing how much of each clip has been translated*

In addition to the actual subtitling process becoming more distributed and accessible, now anyone could make copies of fansubs without losing video quality and the release of material over peer-2-peer technology ensured that people were literally obtaining their copies from one another rather than from a handful of central authorities. Fansubbed Jdrama, the main “centers” are not nodes of production, but aggregation, creating a process that is very much circulation rather than distribution due to the fact that the resources required for circulating and sharing content were now exactly the same as those required to simply view it. So whereas previously, subtitled cassettes were typically acquired directly from the fansubbing groups or through limited sharing between local anime clubs, with the move online, the materials pass laterally through various participants and channels with no assigned roles or routes.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Some fansubbers do request that their content not be “re-posted” outside the channels that they’ve released it in. Often times these requests that content not be posted on specific sites, such as YouTube, because the fansubber fears the policies and visibility of those sites will put them at risk for legal action. These request are generally, but not very thoroughly or strictly, respected.



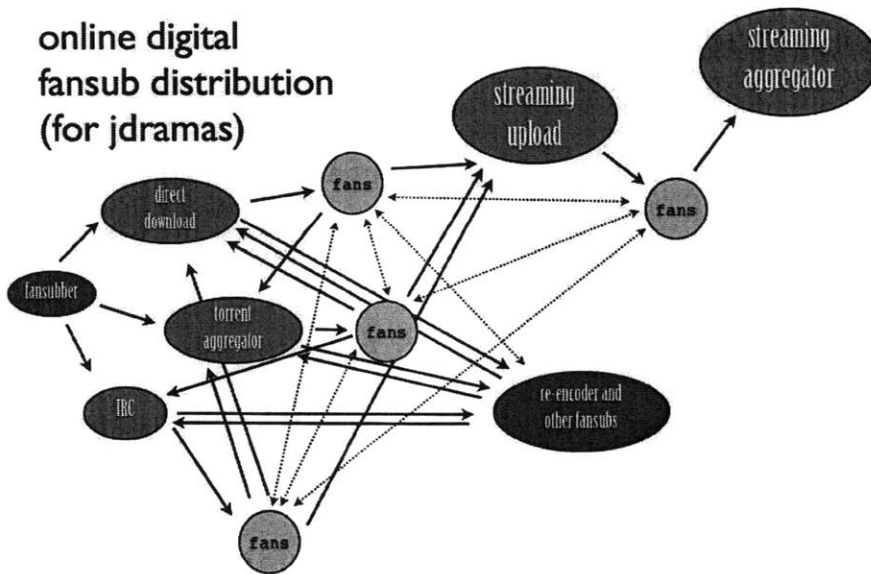
**video cassette  
fansub distribution  
(for anime)**



*(fig 2 above: chart outlining the distribution system of anime video-cassettes before fansubs were digitized)*

*(fig 3 below: chart outlining the distribution system of digital files online for Jdrama fansubs)*

**online digital  
fansub distribution  
(for jdramas)**



Digital (re)production technology alone, however, does not explain the much broader reach and volume of fansubbed Jdrama circulation online. The central difference between audience-moderated circulation and VCD piracy is that the latter operates under an industrial market logic in which revenue is the central motivation. Fansub circulation online, on the other hand, comes out of a system in which the accessibility and low cost of production frees content production and distribution from the drive for profit and allows for the large-scale “exchange [of] ideas, insights, and expressions in many more diverse relations than those mediated by the market . . . [and] bring this rich diversity of social life smack into the middle of our economic and productive lives” (Benkler 2006: 52-53).

### *fansubbing as social practice*

Unlike both the broadcast and piracy efforts, fansubbing groups primarily labored for social and personal gain. Amrayu, the founder of the popular group SARS fansubs, began subbing out of both a personal interest in improving her Japanese language and technical skills as well as a desire to supply “better quality” content to fans after her own frustrating experiences with “poor quality TV rips . . . and translations [where] things were left untranslated and . . . timing [was] off” (Amrayu, chat, Oct 2008). Similarly, Javabeans, a prominent Kdrama blogger and a subber with the With S2 fansubbing group, described her motivation to begin translating and subtitling coming out of a hope to make more content available and generate more in-depth discussion. As she explains,

“I realized that if i wanted to discuss the drama in more detail (more than just "OMG they kissed!") my options were limited since a lot of fans relied on subtitles and couldn't understand. So if I wanted discussion, I figured I'd help things along by translating little bits of scenes I particularly liked, to get the ball rolling”

(Javabeans, chat: Feb 4 2009)

She also notes that while helping create more material for discussion was her primary goal, there “are a lot of reasons [people get involved].” For example, she points out that she often

hears that for those who don't have the language skills to contribute in the same way she does, "the editors, the timers, etc. they help because they feel they've gotten so much out of fansubs that they want to return the favor" (Javabeans, chat, 4 Feb 2009).

Amrayu was careful to point out, however, that not all of the social motivations are altruistic, and that whatever their initial motivations for getting involved "a lot of groups have lost that sight of that [sense of contributing to a community]" and are instead driven by a desire "to be worshipped by fans . . . the attention . . . feeling important" (Amrayu, chat: Oct 2008). Thus, even as distribution hierarchies are flattened, we should not confuse that with a disappearance of all social stratifications. Rather, in this context, the stratifications are first of all far from absolute and do not control or delimit the flow of content in the way that they might in industrial distribution practices. Popularity and reputation of different groups varies depending any number of factors, since drama fandom isn't by any means a coherent, stable whole, but rather a loosely affiliated intersection of various interest and affinity groups.

Both the community building and competitive motivations nevertheless come out of a sense of social embeddedness, an awareness of and involvement with the very audience that the subtitled videos are being produced for, and both promote greater diversity in content. The competitiveness between groups can result, for instance, in multiple versions of the same drama being produced with differences in format or interpretations in the translation or in new groups forming out of dissatisfaction with the current subbing teams and subtitling less popular genres and older dramas in an effort to draw untapped niche audiences. Similarly, as in the case of both Amrayu and Javabeans, any visible gaps between audience demand and content availability will eventually be addressed since these audiences members are themselves the people involved in producing and circulating content and seek to fulfill needs and address frustrations they have as participants.

Therefore, without concern for a monetary return on investment for their labor<sup>23</sup>, subbing groups take it onto themselves to subtitle in a variety of languages, not only for a pre-established audience. Whereas originally circulation was limited to diasporic Chinese since VCDs were subtitled for predominantly for the largest available linguistic market, fansubbing groups don't run the risk of losses if their work appeals only to extremely limited audiences since the return value is community engagement rather than revenue. Fansubs, especially circulating online, are thus inclusive of a far broader and more diverse range of audiences. Inclusivity, however, does not mean accessible to all audiences in the sense of a more general or broadly appealing product. These are still, in a sense, "niche" audiences, and fansubbing has always been seen as a "niche" practice, outside both the mainstream of media consumption and of normalized subtitling standards.

### ***fansubbing translation***

There are many standards of practice in fansubbing that run askew of or directly contrary to the standards set for western commercial subtitling, and often ease of viewing, both in terms of required knowledge and optimum visibility, are sacrifice in established community aesthetic preferences and cultural desires. Accordingly, most of these difference have to do with preserving the original cultural and aesthetic sense of the original text, since its cultural origins are central to their appeal.

Commercial translation typically favors normalizing speech through "the replacement of non-standard verbal elements by standard ones, typically resulted in reduced text volume," a strategy that "moves the text away from its original and, literally speaking, often eccentric position

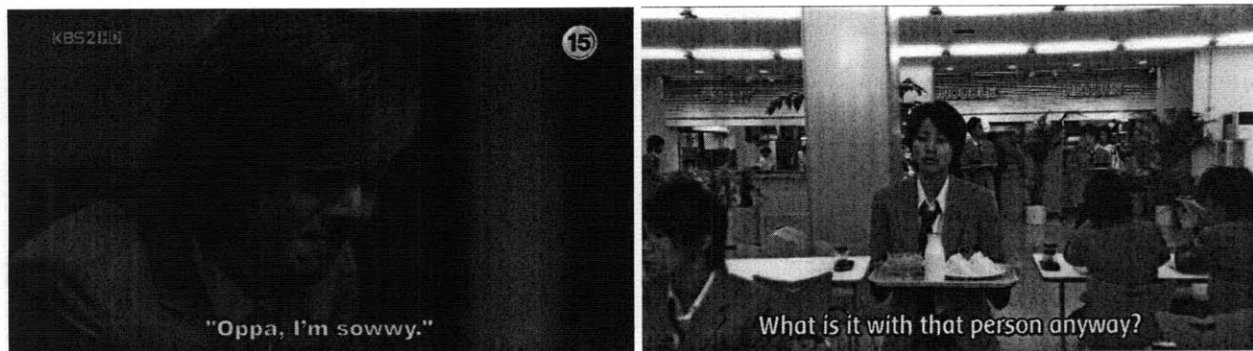
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<sup>23</sup> Many subbing groups do, in fact, accept monetary donations. However, in most cases, such as with SARS fansubs, this income is directly entirely towards running the website and acquiring DVD in order to provide high quality video on their offerings. Some sites, such as streaming video aggregator Mysoju.com in fact does not accept donations and encourages people to donate to subbing groups or other sites.



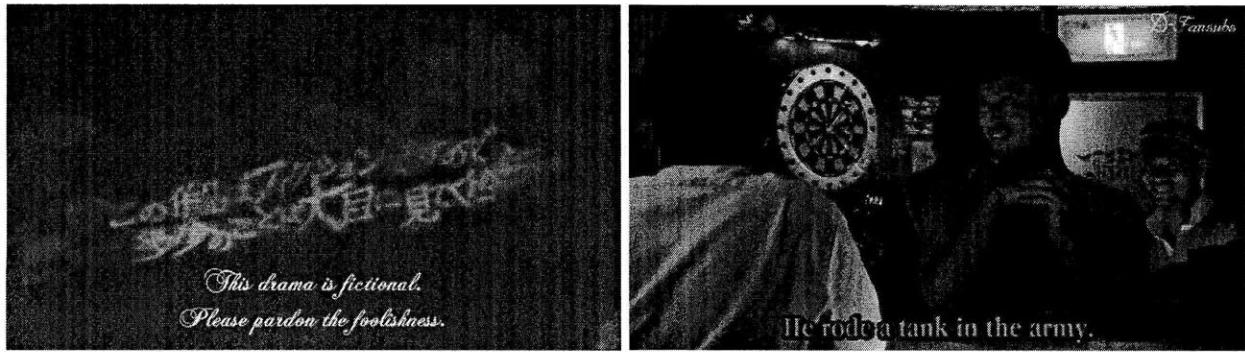
within its genre, pulling it into a position which is less extreme” (Gottlieb 1997: 22). Commercial translation thus acts as a normativizing and domesticating force, both in the sense of reigning and correcting the eccentricities of the original and as a means of “acculturation of the source text in line with dominant conventions and expectancies prevailing in the TC [Target Culture]” (Ulrych 2000: 130 in González 2006: 264).

By contrast fansubbers take extensive measures to maintain the “eccentricities” of a text, often leaving specialized terms untranslated and leaving intact linguistic customs such as the Japanese custom of calling people by their last names with honorifics. Also used are translator’s notes to explicate ‘untranslatable’ cultural references or idiomatic phrases rather than finding a local equivalent.



*(fig 4: Language “eccentricities” such as honorifics and gender-ambiguous pronouns left untranslated or literally translated*

Additionally, fansubbers use non-standard typefaces and font color that reflect the overall tone of the series as well as employ changes in font style in order to note “changes in use of language, such as dialect shifts” (González 2006: 271). Thus, great stakes are taken to preserve a sense of the “original” text, at the cost of accessibility for a broader audience.



*(fig 5: adjustments in typeface to reflect the tone of a scene and speech affectations*

This is because, as noted previously, one of the defining traits of online drama circulation communities is that they are at once audience and producer, exhibiting “uniquely multifarious capacity as patrons, producers, distributors and viewers of the subtitled product” (González 2006: 268). In other words, commercial subtitling attempts to please the largest possible audience, while fansubbers seek to please a committed, specific niche audience: themselves and their peers.

In removing more traditional market imperatives, accessibility becomes a measure of individual interest (and, of course, access to technology). But as made evident by the statistics on the number of visitors and downloads to these sites, that kind of targeted appeal is not, strictly speaking, a limitation in the sense that though each production targets a specific audience, there is no limit on the range of productions and version that can be created. Since “there’s no rules to fansubbing practices, so each group does something differently” (Amrayu, chat, Oct 2008), as fansubbing groups continue to proliferate, so too do the variations on technique, translation philosophy, and style of the content available. Multiple subbing groups with have been known to tackle the same series even, and certain series, such as “[Popular idols] Yamapi and Matsujun’s dramas have as many as nine groups translating” (Wolfie email: 25 Mar 2009), though the practice is not always encouraged. However, the occasional resistance to this practice is not meant to discourage the production of varying versions of a single series, but rather to help

channel energies away from reproductions were not produced with the intent of offering true variation. D-Addicts founder Ruroshin set up the fansubbing wiki, for instance, in order so that fansubbing groups could post their current projects so that other groups could see what was already being subbed, thus avoiding accidental “duplicated efforts.” (Ruroshin email: Feb 19 2009). Amrayu also noted the poor performance of a group that released what was ostensibly a higher video-quality version that was, in fact, simply a larger filesize to try and “fake people into downloading their version,” though she had no problem with a newer group wanting to do a different version of a drama that SARS had already subbed (Amrayu chat: Oct 2008). Thus, there is discouragement for “duplicates” but not for alternate versions, since the former as seen as wasted effort that could’ve otherwise contributed to broadening the range of drama offerings.

Thus, though access is not even across the board — the level of interest and action necessary for someone living in a diasporic community in the US who already has knowledge of drama and cultural conventions and can watch either raw or English-subtitled materials will have a wider selection and easier time navigating the website -- further development and inclusions are infinitely possible, once the barrier of technological access is breached. Unlike market-driven models, which are fundamentally conservative, these circulation and (re)production systems are fluid, responsive, and accretive: without collective resource limits beyond interest and fan labor, more options and more targeted niches can always be added.

### **2.3 Circulation as community: aggregation, curation, discourse**

With the lowered barriers of cost and the resulting increased access to media materials and technical tools affording a rise in socially-motivated content production, drama fansubbing flourished as a practice. Amrayu remembers that when she was “just a drama viewer” in the late

1990s, “drama fansubbing was non-existent” since “raws” -- subtitled video files of the original series -- were so difficult to obtain (Amrayu chat: Oct 2008). However, the technological and lack of access to content was not the only barrier, and the advent of P2P technologies allowing for easy file sharing alone was not enough. While it was a significant shift, giving audiences abroad access to encoded video files from Japanese broadcasts that were uploaded by fans living in Japan, Ruroshin, the founder of D-Addicts, acknowledges that even “as the numbers [of fansubbing teams] grew the groups started to subbing the same dramas . . . [because] there wasn't enough coordinated effort” (Ruroshin chat: 19 Feb 2009). It was not until the social infrastructure for organizing subbing and circulation efforts emerged through aggregation sites that drama fansubs truly took off.

### ***aggregation and social infrastructure***

Sites of drama aggregation, as the key sources for obtaining East Asian drama content, thus serve as the central node in the drama circulation system. Rather than simply providing a service for content distribution, the most successful of these are predominantly structured to facilitate social contact and community building through the sharing of content. For instance, D-addicts, short for “drama addicts,” is inarguably the largest aggregation hub of subtitled East Asian dramas<sup>24</sup>. Founded by Ruroshin in 2004 after observing “a combination of difficult access to subtitles and lack of subtitled dramas” (Ruroshin email: 19 Feb 2009) that was inhibiting the growth of drama fandom, it currently tracks nearly 23,000 separate files<sup>25</sup>, just under 6,000 of

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<sup>24</sup> D-addicts, in fact, tracks both subtitled and unsubtitled files and in fact has more unsubtitled “raw” files than subtitled ones. However, while it is clearly the heaviest traffic site for subtitled files, I am not familiar enough with online circulation practices *within* Asia to assess its relative volume compared to Asian drama downloading sites.

<sup>25</sup> Statistics taken from <http://forum/stats.php> April 28th, 2009. Of these torrent files, roughly 16,000 are for Japanese (11,890 files), Korean (3,553), and Taiwanese (1,214), and Hong Kong (348) dramas. The rest of the files are miscellaneous East Asian television, drama soundtracks and theme songs, and other miscellaneous video.

which are English-subtitled, and lists contributions by 192 fansubbing groups<sup>26</sup> in 23 languages<sup>27</sup>.

D-addicts, as Ruroshin explained, grew out of an effort to “encourage more free flowing sharing of translated works” (Ruroshin email: 19 Feb 2009). Prior to D-addicts, there were no large-scale content and translation aggregation efforts, and the only site for those who didn’t have the language skills to watch unsubtitled dramas was Jdoramas.com, a discussion site. Discussion, however, was fundamentally limited due to restricted access to subtitled content, since “for the non-fluent Japanese members the only way we can discuss the dramas is if we could actually watch and understand them . . . via fansubs” (Ruroshin email: 19 Feb 2009). Accordingly, Ruroshin’s primary concern in the beginning was first in helping facilitate fansubbing, which resulted in the launch of a Fansub wiki where different groups could post current and past projects to help coordinate efforts and prevent unintentional duplicate translations. From there d-addicts grew to encompass a whole system of discussion boards, torrent postings, and Dramawiki, a collaborative and extensive drama encyclopedia in the style of wikipedia.

The most revealing characteristic of D-addicts is that every major portion of the site is housed within either a wiki or forum format, structures meant for collaborative production and social engagement. While there are additionally a series of forum boards devoted to the discussion of dramas, actors, East Asian cultures and travel, and so forth, every torrent file is posted within its own forum thread, where downloaders frequently comment directly to and interact with the fansubbers, creating a potentially robust feedback system around every torrent file. This active, and very public, feedback is precisely the sort of social capital and engagement that motivates subbers, as previously noted. D-Addicts was therefore able help the growth of fansubbing not

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<sup>26</sup> Statistic taken from the groups page of the Fansub Wiki: [http://fansub.d-addicts.com/Category:Fansub\\_Groups](http://fansub.d-addicts.com/Category:Fansub_Groups) as of April 28, 2009. This number is up from 147 as of December 2008.

<sup>27</sup> Statistic from the subtitle listing: <http://d-addicts.com/forum/subtitles.php>

only by facilitating coordination between subtitling groups, but also through fostering more direct and visible lines of communication between fansubbers and the drama-viewing community at large, generating the kind of social engagement and community infrastructure necessary for fansubbing to be socially rewarding both to those who consumed and produced fansubs.

Similarly, one major hub of direct download aggregation, Jdramas@Livejournal, is an open membership community blog housed within a system that is part social network, part blogging platform. Within it, anyone interested can sign up as a member to gain access to posts made by other members with links to direct downloads of subtitled drama episodes. Like D-Addicts, because of the format of the site, each post has capacity for commenting and, since Jdramas@Livejournal does not have separate dedicated spaces for discussion, comments regarding the dramas being posted will often coexist besides those declaring the intent to use the download links and comments of appreciate for the efforts of the uploader. Thus, at Jdramas@Livejournal, consumption, circulation, and discourse exist simultaneously within the same screen space.

Moreover, Livejournal allows blog maintainers to customize what the links for “comment [on this entry]” and the number of comments say, so that instead of having a generic “5 comments/comment on this entry” someone might change it to “5 stories told/tell me a story.” In the Jdramas@Livejournal community, all the entries have a link asking “watch with me?” that links the user to comment. In using a request to “watch with” as the invitation to make a comment on a post, viewership and discourse are explicitly linked. Speaking is explicitly constructed as act of viewing, folding discourse into a characteristic of online drama audienceship.



I have combined all my posts into this one and the others are now deleted! I'm a bit sad for losing all the wonderful comments people made and all the screencaps I made for each episode. If ever I get less lazy I might reduce the size of the caps by a lot and post mini pics here for each episode XDDD I make no promised but maybe ^^;;;

( Hana Yori Dango )



♥ enthralled  
👤 hana yori dango, jdrama

Memories | Tags | 311 watched | Watch with me?

*(fig 6: Cropped posting from the Jdramas.livejournal.com community showing the customized comment links)*

The notable exception to this formula of content aggregation and sharing within sites designed around social interaction and discourse is MySoju.com, a site that aggregates links to online streaming video of dramas from major streaming video sites around the web such as YouTube, Dailymotion, and Veoh. MySoju.com, in fact, has no spaces for comments or discussion, only a generic contact form for the site maintainers and a single-line drama request form that allows viewers to enter the names of dramas they would like the site to host. Unlike drama request systems on both D-addicts and Jdramas@Livejournal, the form on MySoju.com gives the impression that “they totally do not care what you think” (Dana chat: 27 April 2009), and doesn’t support responses from the maintainers nor allow people to see and perhaps fulfill requests made by others. Other than popularity rankings for the hosted drama links, there is in fact a startling lack of evidence of other viewers and site visitors.

The video format, in part, accounts for this discrepancy. Whereas both D-addicts and the Jdramas community on livejournal are means of obtaining large, high video-quality download files, MySoju.com provides access to low-quality, but readily available streaming content that doesn't require potentially lengthy downloading times, a mutli-step downloading process, and large amounts of hard drive space<sup>28</sup>. As a result, viewing on streaming sources like MySoju.com tends to generate a slightly different mode of engagement that is focused on "immediate gratification" rather than prolonged engagement. As one participant explained, though she prefers generally to download files, she will sometimes "wind up streaming when [she gets] impatient" (Wolfie email: 27 Apr 2009). Another participant revealed that she found sites like MySoju.com useful to "test" dramas and watch episodes to see if she likes something before committing the time and hard drive space to download. Part of the appeal too is that ability to watch on any computer at any time, allowing "5 minutes between classes, or at work" (Dana chat: 27 April 2009). Thus, the streaming site provides a kind of on-the-go, ad-hoc viewing experience for many that compliments, rather than replaces, more socially-embedded consumption experiences elsewhere. Thus, as I noted early in comparing early anime fansubbing to current practices, the move online resulted in the reorientation of circulation around hubs of aggregation rather than production as the crucial intermediary because these aggregation sites provided the social context for selecting and understanding dramas.

It is also fairly common for participants to use "all of the above" systems to obtain content. For instance, in addition to streaming when she's too impatient to download materials, Wolfie also uses different sources depending on the drama and on what she intends to do with the video files, preferring to download rather than stream if she intends to in order to make screencaps (short for screen captures, which are still images from a video file), which she then uses for recapping and reviewing dramas. Her choices are also determined by the resources she has

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<sup>28</sup> The typical drama episode compressed and encoded into an AVI file runs around 700mb. Dramas series typically run somewhere between 10-24 episodes.



available at any given time, so that she will use direct downloads when she has an active account with download hosting sites to make the process faster, but otherwise relying on torrent (Wolfie email: 27 April, 2009).

Rather than suggest that all participants are engaged in social activity all the time, in highlighting the fact circulation is often intentionally enabled through platforms designed for feedback and discussion, I merely want to reiterate that the circulation of East Asian drama online take place within, and are fundamentally shaped by, a socially-regulated space. Accordingly, as participant use of a site such as MySoju.com reminds us, drama circulation is vast system of complimentary production, distribution, and discursive practices that are entangled both in the process of circulation, but also consumption, as individuals selectively employ a number of different platforms of serve varied viewing needs and goals.

### ***curation spaces and community production***

MySoju.com also reveals another key process in drama circulation, which is curation. Unlike more volume-oriented aggregator sites such as D-Addicts or the Jdramas@Livejournal community, MySoju.com links only to a selection of dramas that have proven widely popular or have received high demand<sup>29</sup>, giving the impression that “what's up has usually been vetted” (Dana chat: 27 April 2009). There is also an emphasis on the site in organizing based on popularity, with significant screen space at the top of the home page devoted to ranking dramas based on popularity from current week, all time, and staff favorites. MySoju.com, I would suggest, is therefore self-consciously a curation space with popularity as its key criteria, in addition to being a more standard aggregator.

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<sup>29</sup> I was unable to get a response to interview requests from the maintainers of MySoju.com, and therefore don't know what their official criteria is for linking to drama files. Thus, this assessment is based on my own impressions and the impressions of users of the site that I spoke to.

I'm using the term curation very broadly in this context to describe all activities that involve the selective archiving or production of a knowledge around content for the purpose of helping to direct and organize the selection of viewing materials by the participants. In this sense then, one might suggest that what I've been calling "aggregator sites" such as D-Addicts or Jdramas@Livejournal are themselves simply large-scale collective curation efforts with a enough participation to be relatively comprehensive. This suggestion is precisely part of the point I am hoping to make wherein many processes involved in drama circulation online is part of a larger trend in the spread of media online in which acts of production, distribution, discourse, and consumption are not so readily delineated from one another. As I suggested earlier, particularly in these socially structured downloading sites, acts of consumption and viewership are increasingly collapsed into distribution and engagement within a social space. Thus, though the primary purpose of sites like d-addicts is to aggregate and provide access to as much content as possible, the ways in which dramas are organized, in addition to forums devoted to polls in order to select a "drama of the week" are, like MySoju.com's popularity rankings, meant to instructionally shape viewing and downloading in a way that might be considered curatorial.

It is, however, worthwhile also to take a moment and describe "curation" or, more broadly, knowledge production practices around drama circulation that is not tied explicitly to literally providing access to content. With the flourishing of fansubbing and the increasing options for obtaining files, the sheer volume of content available makes organization and curation efforts -- guidance, information, and recommendation systems for drama viewing -- increasingly crucial. As I've suggested, in part due to their socially regulated nature, all the aggregation sites accomplish this to some measure. D-Addicts, for instance, has a forum devoted to polls to select a "drama of the week" that people can then watch based on its popularity. The site also houses the most comprehensive wiki devoted entirely to dramas, with detailed synopses and production information of dramas as well as actors and other drama related information. The use of

dramawiki, or the usefulness of synopses in general, already presumes a familiarity with dramas. A wiki, for instance, functions more as a reference tool, with the ability to look up dramas one might be curious about, but is far less useful in helping guide someone towards a drama they might enjoy. Similarly, the “drama of the week” polls are limited in that they only reflect voting numbers, and not reasons for the votes, so that there’s no telling if a particular drama is more popular due to a more famous cast or a more compelling script.

While practices such as subbing and aggregation are structural filters for content, they don’t deliberately privilege any specific form of content. Though sites like D-Addicts and Jdramas@Livejournal allows users to filter content searches through the national origin or format or, in the case of d-addicts, the subtitled language of the files available, they do not differentiate between subgenres or make value judgments on the “quality” of content. A posting containing any drama or other type of file is structured and organized according to the same logic as any other, the only difference in both instances being one of visible popularity. In the case of the Jdramas@Livejournal, though all postings are organized by date posted, users can easily scroll through the pages seeking out those than have had the most comments (the most people who “watched with”) to get a sense of what dramas are most popular. A similar thing can be seen with d-addicts as well, though there is also an additional technological indicator due to the fact that D-Addicts tracks torrent files. Files that are most popular, and thus have the most peers downloading, are the fastest and easiest to obtain by virtue of how P2P technologies work<sup>30</sup>. So while these sites seek to make as much content as available as possible -- D-Addicts, for instance, has a running board that lists the torrents most in need of “seeding”<sup>31</sup> to help speed up stalled downloads of less active files -- they do not account for downloading patterns on these

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<sup>30</sup> Instead of having central servers where everyone downloads from, which can become slower the more people that are downloading, P2P systems actually network all the downloaders to download bits from one another, thus ensuring that the more “peers” involved, the faster the download will go.

<sup>31</sup> Seeding, in terms of torrent, refers to the practice of staying active in the P2P network for a file without actively downloading yourself. Therefore, you lend your bandwidth to those downloading without taking anything in return.

sites. In other words, while aggregators and fansubbers control content availability, there are additional forces that shape *popularity*.

Drama blogs are one of the most central of these forces, heavily influencing both the popularity of content and the flow of discourse around it. As Javabeans, the creator of the prominent Korean drama blog Dramabeans.com, explained, blogs like hers serve as “middlemen” that “instead of just uploading raw video and music to a huge depository for people to grab themselves . . . are filtering, editing, directing discussion” (Javabeans chat: 4 Feb 2009). While the notions of “filter, editing, directing” might seem like limiting or containment efforts, they are in fact intended to help broaden the audience and participation since, as I suggested in my discussion of fansubbing practices, the content produced and circulated within these fan-moderated spaces are not produced under commercial standards, thereby creating certain barriers of entry and a sort of “learning curve” for those not already familiar with both the fan context of the productions or how to otherwise navigate the complex system of websites. Dramabeans.com, for instance, provides an FAQ about “where to watch” content, detailing the different ways to download or stream content, as well as a glossary of common Korean terms that are often left untranslated in fansubbed files. In this sense, Javabeans sees her site in part as an entryway into drama viewing for more novice participants, “like a place to start . . . a more organized approach to introducing people to dramas” (Javabeans chat: 4 Feb 2009).

There is also a strong component of providing the necessary cultural contexts to “get” or “fully appreciate” East Asian dramas. In discussing her site as a “place to start,” Javabeans compares viewing Asian dramas cultural background by asking us to “imagine being a non-American and wanting to get into US television and having no idea where to start,” acknowledging the possibility of non-diasporic audiences within drama fandom. Multiple participants express an awareness of a need to provide cultural context for new fans. Wolfie, another popular blogger who regularly does reviews and “pimp” posts for dramas she enjoys acknowledges in discussing

two of her favorite dramas that “without context, without the knowledge of the typical drama heroine, I'd be afraid they wouldn't fully appreciate Makino [in the popular Japanese drama *Hana Yori Dango*]. And for *Coffee Prince*, without knowing how dramas -- or Asia, really -- treat homosexuality, they might not fully understand how awesome it was” (Wolfie Chat: 8 April 2009). Thus, these curation or filtering acts are not meant to inhibit, but rather broaden and encourage viewing as an effort to make content more *accessible* instead of merely available by providing guidance, assessment, and meaningful organization.

### ***“a place to discuss stuff”: reviewing, recapping, pimping, priming***

These curatorial and filtering endeavors are ultimately meant to generate discourse and build a more active, engaged community around drama circulation beyond viewing. The sense of sharing materials with others is one of the key motivators. As Wolfie explains it, “there's no greater thrill than someone cussing me out because they've spent all night marathoning drama and now they want more” (Wolfie email: 8 Feb 2009). To this end, there are a set of common forms in organized drama curation efforts.

### **reviews and recaps**

Reviews and recaps (short for recapitulations) are posts in blogs or other discussion sites that are usually centered around discussing and assessing a single drama or drama episode<sup>32</sup>. Like film reviews, drama reviews are primarily intended to evaluate and inform readers on the drama in question, and thus often presume that the reader already has interest in, and working knowledge of, Asian dramas. Thus, they frequently have plot summaries and ratings, as well as an explanation of the reviewer's judgement. While the length and depth of detail in reviews can vary vastly, there is frequently an effort made to assess the drama based on multiple criteria

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<sup>32</sup> though bloggers will sometimes do a general review of a drama season, or a particular producer or actor's repertoire

with a clear intent to inform or serve as reference material. Recaps are like reviews that place the emphasis more on detailed summarization or commentary rather than more general assessment and evaluation. Many fans will often write recap posts in their blogs for episode of popular shows soon after their air in order to share their views on a particular episode. Though they often have a rundown of the events that occurred in the episode, much of the draw of recaps is the fact that these summarizations of the plot are infused with the writer's opinions and commentary. Many of Wolfie's recaps, for instance, do not give a particularly detailed plot synopsis, focusing instead on providing video stills ("screencaps") of key moments of humor or character development that she sees as highlights in the episode. Recaps, often, are read by people who have already seen the episodes they cover, since there are many plot spoilers within them, and serve less as a replacement for viewing than a supplement, a way to revisit the viewing experience and share it with other drama fans. Recaps, in other words, can create a sense of "watching with," and helps shape the drama viewing experience socially.

### **pimping and priming**

While reviews and recaps are both critical resources for drama fans who are looking for more things to watch or to extend the viewing experience, pimping and primer posts are typically oriented towards people who are not yet extensively familiar with dramas. Primers and "Pimp" posts are informational posts that are geared towards "priming" a viewer for the material that they are going to view or "pimping" (enthusiastically promoting) material to someone who isn't yet familiar with it. "Primers" and "pimp" posts are often similar in form and goal -- to promote a series to someone else in hopes of making them a fan as well -- and the terms are sometimes used interchangeably, though one might argue that "primers" can be more focused on being informative rather than just enthusiastic. Both are common within fan communities and are meant to give a new viewer context and reason to watch something they're unfamiliar with, and are thus critical amongst English-speaking Asian drama fans due to the differences in the style, form, and cultural cues present between Asian dramas and mainstream American and English

television. Primers and Pimp posts typically give a rundown of what to expect, as well as an argument for why a particular series or, in the case of East Asian drama, entire genre or fandom is worth getting involved in. They also typically provide links to additional materials, and make recommendations for how to proceed. In short, unlike reviews and recaps, which are for fellow fans, they are like a starter manual for the uninitiated and intended to provide an explanation of the cultural codes and contexts that the writer (or “pimper”) believes a new viewer will need to fully understand and enjoy the drama.

It should be noted that the cultural codes and context highlighted in pimp and primer posts are not solely those of a drama’s country of origin. Often they also provide an introduction to the discourse around a particular text, giving a new viewer cues on what is considered important within the fan community, such as favorite romantic pairings (known as “ships,” short for relationships) or certain readings of subtext. Some of Wolfie’s pimp posts, for instance, sometimes highlight the homosocial subtext between popular male characters, which is a popular topic of discussion amongst some fans. These pimp and primer posts, therefore, are meant to prepare a novice viewer for understanding the cultural context of not only the production of the drama, but also that of its circulation and consumption. In other words, they “prime” potential viewers not only to watch a series, but to become part of the discursive social space around drama viewing, to watch as a *fan*.

Finally, what is notable here is that people are not only consuming content, but also creating content as well. While providing information is central in all of these practices, the end goal is not only to inform or educate, but to help shape and structure discussion. These reviews, recaps, primers, and pimp posts shape not only how people talk about the content they watch, but how they watch it, highlighting certain aspects and relationships, as well as bringing in contextual and cultural information. As javabeans pointed out, before her site, there were certainly various message boards and discussion forums, such as soompi.com, but they were

“more like a big place to amass pictures and tidbits of information [about dramas]. . . [and not] really a place to discuss the stuff [in dramas] itself” (Javabeans chat: 4 Feb 2009). Similarly, Wolfie writes her extensive pimp and recap posts as part of an effort build her “own slice of community” by attracting like-minded friends:

“I like to join existing communities and carve a little corner of fandom for myself, like with a certain pairing or my favorite character/actor/boyband. I think it's a good way to avoid wank and negativity -- attract like-minded friends, convert who you can, and you have your own slice of the community where everyone gets along and comes together for the good stuff. I've always been an avid pimper”

(Woflie email 19 Feb 2009)

Thus, while there is “a small element of ‘providing a service’” (Javabeans chat: 4 Feb 2009), we should not consider these efforts to encourage discussion or build communities as purely outward facing. Rather, they stem out of individual efforts to actively shape the discursive spaces they participate in through their contributions. While it is absolutely about contributing to a larger sense of community practice -- as Wolfie puts it, she believes strongly in “giving back” -- it is simultaneously for the benefit of the group, but also for yourself as part of the group. As Mizune, one of the moderators on the discussion forums at D-Addicts explains, she has always been “more interested in helping others discover their joy of these programs than anything else . . . [and] part of it is because it's nice when other people can enjoy and appreciate the same things you do” (Mizune email: 29 Mar 2009).

Moreover, these discourse and community building practices aren't simply participatory, but fundamentally productive endeavors, as much about creating media content as about discussing it. Javabeans believes, for instance, that because the rise of “Hallyu,” or the “Korean Wave” coincided with the user-generated content -- “YouTube, blogs, fan video” -- it feels “interactive . . . not [just with] the content itself . . . not merely in the sense that we all get together and merely talk about it. It's that we're generating content that adds to the conversation, too. In trying to make stuff more available, people are more than just gatekeepers



to the product, they actually creating content” (Javabeans chat: 4 Feb 2009). Similarly, in describing what it takes to “build community,” Wolfie lists both discursive and explicitly productive endeavors: “Pimp your series/character/OTP, make new friends who like it, wheedle your old ones into seeing the light. Fic, icon, squee<sup>33</sup>, create chats, create new communities if necessary (or increase traffic on existing ones if not)” (Wolfie email: 1 Mar 2009). These fans and many other like them are effectively creating elaborate paratextual materials that not only help make the text more accessible, but are also providing interpretive frameworks for other viewers. These are, in short, productive efforts not to simply “build a community” but to “have your own slice of community,” as Wolfie puts it, to actively direct and form and share the cultural space within which you encounter and engage with the media materials being circulated.

## **2.4 Active Audiences and Collaborative Imaginaries**

These activities not only help determine who watches and what they’re watching, by promoting content and making the genre more accessible to a wider range of audiences. They are also integral to shaping not only how and what people watch, but also what they are watching *for* in dramas, by directing attention to certain characteristics of dramas, such as Wolfie’s emphasis on particular types of character dynamics or humor that she sees as unique in Asian dramas. These efforts functionally “work to activate and often extend the meanings of primary texts” (Fiske 1989: 65) by proposing alternative readings of dramas and legitimizing shared interpretations brought in from different fan experiences. In short, they help shape how and why the content is engaged with and valued.

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<sup>33</sup> “Squee” is a fandom term for publicly expressing extreme joy and enthusiasm over something. It is an onomatopoeia for a girlish squeal of delight.

This, like fansubbing, shifts the flow of content by taking its circulation out of commercial markets. Cunningham and Sinclair remind us that even taking into consideration the fragmented and multiple identifications and responses of the postmodern audience, “collective audience preferences and desires . . . are still shaped commercially and ideologically as markets for certain forms and genres by media corporations” (2000: 6). This is the logic we have seen with the struggling broadcast cable networks attempting to target “Asian-American” audiences, wherein media corporations are “actively seeking out audiences” (ibid.) that they believe to exist. What online curation and circulation suggests to us is that though these audiences very much exist, they do not exist as the audiences that these network executives envision.

It is not simply that these systems make content more accessible to a wider range of subjects beyond diasporic Asian-American communities, though that is significant. It is that even for those who might demographically fit into the audience profiles drawn up by commercial media channels, they are still not the same audience being sought, because the industry is unable to account for how people are watching and what exactly the audience is watching for in the content. In failing to understand how and with what the audience engages in, even in running some of the same content, the industry fails to understand “who” the audience is. That is to say, their understanding of the audience, even the Asian-American diasporic audience, cannot account for the how and *to what* audiences respond to, thus ensuring that even if they have the right populations in mind, they still do not have the right audiences.

These audienceships, therefore, are formed precisely because their preferences and desires are unaccounted for within any of the presently operating commercial markets. While it is true, of course, that markets within Asia affect which dramas are produced and promoted, rippling out to affect content availability in online circulation channels, these audienceships are themselves not a part of the market. In that sense, of course, their desires are formed within the negative

space left open by these markets, but in another sense too they exist beyond their commercial ideology, creating a sense of self-determination and agency within the audience.

I would like to clarify however, that this is not meant to privilege more explicitly productive types of participation as somehow more valuable or prevalent over others. Or rather, I would like to suggest that even forms of engagement that are not traditionally understood to be productive, are nonetheless dramatically active in contributing to a larger collaborative social ecology. Though only a relatively limited number of people are producing a significant proportion of the content, a far larger number are engaged in commenting, tagging, and recommending content. Tagging and similar contributions, as Lawrence Lessig points out, organizes content based on “significance [that is] is created directly by the viewers of consumers of that culture “ which in turn “enable collaboration . . . [and are thus] a self-conscious community activity“ (2008: 60). Or rather, they not only organize based on significance, but undertake organization as a process of public signification, of producing and attaching meanings to texts for the benefit of other viewers. Moreover, these activities also contribute to and help motivate those which are more traditionally productive, such as fansubbing or writing recaps, “because their investment is basically a labor of love . . . [and] a comment . . . [is] how they get *paid*” (Bluestar chat: 15 Apr 2009, emphasis in the original).

I would emphasize, too, that there are significant portion of East Asian drama fans who do not participate in discussions, commenting, tagging, or any of those more broadly productive task, but that in no way exempts them from being active participants. Drama fans themselves, first of all, see the basic act of watching dramas as fundamentally different from typical television consumption since “dramas are sort of unique in that you have to actively pursue watching them” (Bluestar chat: 15 Apr 2009, emphasis in the original). This sense of active consumption, to be clear, is fundamental not to the content itself, but to the transnational online circulation through which it is obtained. Bluestar, for instance, compares her watching dramas to her

cousins in Hong Kong watching the popular American series *Gossip Girl* before it began airing officially outside the US, since in both cases “they had to actively pursue getting their hands on [the content] via the internet” (Bluestar chat: 15 Apr 2009). Javabeans also makes this distinction, suggesting that though for her “active/passive is kind of the distinction in my mind between US television and korean television . . . koreans in korea are more a passive audience” (Javabeans chat: 4 Feb 2009). This is because Korean dramas are “always there” for Korean audiences in the same way that US television is for her, “whereas the global followers are active” (Javabeans chat: 4 Feb 2009). Thus, by virtue of being part of a commercially unacknowledged transnational audience, Drama fans in the US view their media consumption as deliberate and fundamentally active.

Rather than simply a consequence of the conditions of participation within a transnational media fandom, this sense of being active is also part of the central appeal. Part of the enjoyment of being an “overseas fan of Asian media” is in getting to “choose when and how [one is] exposed to it . . . [which] in some ways, feels more personal” (Bluestar chat: 14 April 2009). Though fans derive a clear sense of individual satisfaction from having this control over the selection of content, these selections are socially attenuated, both evolving from flows shaped by social activities and being carried out through discursive spaces where others participate. They can additionally be unintentionally or incidentally influential, in instances where the expression of their personal interest in dramas through avatars or background themes might pique the interest of those passing (or rather, clicking) by. In fact, several of the individuals interviewed recalled discovering new facets of drama fandom through “fortuitous clicking” or seeing an image from a drama in an unrelated community in someone else’s avatar icon. So that even when done as an act of individual media selection, watching dramas creates not only a strong sense of actively forming one’s own cultural spaces, but is potentially, if perhaps sometimes unintentionally, social and collaborative.

All of these practices together form a densely woven and increasingly complex ecology facilitated by the internet, as a system of technologies and protocols of use. While one cannot deny the persistence of legacies of imperialism, and uneven development and flows of populations and capital, these emergent and developing practices around the circulation of media destabilizes established paradigms of power and control by intervening on the flow of cultural resources and symbolic capital. What results instead is a mash of hybrids that, rather than signaling a sort of unproblematic fusion, maintains the productive tensions and contentions, creating more amorphous, conflicted, complex systems of identity and community formation that I would suggest even more radically displaces the role of the nation as the organizer of collective sentiment and mediated publics, creating far more complex and entangled cultural encounters between the global and the local, between the fans and diasporic audiences. What results, in other words, is the emergence of audiences, and forms of audienceship, that could not have been anticipated within previous systems of media distribution. Audiences that, in other words, were previously *unimaginable*.



## Dis/locating Difference: Fluid Audienceships, Transitory Texts

*“There is no text, there is no audience, there are only the processes of viewing.”*

John Fiske

In his examination of the relationship between satellite and cable television in India and the formation of national and cultural identity, Shanti Kumar suggests that electronic media is facilitating the formation of “unimagined communities” that are “infinite, limitless, and unbounded in the worldwide flows of national, transnational, and translocal networks” (Kumar 2006: 15). Though Kumar was speaking of satellite and cable technologies, the notion of communities that are unimaginable “at the technological limits of imaginative access . . . [and] limitless in imaginary excess” (Kumar 2006: 15) nevertheless resonates strongly with the digitally-networked fan communities around East Asian television drama. These too are communities that, enabled by technological change, are unpredictable and fluid and defined not by their boundedness but by their potentially endlessly adaptive nature. The audiences engaged in these practices are unimaginable first in the sense that they are no longer simply *imagining* their fellow-members in the collective media experience, but tangibly *interacting* with one another. Though these interactions are not always through direct communication, the content,

commentary, and metadata being produced provide robust points of contact and discursive encounters between individuals. Audiences are not only viewing, but producing, selecting, forming, and sharing texts together, so that “the image of their communion” lives not as Benedict Anderson famously suggested, “in the minds of each” (1983: 6), separate from one another in atomized, imaginary collectivity, but online in spaces meant to facilitate collaboration, participation, and discourse. In short, these communities or audiences are unimaginable because their formation -- the acts of sharing in and communicating through media -- are not in need of imagining.

They are also unimaginable, however, in the sense that they are increasingly impossible to define along any clearly delineated axis of identity or pre-given category. As Sonia Livingstone points out, “[i]n the new media environment, it seems that people increasingly engage with content more than forms or channels – favourite bands, soap operas or football teams” (2004: 81), so that these communities are formed around shared tastes rather than social determinations, resulting in groups with diverse backgrounds and motivations. Moreover, how these drama series are being viewed and interpreted are socially-regulated through the process of sharing and acquiring these texts, so that the conditions of any individual fan cannot alone determine that fan’s relationship to texts being watched. Fans from all manner of backgrounds are shaping each other’s impressions and interpretations through their use of the content. The encounters between audience and text are constantly in flux, causing audiences to fragment, diversify, and converge in unexpected and unanticipated ways, creating what Livingstone refers to as a “moving target” (Livingstone 2004) that is constantly being transformed and re-articulated within different contexts of engagement.



### 3.1 Locating the Unimaginable

As Fiske reminds us, popular culture, and television in particular, is always bounded by encounters between the material conditions of consumption and the textual materials available. Television is not only a matter of texts, but of *use*. Popular texts, due to their pervasiveness, become particularly powerful “tool[s] to think with” (Fiske 1991: 60), such that reading positions simultaneously inform, and in turn are informed by, the materials being read. Thus, in considering the circulation of East Asian television dramas, we should not confuse radically open participation in (re)producing and sharing the “textual materials available” and the collaborative social structures of fandom as exempt from larger structural and historical conditions. Specific social contexts still crucially shape and determine the range of encounters between audience and text. That is, rather than allowing the difficulty of imagining the audience lead to concessions to endless complexity, the unimaginability of the audience both in their unpredictability and visibility is what precisely demands closer examination, acknowledgement rather than assumption. That is, we must not reduce the unimaginable to the unintelligible.

To this end, we must not presume from the outset a perfect alignment between social positions and reading positions. Rey Chow provocatively warns against “the hasty supply of original ‘contexts’ and ‘specificities’ that easily become complicitous with the dominant discourse, which achieves hegemony precisely by its capacity to convert, recode, make transparent, and thus represent even those experiences that resist it with stubborn opacity” (1993: 38). In other words, in filtering our understanding of experience through predetermined social categories or determinations, we necessarily run the risk of producing accounts and explanations that are, in fact, ahistorical and decontextualized by foreclosing on the possibility of new cultural formations and social change. Ien Ang and Joke Hermes bring these warnings to bear on empirical audience studies, pointing to the potential dangers of drawing direct correlation between how encounter viewers interpret texts and socio-demographic variables. In discussing the contradictions that

emerged between two studies of female middle- and working-class soap opera viewers, they suggest that the move to categorize audience responses as coming out of their structurally determined social positions invites “the creeping essentialism that . . . runs the danger of reifying and absolutizing the differences found . . . [which when] pushed to its logical extreme . . . would lead not only to the positing of fixed differences between working class women and middle-class women, but also to the projection of unity and coherence in the responses of the two groups” (Ang and Hermes 1996: 116). Their argument here, like Chow’s, means not to deny the existence of class difference (or any other sociohistorical condition), but to warn against a “premature explanatory closure, which precludes recognition of multiplicity and transgression” (1996: 117) and imposes potentially hegemonic interpretations by deciding ahead of time the pertinence of any axis of identity.

It is with this in mind that I have come to distinguish audiences from audienceship, wherein the latter seeks to examine engagement not by abstracting out from who, but in situating -- locating -- *how* viewers relate and make meaning from texts. Audienceship examines audience engagement *if given* particular modes of participation and interpretive activities and social determinations, rather than presuming these interpretive engagements *as given* based upon the social position of the participant. It therefore seeks to describe modes of engagement within a context where audience positions are not rigidly defined, and where for “any one viewer . . . different social alliances may be mobilized for different moments of viewing” (Fiske 1991: 57). Thus, any given audience member might encounter each text across numerous potential audienceships that are activated by the multitude of social positions and interactions that make up the encounter. Rather than thinking of individual identities as defining audiences, it is perhaps more useful to think of the practice of audiencing as constitutive of different cultural identities or positions, so that audienceship comes to define the formation of social and cultural engagements that are mobilized through practices around viewing and sharing texts.

The discussion of audienceship as the aggregate practices and conditions of viewing, creating, sharing, and discussing texts becomes central in avoiding sociological reductionism in considering how audiences encounter and produce pleasure from East Asian dramas. Drama audiences online are formed across numerous intersecting social positions and cultural affiliations. However, as we have seen, there is a continuing tendency in commercial distribution efforts to define East Asian drama audiences primarily, if not solely, in terms of ethnic or diasporic communities. The struggle of commercial broadcasters to locate and engage audiences can be seen as indicative of what Aswin Punathambekar describes as “the limits of thinking along ‘ethnic’ lines” which neither allows for the possibility of “outside” interest nor accounts for the internal complexity and diversity of the Asian-American audience (Punathambekar 2008). Thus, it is precisely because audiences have become unimaginable -- unpredictable in their engagement with texts and one another -- that the relationship between nation, culture, and identity must be examined within the contexts of media use rather than drawn into abstract alignments.

### **3.2 Cosmopolitanism, Diaspora, and Transnational Fandom**

Moving away from the limits of defining audiences along ethnic lines, therefore, is not to suggest a dismissal of the role of ethnic or national affiliations and legacies of migration in shaping audienceship among fans of East Asian television drama. As Gillespie points out in her research into Punjabi youth in Southall, as much as we may valorize the productive nature of media use in negotiating cultural identities, we cannot assume that these identities are “somehow self-selected, freely chosen through consumption activities” (Gillespie 1995: 14). Though fansubbing and online circulation has opened East Asian drama viewing to a far wider range of audiences, whose increasingly varied backgrounds and motivations may destabilize the coherence of any

one set of determinants, it does not do away with their influence. In particular, the influence of “the continuing power of social structures and political power relations is manifest in the range and kind of identities” (Gillespie 1995: 14) that can be ascribed, assumed, or contested. Although the specificities of *how* and to what extent cannot be imagined in the abstract, structural limits -- relations of power and difference -- understood alongside the social context of the viewing and the formal and ideological characteristics of the texts, nevertheless powerfully shape the way audiences encounter and interpret texts.

It should be noted to that the notion of “fandom” is predicated on relations of power. Early fan studies, heavily referencing de Certeau’s work on the tactics of the marginalized, allied fans with “the cultural tastes of subordinated formations of the people, particularly those disempowered by any combination of gender, age, class and race” (Fiske quoted in Gray et al. 2007: 2). In the mainstream press, fans were often “dismissed as others” (Gray et al 2007: 3) such that fandom became seen as “more than the mere act of being a fan of something: it was a collective strategy, a communal effort to form interpretive communities that in their subcultural cohesion evaded the preferred and intended meanings of the ‘power bloc’ (Fiske 1989) represented by popular media” (Gray et al 2007: 2). Fandom, as a social construct, is thus already defined in terms of power as negotiated from a position of cultural difference.

But as I suggested briefly in chapter 1, the tensions between structural limits and audience autonomy manifest themselves not only between the interpretive communities and the “power bloc” of popular culture industries, but also within fan communities. No fandom nor audience can ever be fully cohesive or coherent, and this is particularly true of transnational media fandoms. The *transnational*, after all, properly designates the crossing, not the disappearance, of national and cultural boundaries, and is thus unavoidably implicated in and characterized by negotiations of difference. In East Asian drama circulation, for instance, content is generally categorized or labeled by the country of origin and the language of subtitling. Thus, the very

organizing mechanism for distribution inscribes a consciousness of translation across linguistic and cultural difference between the site of production and that of consumption. Additionally, it is not only the texts of East Asian drama fandom that are transnational -- a significant portion of its audience are might be considered migrant or diasporic subjects, who see themselves as “linked to but different from those among whom it has settled” . . . [while also] powerfully linked to, but in some ways different from, the people of the homeland as well” (Tölölyan 2007, 650). Thus, even though defining audiences along strict ethnic lines cannot account for the range of experiences, identities, and engagements in fans of East Asian dramas, difference most visibly operates in relation to articulations of national and cultural contexts in which these dramas are produced as well as those in which they are circulated and consumed.

### ***re-imagining diasporic audiences***

The consumption of media from “home” by diasporic populations, considered to be “the exemplary communities of the transnational moment” (Tölölyan 1991: 3), has become one of the most well-established models for examining transnational media flows. Aided by faster, more expansive and accessible communication technologies, the increasingly reproducible, portable, and transmittable texts and images “meet deterritorialized viewers . . . [and] create diasporic public spheres” (Appadurai 1996: 4) wherein “Turkish guest workers in Germany watch Turkish films . . . Koreans in Philadelphia watch the 1988 Olympics in Seoul . . . Pakistani cabdrivers in Chicago listen to cassettes of sermons recorded in mosques in Pakistan or Iran” (Appadurai 1996: 4). Ang, citing Gillespie’s work on video use by South Asian communities in West London suggests that “the circulation and consumption of ethnically specific information and entertainment on video serves to construct and maintain cross-national ‘electronic communities’ of geographically dispersed people who would otherwise lose their ties with tradition and its active perpetuation (Gillespie, 1989)” (Ang 2003: 370-71).

These examples, emerging at a time when transnational media was dominated by satellite TV and portable video technologies, correspond with the early experiences of some drama fans. Javabeans, for instance, in explaining how she became interested in Korean dramas explained simply “well, I’m Korean myself, so i suppose i’ve always been exposed to them, with my parents watching them” (Javabeans chat: 4 Feb 2009). Bluestar, similarly, recalls that her parents “would rent these videotapes from the local Asian video store . . . one of those hole in the wall places ensconced within a Chinese grocery” (Bluestar chat: 15 Apr 2009). Since then, with the shift towards more collaborative and participatory spaces of circulation online, East Asian drama fandom has become “a lot broader” (Javabeans chat: 4 Feb 2009). In expanding distribution beyond explicitly diasporic audiences, drama viewing online has become such that, in contrast to many fans’ experience of exposure through their families or ethnic communities, “even a casual YouTube user might be curious as to why there are so many clips of Korean variety shows and dramas” (Javabeans Chat: 4 Feb 2009). Similarly, the range of texts and forms of discursive practices available through which these new, broader audiences can articulate their cultural identities has dramatically increased.

As Stuart Hall reminds us, “[c]ultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation” (Hall 1998: 225) such that “diaspora” constitutes not an already accomplished, fixed subject position that comes at the end of displacement. It is instead characterized by persistent and ongoing negotiations between and within changing cultural contexts. Thus, the changes in the context and contents of the transnational communication system necessitate a reconsideration of what the relationship of diasporic subjects and East Asian drama consumption entails and how these identifications might reconfigure the role of the nation. Rather than starting with how the conditions of diaspora might be explained or be reflected in particular forms of media engagement, it’s more useful in this instance to begin instead with how the changing social apparatus around media

use intervenes upon what it means to be part of a diasporic audience and shapes the production of transcultural identities.

The mediated “re-turn” (Tölölyan 2007: 649) of what is considered to be diasporic media use is, of course, not a simple reproduction of cultural “roots” and traditions elsewhere, but a process filled with increasingly complex and often contradictory experiences and encounters. Bluestar, whose family is ethnically Chinese and who identifies strongly as diasporic<sup>34</sup>, had a sense of the aesthetic and cultural aspects of East Asian dramas as being “all familiar,” as well as an awareness of Japanese, Korean, and Taiwanese dramas as being all equally “foreign” (Bluestar chat: 15 Apr 2009). The appeal was simultaneously a sense of connection to her own life and cultural traditions -- “I liked TWdramas because they helped me practice my mandarin” (Bluestar chat: 15 Apr 2009) -- as well as “the exotic, the foreign part of it” (Bluestar chat: 15 Apr 2009) which she likened to watching “odd czech film and reading at the movies” (Bluestar chat: 15 Apr 2009). Though seemingly contradictory, the interplay between the sense of the cultural familiarity and difference might be better understood in the context of changes in the patterns of drama consumption as young drama fans online gained dramatically increased control over the circulation of content.

### ***familiarity of the foreign***

As I suggested in Chapter 1, there is already evidence within pirated VCD drama circulation of an interesting incongruity between the nation of production and the “homeland” of the diasporic audience, with Japanese and later Korean dramas featuring heavily in distribution markets for the Chinese diaspora. This is at the outset symptomatic of intraregional media circulation within Asia through satellite channels and VCD markets there. Simply put, due to the popularity of a

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<sup>34</sup> In recalling her family’s migration from mainland China to Taiwan to the Phillipines and finally the US over the course of four generations, she jokingly declared “so really, i guess i am the diaspora” (Bluestar chat: 15 Apr 2009)

number of Japanese and Korean dramas across Asia, sharing in the media consumption of a “home” nation or community did not necessarily mean watching media that was produced there. As content became more broadly available online, however, this sort of regionalization of content consumption was no longer defined through market interests mirroring consumption patterns within Asia. Young drama fans were no longer tied to what their parents wanted to watch and the content available through traditional channels that were “heavily geared toward the first generation [viewers]” (Park and Suk phone: 3 Feb 2009). Javabeans describes this change in detailing a hiatus she took from Korean drama fandom as part of her “dual-heritage identity crisis” wherein much of her early exposure to dramas were a part of being “really *into* your parents’ culture . . . [which] starts feeling like a way to be *exclusive* rather than *inclusive*” (Javabeans chat: 4 Feb 2009, emphasis in the original). Her re-immersion in dramas then came in part due to the widening range of content available. Where as “growing up it was stuff on TV (which I didn't care for because that was limited), or stuff my parents recommended (not always my taste), or stuff someone else told me about . . . now, you go online and stuff is just everywhere . . . [and] I can find stuff on my own” (Javabeans chat: 4 Feb 2009). While for Javabeans, her interest in Korean dramas remained closely tied to her national and ethnic heritage, for many other fans, being able to tailor their viewing to their personal tastes led them towards a more “pan-asian” consumption.

For example, Mizune “grew up watching Wuxia and other Chinese dramas . . . since my parents are Taiwanese” (Mizune email: 29 Mar 2009) but her personal interests leaned towards Japanese dramas, which she got “hooked on” as an exchange student in Japan in the 1990s and now helps subtitle on D-addicts. Another drama fan similarly admits that she at first believed that she would be more drawn to Taiwanese drama due to the language familiarity, but found that not to be the case: “Even though I am Chinese, I find tw-dramas much harder to like than k-dramas and j-dramas . . . The style of tw-dramas takes a bit of getting used to” (Shipless email: 14 Jun 2009). Many fans move fluidly between different East Asian dramas. Bluestar, for



instance, will “watch certain kinds of dramas when . . . in a certain mood” (Bluestar chat: 2 Apr 2009) because each country produced a drama with a slightly “different feel”: “[I]f I want mindless fluff? I go TWdrama . . . If I want a little more nuance? I go Jdrama” (Bluestar chat: 2 April 2009). These dramas fans were looking not for a virtual re-turn home to their “parents’ culture” as it were, but media that spoke to their cultural experiences, interests, and tastes rather than those determined by national origins.

Though viewing patterns were not bound by a sense of national affiliation, they were nevertheless powerfully informed by a sense of cultural difference. Shipless attributes her affinity for Asian dramas as, in part, symptomatic of her minority status, explaining that “something about American culture doesn't fit with me so I look elsewhere for a sense of familiarity or even belonging” (Shipless Chat: 15 Jun 2009). Similarly, Bluestar, remembers that viewing the Taiwanese drama *Meteor Garden*<sup>35</sup> “was in some ways a bit of a revelation” in comparison to the “American mass media . . . warblings of Dawson Leery . . . [It was] hard to connect to that as a first generation [A]sian-[A]merican girl” (Bluestar chat: 2 Apr 2009). Though the dramas being watched were not from the same place, there remained a sense of affinity and familiarity, particularly in contrast to the “West”:

Although culture among different Asian countries is different, there is a similarity in cultural values. Like, American and the "West" are typified by the emphasis on the individual while the "East" is more reliant on communities and the group. The portrayal of the latter in dramas, individuals finding their way in the rules outlined by the group, is appealing

(Shipless Chat: 15 Jun 2009).

Thus, the sense of identification or “familiarity” that emerges is not direct recognition of “home,” but a feeling of “cultural proximity,” which Iwabuchi reminds us is “not . . . a primordial sense” of shared cultural values (2004: 12). Rather, the notion of cultural proximity in this case

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<sup>35</sup> *Meteor Garden* is the Taiwanese adaptation of the Japanese manga series *Hana Yori Dango*. It was, in fact, the first live-action drama version of this series, preceding the Japanese version that I will be discussing in this chapter.

is suggestive of a relative closeness, wherein East Asian dramas provide a sense of an ‘elsewhere’ that is more representative of the experiences and values of Asian-American fans than what was available on American television.

In viewing East Asian dramas as culturally proximate texts, we highlight the perception that they are simultaneously “all familiar” and “all foreign,” at once providing “emotional ties to . . . ethnic heritage” (Bluestar chat: 2 Apr 2009) and “new exposure to another culture” (Amrayu chat: Oct 2008). Cultural proximity, “as Koichi Iwabuchi cautioned . . . is always also accompanied by cultural distance; affinities converge and diverge at the same time . . . [creating a] complex entanglement of similarity and difference” (Ang 2007: 27). It is important to note that both Iwabuchi and Ang are describing the cultural proximity felt by viewers of Japanese dramas across East and Southeast Asia, rather than diasporic audiences in the US. I am not making a suggestion that there is some primordial link between diasporic audiences and their ethnic counterparts in Asia, or that the context of viewership is somehow overridden by a shared ethnic subjectivity in a deterministic sense. Rather, I am merely suggesting that there may be something to be gleaned from a similarity in the positions of these audiences that are simultaneously a part of a transnationally East Asian construct, and yet functionally foreign to the national and the cultural origin of these texts. Thus, cultural proximity is deployed here as a useful concept for describing cultural identifications that are situated within simultaneous perceptions of familiarity and difference.

Perhaps more provocative, however, is Iwabuchi’s suggestion that for Taiwanese audiences of Japanese dramas, cultural proximity is “a dynamic process . . . [that emerges from] the feeling that the Taiwanese share a modern temporality with Japan” (Iwabuchi 2002: 122). The notion of proximity as a shared *temporality* is especially suggestive when we consider that along with a shift towards more pan-Asian viewing patterns, online drama circulation is noticeably

dominated by what might be considered “(post-)trendy” and school dramas<sup>36</sup> that depict images of modern youth cultures in Asia. I am using the term “post-trendy” to refer broadly to dramas depicting young people dealing with family, relationships, school, and careers in contemporary urban settings, specifically in contrast to “all the tedious family or historical stuff that used to be shown” (Javabeans chat: 4 Feb 2009) on cable satellite networks and in ethnic grocery stores. In other words, there was a notable movement from representations of historical Asia towards those of a modern Asia.

In explaining the popularity of trendy dramas throughout East and Southeast Asia, Ien Ang suggests that

Japanese trendy dramas resonated with young Asian audiences because . . . [they] captured the new kinds of challenges life in the new, modern Asian context provokes. Or perhaps more precisely, the show expressed what it feels like to grow up modern and Asian in the late twentieth-century, not just in terms of substance but also in terms of style – the ethics as well as poetics of everyday life. What does it feel like to live in societies that have gone through a cultural transformation of ‘traditional’ to ‘postmodern’ within not much more than one generation? How does one live through the new gender and generational divides it has created? How does one come to terms with the emptying out of traditions -- filial piety, for example, or the all-importance of family and patriarchy – which have been held so central to Asian cultures for centuries?

(Ang 2007: 27)

Though Ang is speaking of audiences in East and Southeast Asia, online fans similarly found one of the central appeals of dramas to be the representations of “family culture [that are] very similiar” (Ruroshin email: 19 Feb 2009) to their own in the sense of “familial obligations, the expectations placed on [the characters], the sense of responsibility to the family” (Shipless chat: 15 Jun 2009). At the same time, in contrast to the “historical types [of dramas] with these middle-aged men with long white beards” (Bluestar chat: 2 Apr 2009), trendy dramas were appealing since they featured characters who had “the same struggles and concerns” (Bluestar

chat: 2 Apr 2009), and were more relatable in that they were living in an Asia that “*looked* like a modern American city -- skyscrapers, stylish young women in designer clothes . . . it was familiar-looking” (Bluestar chat: 2 Apr 2009, emphasis in the original). What was familiar, in other words, was not only that it was Asia, but that it was modern, that on the surface, the settings resembled the Western cities that fans associated with contemporary life. The common “struggles and concerns” arose not only out of a sense of shared values, but of a shared historical moment, “based on a consciousness that both live in the same modern temporality” (Iwabuchi 2004: 12). Dramas taken in this context powerfully thematize conditions of hybridity and negotiation. In particular, the post-trendy or school drama, in wrangling with themes of self-discovery and “individuals finding their way in the rules outlined by the group” (Shipless chat: 15 Jun 2009) are particularly resonant with the “dynamic process of becoming” (Iwabuchi 2004: 12) that both characterizes the sense of cultural proximity and the diasporic imagination.

The post-trendy dramas thus presented these audiences with a vision of a modern Asia rather than a static, historical “homeland.” Though their concern was not of how to cope with life within a modernizing Asia and the distinct struggles of different Asian modernities and urban spaces, they too grappled with the “uncertainty of relationship” between a global modernity that is typically represented as “Western” and their status as “Asians.” Thus, one might suggest that diasporic audiences have similarly (though not in the same way) “gone through a sudden transformation” (Ang 2007: 27) that leaves them faced with the task of learning “to inhabit at least two identities, to speak two cultural languages, to translate and negotiate between them” (Hall 1992: 310 in Gillespie 1995: 19). That if trendy dramas offer representations of a sort of hybrid or translated sensibility, they thus create a site ripe for identification and meaning production for those who “grow up pretty much with a dual culture” (Amrayu chat: Oct 2008). In other words, the trendy and post-trendy dramas might be understood in diasporic audienceships to provide not a re-turn, but rather a (re)vision of home as dynamic, modern, and contemporary, a vision that models the reconciliation of Asian history and cultural values with

and within a modern (Western) context. The tension between dramas as both foreign and familiar material might in this light be considered a source of appeal and productive pleasure rather than a contradiction, a site of working through the in-betweenness of being neither fully one culture or another. Moreover, as one fan acknowledges, the sense of the “familiar” is at once a primary draw of dramas, as well as a consequence of regular drama-viewing, such that it is in a sense “artificial, like the familiarity comes from a place of observation rather than participation . . . a sense of familiarity could be true or imagined” (Shipless chat: 15 Jun 2009). Thus what becomes familiar is not necessarily a sense of Japanese or Korean or Taiwanese culture as represented within the dramas, but the production of familiarity itself, the very process of *imagining* crucial the negotiation of cultural difference.

### ***cosmopolitanism and transcultural audienceships***

The networked spaces of flows of information are believed to be replacing the territorial boundaries by producing a sense of shared cultural sentiment regardless of physical locality, but as the forms of identification produced within online diasporic audienceships suggest, this sense of shared cultural sentiment is neither anchored by a clearly defined link to a specific national territory and its culture, nor completely unanchored as part of a deterritorialized global consumer youth culture. The use of East Asian dramas that at once informs and is informed by feelings of in-betweenness, through relations of similarity and difference both within and across cultures, signaling a remapping of cultural space in which nation, or the national, is not the primary organizing structure. This is then ever further complicated by the fact that audiences participating from within the structural limitations of diasporic histories are merely one subset of the East Asia drama fandom online. They are helping shape the flow and consumption of content not only in addition to, but in *collaboration with*, other participants of diverse and varied backgrounds and motivations.

If one form of engagement described within diasporic audienceships is a sense of feeling different along with the texts -- that is, of identifications with dramas that feel similarly different or model a similar negotiation of difference -- there are also forms of engagement in which the central appeal is a sense of feeling different *from* the texts as well. For instance, Wolfie, who runs a popular drama review blog, described one of the appeals of dramas (as well as Asian cinema) as “the unique in Asia”: “They were just *different*. They were fresh and exciting . . . [and] they can strange the hell out of you” (Wolfie chat: 8 Apr 2009, emphasis in the original). The engagement with East Asian dramas as something “unique” and “just different” is also often expressed as something that both produces and is produced by an eagerness to learn about and create a sense of closeness with cultures that are different from the “local” (Western) cultures of fans. Many who do not have any family or ethnic ties to Asia express the desire to travel to Asia -- “I’ve always been into the idea of traveling, but drama watching has caused me to launch into a full-blown fantasy of someday taking a tour of Asia” (Zerohundred email: 16 Jun 2009)” -- or to learn East Asian languages.

This use of dramas to connect with East Asian is reminiscent of what Jenkins calls “pop cosmopolitanism” (Jenkins 2004). Pop Cosmopolitans are those who, through the use and consumption of popular media from different cultures, “embrace cultural difference, seeking to escape the gravitational pull of their local communities in order to enter a broader sphere of cultural experience” (Jenkins 2004: 117). As Wolfie explained, though she can’t imagining living in Japan long term, she’d “love to go for awhile and soak up the culture” (Wolfie chat: 8 Apr 2009). The crucial distinction between this and the sense of being *different with* dramas expressed through a diasporic mode of engagement is that, here, cultural difference is primarily understood as something to be sought out and acquired rather than an inhabited condition. Difference *from*, in other words, is closely linked with a feeling of connoisseurship, of gathering “new exposure to another culture” (Amrayu chat: Oct 2009).

The engagement of the pop cosmopolitan, a cultural outsider who takes on a position of *different from*, is thus distinct from what Iwabuchi calls “culturally odorless” consumption that enact an “erasure of physical signs of Japaneseness . . . [that creates a] race-less and culture-less, virtual version of ‘Japan’” (Iwabuchi 2002: 33), in the sense that pop cosmopolitanism strives to maintain a precisely a sense of cultural specificity and difference. That it does not enable consumption through cultural erasure, however, does not exempt it from potentially reproducing patterns of dominance. Whatever the motivation, a pop cosmopolitan engagement unavoidably “walks a thin line . . . between orientalist fantasies and a desire to honestly connect and understand an alien culture, between assertion of mastery and surrender to cultural difference” (Jenkins 2004: 127). While diasporic audienceship seeks to create contact with a sense of identification located elsewhere *within* difference, pop cosmopolitan engagement decontextualizes cultural materials through transnational consumption based in difference as such. However, though we cannot overlook structural powers and dangers of orientalizing forces, pop cosmopolitan audienceship, at the very least, “opens consumers to alternative cultural perspectives and the possibility of feeling what Matt Hills called ‘semiotic solidarity’ with others worldwide who share their tastes and interests,” (Jenkins 2004: 117). As one “pop cosmopolitan” fan admits, she may “still have misconceptions about Asia, but I no longer feel like it’s on the other side of the planet. For all I feel, it could be in my backyard” (Zerohundred email: Jun 14 2009).

This “semiotic solidarity,” moreover, is not simply imagined through the knowledge that different individuals are engaging in the same media, but explicitly created through discourse and contact that informs the decisions made around the circulation of materials. In distinguishing what she finds unique in East Asian drama fandom, one “pop cosmopolitan” fan suggests that the drama fandom behaves different due to its “cultural context” in a way that makes it more “interesting to experience” (Zerohundred email: 8 Jul 2009):

Although there are a lot of international fans of dramas, the main fan-base is set in the country the drama originally airs in. Even among international fans, there are the second-generations (children of people of the drama's country) who take more "ownage" of their dramas . . . Some people are very open to foreigners enjoying their television, but others can be possessive. All of them contribute to fandom, though"

(Zerohundred email: 8 Jul 2009)

Pop cosmopolitanism therefore does not operate in isolation from diasporic or other forms of transcultural audienceship, nor is the sense of connoisseurship the privileged domain of those considered cultural outsiders to East Asian drama. Participants that in other contexts enjoy dramas through a sense of identification with Asian culture also, in other moments, engage along with and, more provocatively, as pop cosmopolitan connoisseurs of cultural difference. According to Bluestar, who had previously cited part of the appeal of dramas as the "the exotic, the foreign part of it" despite feeling a cultural familiarity as a diasporic subject, this sense of exoticism was not a sort of absolute, but a contextual exoticism that was created by "a sense of covertness" about watching drama since dramas are "not commonly known . . . like an odd secret club" (Bluestar chat: 15 Apr 2009). On the other side, one fan found that, much like viewers that identified as diasporic, she tended to "prefer the themes that are in most Asian dramas. . . . [because] the values that are typically portrayed are very similar" to her own (Zerohundred email: 14 Jun 2009) despite having "no Asian ancestors . . . [nor] a strong Asian community in my area" (ibid.). She concluded that her identification was not unexpected, since "the sources of my values and Asian values may have originated differently, but the end is the same, isn't it?" (Zerohundred email: Jun 16 2009). This sense of being "the same" emerges in part from the way "online interactions like [drama fandom] have brought people closer together" (ibid.), creating a sense that the Korea depicted in dramas was "just as real as the US, even though the two countries are very different" (ibid.).

Identifications with a feeling of being the "same" or "different" are articulated differently at different moments, and used to describe different encounters with the text in relation to



changing interactions with other fans. A pop cosmopolitan fan may identify as being different from the communities in their “area” -- the local culture -- in a way that resonates with diasporic fans’ sense that they “didn’t fit” completely with American culture, while self-avowed diasporic fans can relish in the “exotic” of Asian dramas along with pop cosmopolitans in a “secret club” despite their personal familiarity with the cultures where the texts are produced. In fact, rather than being distinct impressions, the feeling of *different with* and *different from* are necessarily entangled, forming a manner of imbricated -- of distinct yet overlapping -- engagements. A pleasure of being *different with* of diasporic audienceship depends upon feeling similarly *different from* the popular media and cultural context of the “host” as the texts being engaged. At the same time, the sense of connoisseurship in which the texts are valued as being culturally *different from* the site of consumption creates a sense of shared exclusivity, the feeling of being *different with* other fans.

We might perhaps consider then that diasporic audiences are engaged along with other East Asian drama fan as transcultural audienceships. Diasporic social imaginaries online exist online, richly and visibly, alongside other forms of transcultural engagement, and the virtual boundaries between them are more unstable than ever as participants move fluidly between different forms of engagement as they help circulate and share content with one another. Whether cultural insiders who experience *difference with* or outsiders who experience *difference from* transnational media texts, they are linked by an effort to understand culture across national boundaries. Their encounters with one another powerfully reconfigure difference along ever-changing relations across different national, cultural, and social alliances, mobilizing structuring criteria not anchored to the nation-state. Rather than being types of subjects defined by absolute relations of difference, transcultural audienceships are formations or identifications that are developed and experienced dynamically across and between different subjectivities.

### ***fluid articulations between text and context***

These dynamic forms of cultural contact are possible in large part due to the formation of “fandoms” or audienceships around different flows of content, rather than pre-given categories of identity. This tendency to “increasingly engage with content more than forms and channels” (Livingstone 2004: 81), which I mentioned previously, places the textual pleasures of East Asian drama as a central organizing mechanism in their circulation. The role of texts and the production of meaning, like the structural limitations and other social determinants of the viewers, or the social practices around viewing, serves as yet another important dimension in understanding the experience of transcultural drama audienceship. However, it is in some ways the most difficult of the three to navigate, for the examination of texts presents the problem of “how to integrate the analysis of questions of ideology and interpretation . . . with the analysis of the uses and functions of television in everyday practice” (Morely 1996: 323). Consideration of the determining roles played by historical conditions and social contexts through which audiences encounter texts does not make all texts interchangeable, nor render the popularity of certain texts over others arbitrary or meaningless. At the same time, that a text’s thematic and formal qualities do not communicate self-contained, autonomous meanings, independent of interpretation and “reading” has by now become an analytical truism. The context, in other words, must be considered in relation to, rather than as a replacement of, the communicative and meaning-making potential of the text. The question thus becomes how to even begin addressing the ideological or potential meanings encoded within specific texts in relation to an audience that, as described above, uses these texts in a variety of different social contexts, producing different meanings and relationships with text that do not fall into clear-cut social categories.

Drama audiences online are, in this way, reminiscent of Fiske’s notion of the “nomadic subjectivity” of television viewers that allows them to “occupy different spaces within the determined terrain according to the social alliances appropriate to this specific moment of

making sense of and finding pleasure in the television experience” (Fiske 1989: 57-58). That is to say, viewers do not produce a single meaning or have a single motivation for watching dramas, but a shuffling multitude of them that are differently acknowledged or deployed within different social different relations. As a result, we cannot assign tidy causal relationships between historical conditions and the appeal of textual representations, nor between those representations and the meanings produced from them. Fiske usefully suggests that rather than thinking of texts and audiences as separate, coherent entities, to consider the encounters between them as “moments” of television in which some aspects of the meaning-making potential -- the textuality -- of a given text might be activated. He additionally frames the shifting negotiations between this textuality and its contextual activations in terms of “articulation” as it is used by Stuart Hall, as encompassing both the “symbolic system used to make sense of both self and experience,” as well as a form of “flexible linkage” (1989: 58) between the text and its audience that is created in and for that process of making sense.

Hall’s use of articulation also crucially suggests that those linkages form “a ‘complex structure’: a structure in which things are related, as much through their difference as through their similarities” (Hall 1980d: 325 in Slack 1996: 215). Thus, we might consider social identities and textual representations to be connected through fluid articulation, rather than creating reductive correlations by suggesting the textual pleasures of drama fans to be clear-cut expressions of viewing motives. This concept becomes especially useful in thinking about the relationship between differently motivated and situated viewers and their shared relations to popular texts because it “has the considerable advantage of enabling us to think of how specific practices articulated around contradictions which do not all arise in the same way, at the same point, in the same moment, can nevertheless be thought together” (Hall 1980a: 69 in Slack 1996: 122). Thus, the process of activating or making pleasure from different aspects of a text does not induce a homogenizing effect but creates fluid relations between socially and historically constituted cultural spaces, subjects, and media materials that emerge by connecting

experiences to and *through* those being viewed. Articulation, in other words, helps remind us that shared pleasures -- a common “appeal” -- do not necessarily correspond to similar meanings or engagements. Meaning is created through articulation not only as an act of expressing, but of associating, of forging elastic resonances rather than direct identifications.

Ultimately, while the accretive social practices around fansubbing and fan circulation have the potential to make a wider and wider range of texts available, it is not a system without structure and distinction. There nevertheless emerge within its practices and texts that we might consider *popular*. How these texts are encountered and interpreted is shaped through the social encounters between diverse, transnational and transcultural audiences. At the same time, it is these texts and the resonances they produce that also brought these diverse audiences and dissimilar modes of audienceship together. Thus, when looking at transnational circulation of dramas, especially since it is controlled at key points by the very audiences that consume them, the matter of *which* texts remains powerfully relevant.

### **3.3 Hana Yori Dango: Melodrama between the virtual and the imaginary**

The Japanese drama *Hana Yori Dango* is one of the best-known and most circulated dramas amongst English-speaking fans online. Episodes from the two seasons<sup>37</sup> of the series take up eight of the top 20 ranking for most complete downloads on D-Addicts<sup>38</sup>, more than any other

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<sup>37</sup> East Asian dramas, unlike American television series, are “limited run” series, with a set number of episodes. The initial *Hana Yori Dango* series ran for nine episodes, but an 11-episode second “season” was created due to the show’s popularity. Unlike American series, where seasons are often left open ended, the first season of *Hana Yori Dango* stands alone as a completed story. In this way, the second season is more of a “sequel” -- it was aired, in fact, under the title of “*Hana Yori Dango 2.*”

<sup>38</sup> As of July 11, 2009

series. Postings for file downloads from the second season and the theatrical film “final”<sup>39</sup> are amongst the highest commented posts on the Jdramas@livejournal community<sup>40</sup> and it is frequently cited as a sort of “gateway” drama that draws people in to drama fandom. In a post on the series in her popular drama review blog, Wolfie notes that “[i]t feels silly to pimp this, like there's a single person in fandom who hasn't seen it already . . . But I figure everyone is new to Asian dramas at some point” (Wolfie 2008), suggesting that it is not only seen by everyone in fandom, but also frequently amongst the first dramas that people watch. The comments in the post reinforce this perception, with numerous people making reference to how it was “actually the first drama I've ever watched, and I've never encountered anybody who watches dramas and hasn't seen Hanadan<sup>41</sup> . . . Hell, sometimes it's the only drama they've ever seen.” (xxlithiumflower blog comment: 19 Nov 2008 in Wolfie 2008). Other commenters made similar claims that the series is “The one guilty over my entrapment in the world of japanese life-dramas” (mzsugarrat blog comment: 22 Nov 2008 in Wolfie 2008) and the series they “use to tempt other people into Asian tv” (aliasspiral blog comment: 11 Nov 2008 in Wolfie 2008). *Hana Yori Dango* is thus a rich case for understanding the textual appeals of East Asian dramas within a transcultural audienceship because its popularity is in significant part due to the how fans interactions that shape viewing patterns and interpretive faculties of online drama audiences. Its popularity is revealing of not only of how these audiences engage with dramas, but how they engage with one another through dramas and with dramas through one another.

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<sup>39</sup> A film version of *Hana Yori Dango* by the same title was released in Japan in 1995. For a variety of reasons, it was never subtitled by fans, and is not related in any way to the drama series other than having been adapted from the same story. It should also not be confused with *Hana Yori Dango Final* which is a full-length theatrical feature that served as a follow-up and “final” installment of the *Hana Yori Dango* drama franchise which was released the year following the end of the second season of the series.

<sup>40</sup> The first season aired in fall of 2005, only a few months Jdramas.livejournal.com was established. The first season is therefore not as heavily commented on the site since downloads for it were not posted until almost three years after it had already aired. Viewers had obtained copies of season 1 episodes from other sources. It is safe to assume, however, that anyone watching season 2 and the movie final had also seen season 1.

<sup>41</sup> *Hana Yori Dango* is frequently shorted by fans to Hanadan or HYD.

### ***reading through: fantasy and melodramatic excess***

One of the key aspects of *Hana Yori Dango* referenced and discussed by online fans is how “unrealistic” the story seems to be:

[. . .] Although some of the stuff seems a bit unrealistic in it, it really is an adorable story”

[Reviewed<sup>42</sup> by noodlefreak on 8 February 2006]

Silly, unrealistic, some dialogues don't make sense. Shun tried too hard to be dreamy! Typical Japanese ridiculous plot BUT superbly entertaining! [. . .]

[Reviewed by aki\_07 on 18 April 2006]

Corny, unrealistic, and just so frickin' good! *Hana Yori Dango* really pulls you in and just doesn't let go - even after the final episode you just want more!

[Comment #189 by williu]

Must see this! It perfectly takes you into another world, yet you can relate to everything that happens [. . .]

[Comment #596 by Orenjideisu]

[. . .] A lot of times you wish certain things would happen but they don't or that someone would say certain things but they never do...however, in this drama, they actually happen! The emotions portrayed by the actors are so real and you really just fall in love with all of them [. . .]

[Rating #119 by icebaby028]

(Jdorama.com: *Hana Yori Dango* [花より男子])

As these reviews and comments attest, the sense that there are strong “unrealistic” elements driving the series doesn't act as deterrent for fans. Many, in fact, find the story's ability to “take you into another world” and make happen the things they “wish . . . would happen” as a key part of the appeal, since it presents “the ultimate fantasy world” (Bluestar chat: 23 Apr 2009).

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<sup>42</sup> user postings on the site are categorized under “review,” “comment” and “rating.” There is no real difference in terms of the kind of content that is written in these. The key difference is that “reviews” have dates, comments are numbered by order by do not have dates attached, and ratings similarly are numbered by do not have dates.

Though the most popular dramas (like *Hana Yori Dango*) are those which depict young people in contemporary settings because they can “relate to it better” (Amrayu chat: Oct 2008), one of the characteristics that is most frequently discussed amongst the fans I interviewed was the element of “fantasy” or lack of “realism.” As one fan put it, “I ultimately watch dramas for the fantasy/escapist aspect of them . . . I will usually prefer a drama that has a number of unrealistic plotlines over one that is too much like real life. I guess I am just one for fantasy!” (Zerohundred email: 14 Jun 2009). Another fan similarly explained that the “desire-fulfillment” aspect of dramas that served as their primary draw came out of the fact that “dramas are very obviously not based in reality” (Shipless chat: 15 Jun 2009). As a result, she in fact “tend[s] to avoid dramas that attempt realism” (Shipless chat: 15 Jun 2009), suggested that one of the primary draws of dramas is that what gets represented in them is not “realistic.”

What makes *Hana Yori Dango* and other dramas that are “definitely not realistic” pleasurable comes from a particular “mix of the real and unreal” (Zerohundred email: 16 Jun 2009) that is just “grounded enough in reality for you to live vicariously” (Bluestar email: 20 Apr 2009). The lack of realism is therefore “not always about fantasy worlds, but the circumstances and people portrayed” (Shipless chat: 15 Jun 2009) in a world where “everything [that is represented] is plausible, but highly unlikely” (Zerohundred email: Jun 16 2009). In this particular type of “ultimate fantasy world” of *Hana Yori Dango*, for instance, a girl like the female lead Makino who is “not exceptionally anything” lives out a “completely ridiculous” scenario in which “a group of good looking wealthy men appear in Makino’s (your) life . . . and serve mainly to save you from your everyday” (Bluestar chat: 20 Apr 2009). Nothing in *Hana Yori Dango* can be perceived as ordinary or banal. In explaining the plot of the series, one fan suggests that while “you might see aspects of these things in reality . . . the story on the whole is not very true to life” (Zerohundred email: Jun 14 2009). She elaborates that, frequently in dramas, “everything that happens is often coincidental, and past and present events are very intertwined. In that

aspect, the story is not like real-life” (Zerohundred email: Jun 16 2009). Thus, the lack of realism of *Hana Yori Dango* and of popular drama series online goes beyond simply depicting “highly unlikely” incidents, operating as a central organizing structure.

In this way, the sense of “fantasy” in dramas resonates strongly with the melodramatic mode, wherein every event and circumstance is aligned into what David Thorburn terms the “nearly mathematic symmetries [that] conspire with still further plot complications to create a story that is implausible in the extreme” (Thorburn 2000: 600). Moreover, these symmetries in *Hana Yori Dango* and other popular post-trendy dramas -- as in the melodramatic mode in general -- are indicative of a deeper driving logic in which an “artificial heightening permits an open enactment of feelings and desires that are only latent or diffused in the muddled incoherence of the real world” (Thorburn 2000: 600). The excessive and exaggerated representations featured in the narrative and narration are not for their own sake, but ultimately serving to express an emotional clarity or truth (Ang 1995; Brooks 1995; Thorburn 2000). Of course, melodrama, and much of the critical understanding of it, notably stems from a distinctly Western literary and theatrical canon, such that we cannot simply assign the form to East Asian dramas outright. Rather, I would suggest that these texts lend themselves to the production of melodramatic articulations within the transcultural audienceships that are reproducing, organizing, selecting and discussing them in accordance to the meanings and pleasures they can produce.

The “unrealistic” fantasy in dramas allows fans to “connect with the characters on an emotional level . . . [even as] the events are something I would probably not have to deal with in my own life” (Zerohundred email: Jun 16 2009). The “unrealistic” thus provides viewers with a chance to produce a sense of “the true, wrested from the real” (Brooks 1995: 2). The fantasy, in other words, comes not out a departure from or denial of reality, but a transformation of it, enacted through a usurping of the prosaic by extravagant incident and coincidence, all in service of greater sentimental affect. Thus, no incident is *without meaning*, inviting viewers at every



moment to make sense and “articulate” an understanding of the world of representation with that of experience.

Character struggles and relationships therefore understandably become a central focus of meaning-making. In *Hana Yori Dango*, the female lead, Makino Tsukushi serves the driving force of the story, so much so that one fan refers to the structure of *Hana Yori Dango* as the “deus ex Makino”:

[Y]eah, deus ex makino? Hanadan is basically a fantasy world in the sense that every girl can relate to makino on some level. Every WOMAN can. Average, hard working, not exceptionally pretty, not exceptionally smart, not exceptionally anything, really and then that fantasy . . . all of a sudden, a group of good looking wealthy men appear in Makino (your) life . . . all your worries, all your cares . . . your family's struggles, your search for a romantic partner, your life goals, all solved in one fell swoop.

(Bluestar chat: 23 Apr 2009)

Makino is therefore not simply the emotional focus of the story. More accurately, Makino's emotional struggles themselves are the narrative center around which the events are organized. Every excessive incident, every “ridiculous plot” point ultimately serves to explicate Makino's subjectivity and fulfill the critical function of trendy and post-trendy dramas to express “an ethics as well as poetics of everyday life” (Ang 2007: 27).

Moreover, Makino's struggles are often cited as a point of identification and “realism” for the viewers “in the sense that every girl can relate to Makino” (Bluestar chat: 23 Apr 2009). But as a melodramatic force, “what is recognized as real is not knowledge of the world, but a subjective experience of the world: a ‘structure of feeling’” (Ang 1995: 45). The heavy reliance upon complex structures of feeling, or subjective desires, rather than circumstances or scenarios as the central point of representation, allows for a more elastic identifications. While cultural insider fans might view

[T]he makino-style heroine (lives in that two-parent household, is a supportive big sister, a general innocent who values schoolwork and her family over say,

experimenting with boys and drugs) is one that's encouraged, one that may actually EXIST in asia . . . [an] asia that exists in the minds of my parents and all their friends, a land where children listened to their parents and no one had sex until they were married or their parents were dead, whichever came last.

(Bluestar chat: 20 Apr 2009)

Another fan might understand Makino in terms of being a refreshingly atypical drama heroine in “that the average drama heroine doesn't get to punch the male asshole in the face. Usually she has to serve him tea instead” (Wolfie chat: 8 Apr 2009), thus linking her with the fan’s gender-focused appreciation of “a competent, kickass heroine” (Wolfie chat: 8 Apr 2009). Yet another fan might identify with Makino despite the fact that the character exists in a “story that would be hard to Westernize . . . [since Makino] belongs to society that is slightly (or more than slightly) patriarchal [than Western societies]” (Zerohundred Jun 16 2009) because “watching dramas allows me to emotionally involve myself in something that would never happen to me” (Zerohundred email: Jun 16 2009). This emotional involvement trumps the limitations for identification that would otherwise be enacted by the story’s cultural contexts.

As a result, fans can both relate to the story because “the characters can only react within their familial obligations, the expectations placed on them, the sense of responsibility to the family” (Shipless chat: 15 Jun 2009) or because “Even though . . . [w]e may react to issues such as love, family, duty, etc. in ways that our respective societies guide us to, but deep down, experiencing and feelings these things in a emotional way -- it's the same, isn't it?” (Zerohundred email: 8 Jul 2009). The melodramatic mode perceived in *Hana Yori Dango*, by privileging emotional or moral truth over a naturalistic realism, effectively makes room for an extensive range of transcultural identifications. In other words, since the context and circumstances of the story are portrayed as “unrealistic,” viewers are invited to use them (or not) in their meaning-making process as they see fit. Thus, a wider spectrum of identifications and meanings is opened, ranging from culturally embedded views of shared struggles to the decontextualized appeal of universal “human” emotions. The melodramatic features of these

text serve as one of the central appeals because they provide rich and dynamic enabling arrangements within which texts can be encoded with a multitude of meanings and identifications.

### ***reading between: multiplicity and (inter)textual articulations***

East Asian dramas are frequently compared to soap operas due to the shared (melodramatic) tendency towards exaggeration and sentimental excess, but fans believe that “the execution, however, is entirely different due probably to the difference in format” (Shipless email: 14 Jun 2009). Unlike soap operas and American TV serials in general, East Asian dramas operate on a limited-run format. In cases such as *Hana Yori Dango* a follow-up season might be produced due to overwhelming popularity, but is considered a “sequel” rather than a direct extension (the second season of *Hana Yori Dango*, in fact, is called *Hana Yori Dango 2* as we might expect from a film sequel) such that each season tells a distinct, complete story.

As with the element of the “unrealistic,” the limited-run format was consistently credited as a “huge part of the appeal for dramas . . . [because it produces] the same sense of *story* [as a film], not just ‘yeah, let’s follow the lives of these teenagers, or that doctor’ or whatever” (Wolfie chat: 8 April 2009, emphasis in the original). The promise of completion makes dramas “more satisfying . . . [in that] a clear goal, or a specific journey” (ibid.). The appeal of narrative closure and authority seems at first at odds with the melodramatic appeal of openness and excess that makes room for a wide range of identifications outside the imagined demographic targets. Soap operas, for instance, are understood to be potentially progressive because their ongoing serial form attenuates the authority of melodramatic structure, which tends towards moral simplification and reassurance. The potentially endless story development permits an endless signifying *potential* where structures of dominance can always be upended in a later episode (Feuer 1984 and Seiter 1982 in Ang 1995). Dramas, individually, have no such allowances and

“[w]hen ‘Hana Yori Dango’ ends, you are done with it no matter how much you liked it” (Zerohundred email: Jun 16 2009).

The crucial distinction here, however, is that drama fandom is not based around *individual* dramas. Instead, fans largely consider that a typical individual drama

belongs to the greater drama fandom . . . because its lifespan (the hype or energy surrounding its airing) is short . . . [In contrast] American television fandoms . . . continue in a seemingly endless fashion with little (relative) change, which leaves the fandom without much to adjust to . . . [and] fosters a community that can get stale easily

(Zerohundred email: 14 Jun 2009)

What is interesting here is that dramas are in fact perceived as more dynamic because the social context in which they are circulated is more open to development and change. The organization of drama fandom positions dramas as a system of texts that inform one another, so that no single text enacts a sense of absolute authority or closure. Moreover drama fans online tend to be highly literate audiences of the form. Even those who do not consider themselves “active” in fandom nevertheless must seek out texts and make informed selections. Because of the work involved in finding and downloading material, not to mention the cultural literacy required to “get” dramas, even the least vocally present fans inevitably encounter curatorial texts — review and recommendation posts, wikis and informational material, discussions with other fans — that leave them exceptionally informed and frequently exposed to that “greater drama fandom.”

This literacy becomes particularly useful because the limited number of episodes and the expository excess present in most dramas require them to be densely-packed. In the opening episode of *Hana Yori Dango 2* for instance, there is a recap of the first season, a trip to New York, an entire plot featuring a strange boy at school who is secretly a model, several cases of mistaken identity, an elaborate birthday party scene where we find out that the male lead has been tied into an arranged marriage to save his family’s company, and a kidnapping and

consequent rescue. In the constant barrage of increasingly improbably events, there is little room to linger on the development of character, relationships, and motivations that are central to the pleasures of drama viewing. Dramas therefore frequently rely upon the formal literacy of their viewers and resort to what Thorburn terms the *multiplicity principle* of melodrama “whereby a particular drama will draw not once or twice but many times upon the immense store of stories and situations created by the genre’s brief but crowded history” (2000: 601). This produces the perception of “a certain formulaicness [sic] to dramas that lends them to filling in those gaps [that American TV shows tend to leave out]” (Shipless chat: 15 Jun 2009), making them “kind of like fanfiction in that they’re very audience-based” (Shipless email: 14 Jun 2009). This sense of dramas as both following a set formula, and also being “audience-based” in appealing to such a wide range of audiences speaks to the permissiveness of the multiplicity principle:

Where the old formulas had been developed exhaustively and singly through the whole of a story — that is how they became stereotypes — they are now treated elliptically in a plot that deploys many of them simultaneously.

(Thorburn: 2000: 601)

Thus, the pleasure from the drama “formula” comes from its invitation to viewers to enrich what they see on-screen by presenting it as a reference to be fleshed out through the viewer’s own knowledge and experience. As one fan puts it, “I do think one thing I like about characters is that they seem to represent something beyond themselves, which does make them seem archetypal . . . Essentially, I love it if a character whispers of an archetype” (Zerohundred email: Jun 16 2009). The drama form’s reliance on the viewers familiarity with a multiplicity of texts allows for characters and motivations to be elliptically drawn and heavily referential. They are both archetypes and “real,” at once vague and semiotically rich with reference, such that “familiar character-types and situations thus become more suggestive and less imprisoning” (Thorburn: 2000: 601). The gaps, in other words, are not filled by the drama, but

rather structured in such a way to mobilize viewers to fill them, opening up the text's signifying potential and producing the possibility of many routes of "satisfaction."

*Hana Yori Dango* in particular even more dramatically reproduces and relies upon the multiplicity of texts because. Though a 2-season, limited run series, *Hana Yori Dango* (along with *Hana Yori Dango 2*), it is not a single text, but one amongst many adaptations of the same story. *Hana Yori Dango* originated as a widely popular *shojo* manga -- or Japanese graphic novel series targeted at adolescent girls and young women -- in 1993, and an animated series based on the manga was produced in 1997 and 1998. The first live-action drama version of *Hana Yori Dango* was in fact produced in Taiwan, not Japan, under the title *Meteor Garden* and proved "phenomenally well received by younger people not just in Taiwan but also in Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and China" (Iwabuchi 2007: 152)<sup>43</sup>, achieving 73.0% national ratings in Manila (Bike of jerryskingdom.tk 2007 in Le 2009: 7). In light of the series' rampant popularity throughout East and Southeast Asia, a Japanese version of the drama was produced and released in 2005, using the original title *Hana Yori Dango*. The series proved hugely popular both domestically and with audiences throughout Asia who watched via satellite feeds and extra-legal distribution channels such as the pirate VCD/DVD circulation described in Chapter 1. Given the immense popularity of *Meteor Garden* across Asia, it is probably safe to assume that many of these audience were already familiar with the story, such that the Japanese "(re)production likely made use of the established popularity of *Meteor Garden*" (Le 2009: 9). Then in early 2009, the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) began airing it's own remake,

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43 Iwabuchi's description of *Meteor Garden* claims that "program features characters with Japanese names, the story is told in Taiwanese high school settings, featuring the Taiwanese pop idol group F4" (Iwabuchi 2007: 152). This is not precisely accurate, as the names were taken from the Chinese *translation* of the manga and were the mandarin pronunciations of the kanji (which are derived from Chinese characters) of the last names of each of the characters, ignoring their Japanese given names. Thus, Domyouji Tsukasa in *Hana Yori Dango* became Dao Ming Si in *Meteor Garden* since "Dao Ming Si" were the characters used to write "Domyouji." Moreover, F4 was not an idol group prior to the production of *Meteor Garden*. F4 is the name of the "gang" formed by the male leads in the story, and the four actors in those roles were later recruited to form an idol group by the same name based on the popularity of the series.

known widely amongst fans under the English title *Boys Over Flowers* and television producers in both mainland China and the Philippines have made announcements of their plans to do their own versions<sup>44</sup>.

Transnational audiences online were similarly exposed these multiple adaptations of the series. User comments made on postings for download files or discussions and reviews of each version often make comparisons or references to other versions and much of the buzz around the release of the Korean *Boys Over Flowers* was based in the belief amongst fans that “[i]f it’s Hanadan it must be good!” (arsinoi blog comment: 11 Jan 2009 in Jdramas@Livejournal: [*Kdrama*] *Boys Over Flowers* (2009)). Familiarity with multiple versions or adaptations of the same story becomes itself a source of pleasure for fans, who frequently discuss or make sense of elements present in one version in comparison to other versions. In her informal review of the Taiwanese *Meteor Garden*, Wolfie uses ones of its scenes to discuss and explain elements from the other versions that she had issue with:

[The female lead] not only rejects his rescue, she holds him accountable for his behavior. As scary as his temper is, I love his vengeance issues for the same reason. It always bugged me in BOF/HYD that these bullies and sexual predators were freely roaming the school. In Taiwan, they get their comeuppance.

(Wolfie 2009)

Moreover, she notes that her enjoyment of *Meteor Garden* is predicated upon having already seen both the Japanese and Korean versions, admitting that

if MG [*Meteor Garden*] had been my first taste of Hanadan I might have tired of [the female lead’s] temper -- but since BOF [*Boys Over Flower*] and even parts of HYD did such a thorough job demolishing Makino’s strength and turning her into a mopey shoujo heroine, I’m thrilled with Shancai’s irrepressible attitude, and it fills me with ABSOLUTE GLEE to know she doesn’t lose it

(ibid.)

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<sup>44</sup> The mainland China version faced some controversy in their announcement since KBS and the producers of *Boys Over Flowers* had signed a deal with the owners of the rights for the original *Hana Yori Dango* manga ensuring that no competing versions would be produced within two years of the airing of the Korean version. The mainland Chinese version however, as of July 2009, has already been cast, with an official teaser music video trailer of the series already circulating on YouTube. Preliminary rumors of casting for the Filipino version have circulated, but little more is known of that production.

Another fan, when asked about her favorite scenes in *Hana Yori Dango* explains

I love the introduction scene in the very first episode in the Japanese version because the thing is that having scene meteor garden? I knew what was coming so as a fan who knew how the story was going to go, I appreciated the style in which the introduction was done

(Bluestar chat: 20 Apr 2009)

*Hana Yori Dango* is thus not only a heavily intertextual series, but is in some ways itself an *intertext*, a text that is discursively produced between multiple texts. Meaning and pleasures are created in large part by the text's multiplicity, through articulations or linkages not only between the viewers and the content, but between similarities and differences among the various of versions. This produces another layer that first invites the viewers to make sense of the text in relation to its other iterations, and then to make sense of their experiences and social contexts through the text. The multi-step process opens ever more elastic "in-between spaces" within which to forge articulations, expanding the text's capacities for divergent, dynamic interpretations and pleasures to ever-greater excess.

We cannot forget, finally, that melodrama as a popular form is powerful particularly because presents a challenge to the naturalization of the "real," since "realism is essentially a unifying, closing strategy of representation . . . [and thus] necessarily authoritarian" (Fiske 1989: 70). The recourse of realism is frequently an enactment of dominance "because it grounds our cultural identity in external reality: by making 'us' seem real it turns who we think we are into who we 'really' are" (Fiske 2003: 281) and thus reifies difference and legitimates asymmetrical relations of power. The sentimental fantasy of melodramatic articulations neatly usurps the closing authority of realism through a valorization of the organizing power of subjective truths, of *subjectivity as such*. The melodramatic thus creates "a forum or arena in which traditional ways of feeling and thinking are brought into continuous, strained relation with powerful institutions of change and contingency" (Thorburn 2000: 597). East Asian dramas that circulate widely online, like *Hana Yori Dango*, produce this forum literally, creating an uncharacteristically



visible and participatory space of media circulation and subjectivity. Within it, texts are understood and discursively constructed to articulate a poetics of the encounter, to help generate linkages that both make sense *of* and *within* dynamic relations of difference. It is for this reason that online cultural practices makes critical paradigms around the transnational circulation of media worth looking at again: to put it simply, when speaking of identity and representation, public visibility and increased connectivity makes a *difference*.



## Conclusion

### Audience Publics and Transcultural Citizenship

*"The recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions. In that displacement, the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting."*

Homi Bhabha

*"We come to see ourselves differently as we catch sight of our images in the mirror of the machine."*

Sherry Turkle

There is another border-crossing ensconced within this modest contribution towards illuminating transnational media circulation practices online. The insistent visibility of these audiences speaks to the undertow of one further crucial contact zone amongst the already complex social, cultural, and textual entanglements: the disorientating transformations and transferences across increasingly porous demarcations between public and private spheres. The online circulation of East Asian television drama produces contingent and interlocking negotiations across multiple species of space -- national borders and geographic boundaries, social determinations and cultural formations, official and unofficial flows of information, the public and the private -- compromising the integrity of defined limits in a way that results not only in composite or hybridized subjects, but in composite and hybridized *spaces*. The world of the virtual, the densely networked spaces of media transmission and communication, forms

within the interstices between the public and the private, between the intimacies of the home where communications are consumed and produced and the highly visible sites online where they are presented, circulated, and accessed and assembled. Within these digital borderlands, it is increasingly difficult to extract out and differentiate between legal and extra legal practices, media production and consumption, between private use and public discourse.

### ***public audiences and audience publics***

Television audiences have been traditionally conceived of as belonging to the private sphere, to the intimate realm of the living room. Or, perhaps more accurately, television viewership has typically been considered a private act with public implications, at once a “domestic medium” of the sitting room and “one of the key sites at which a sense of national (or other) community is constructed” (Morley 1996: 329). As such, broadcast television was said to be “the private life of the nation-state” (Ellis 1982: 5 in Morley 1996: 329), where “a given nation is constructed for its members,” (Hartley 1987: 124 in Morley 1996: 329). What has changed in light of network technologies, however, is the emergence of audience practices that emphatically remind us that the organizing criteria for belonging -- be it the nation-state or otherwise -- is no longer constructed for, but *by* audiences. Transnational fans of East Asian drama online are creating, selecting, sharing, and documenting the way they make meaning of their media consumption collaboratively, constructing symbolic networks, communities of sentiment, and other social imaginaries *for themselves*, from cultural materials of their own choosing, remade and reframed to their own expressive needs and social goals. And they are doing this in plain sight, laboriously generating vast repositories of information and discourse that are readily accessible through a few keyword searches or some purposeful clicking. These practices are produced through and, in turn, further produce new and often unexpected transnational and transcultural alignments, identifications, and articulations across and beyond any “easy equation of geography, place, and culture” (Morely 1996: 338). These audiences, their investments in and use of media, are no

longer sequestered into the darkened alcoves of the private, the atomized, the imagined: they are collaboratively, consciously, and conspicuously *public*.

The deliberate and often vigorously public nature of these audienceships encourages a consideration of the relationship between audiences and publics, groupings that have “become commonplace to define . . . in opposition” (Livingstone 2005: 18) to one another despite being “composed of the same people” (ibid. 17). In mapping the relationship between television audiences or “spectators” and publics, Daniel Dayan acknowledges that one already “cannot be a spectator without reference to a public” (2001: 744) in the sense that television broadcasts link individuals to “the imaginary community of those who are also believed to be watching” (ibid.). He similarly suggests that publics too “must always have been audiences . . . [and] once constituted . . . need nevertheless to remain audiences” (Dayan 2005: 57) because public mobilize, communicate, and recruit through use of media, such that “publics and audiences can -- and do -- turn into each other” (ibid.). However, Dayan maintains that there remain “decisive thresholds” between the audiences and publics:

To put it in very simple terms, a public is born when members of an audience decide to join and go public. Going public involves on their part the construction of a problem, a reflexive decision to join, commit, perform . . . Most audience members do not feel the urge to enter that process.

(Dayan 2005: 57)

The emphasis here is on the ability to *make public*, on visibility as a deliberate social process. Thus what distinguishes groups that are public from publics as such is the latter’s power and agency to constitute itself, to set the terms of participation and imagined collectivity. It is in this sense that the emergence of audience practices and collaborations within networked audienceships online are increasingly public both in the sense of their visibility and their function as conscious, reflexive social collectives. East Asian drama audiences are engaged in discursive negotiations of not only media texts but the multitude of cultural and technological

contexts of their consumption, imagining and reimagining themselves as different types of audiences and subjects as their circulation practices expand and change. No longer are the “mediascapes” described by Appadurai, which bind dispersed communities of sentiment, constructed solely through media policy and transnational market logic. Increasingly, participants are contributing to the selection, (re)production, and circulation of texts and images that shape the very *collaborative* -- rather than simply collective -- imaginaries they inhabit. What emerges then is the formation of an *audience public*, not a public that engages in audience activities nor an audience that also happens to be a public or is transformed into a public, but a public that is constituted through the very practices of audienceship.

In highlighting the capacities of certain audienceships to constitute publics, we cannot forget that many of these practices are still constructed as alternative or unauthorized, and in constant threat of persecution or co-opting from major broadcast conglomerates and other market forces. As Ang reminds us, in applying de Certeau’s tactical approach to consumption to audience reception, while “it is a perfectly reasonable starting point to consider people’s active negotiations with media texts and technologies as empowering in the context of their everyday lives . . . we must not lose sight of the marginality of this power” (Ang 1996: 140). In other words, tactical practices, whatever their potential, often necessarily emerge and operate in response to structural limits.

What makes fans practices online distinct from the active audiences being described by Ang and Fiske or the tactical consumers depicted by de Certeau, is that their “active” nature does not operate “silently and almost invisibly . . . [without] its own products, but rather through its ways of using the products imposed by a dominant economic order” (De Certeau, 1988: xii-xiii). What the digital networked communications makes possible is the creation of ever more complex and effective (and affective) systems of peer-production and distribution that rival and, in many ways surpass, broadcast models. The visibility of these audience practices and the scope of their

interventions, are drastically shaping how media broadcasters address audiences in the future. Thus, while these participants may constitute only a fraction of transnational television audiences, their impact is far more wide-ranging than their relative numbers might suggest. They are creating an environment and setting standards of practice that broadcasters will have to match in order to gain viewers, because they are not merely interpreting and appropriating meanings from what they can get, but creating thriving parallel media economies. Broadcast media cannot simply meet the need for content in hopes of courting these audiences in the future — they must match their social practices as well. This is the logic undertaken by sites like Dramafever, a company that seeks to monetize these audiences, but do so through adapting the content and practices of established non-market systems. In short, digital technologies facilitate audience practices that are not only “symbolic appropriations” which are “invisible, marginal tactics” (Ang 1996: 140), but visible, long-term strategies that may lead to drastic reformulations of the relationships between media producers and audiences, upending the paradigms of power that strive to keep the products of the imagination as something *merely imagined*.

### ***transcultural citizenship***

This distinction in audience practices is important if we consider the semantic resonance between audienceship and citizenship. Digital, networked audienceships, in challenging the authority of the producer-consumer binary, wrests the production and organization of cultural value from institutional domains more explicitly and irrevocably than ever before. They thereby force “the reconsideration of how we define and interact with certain cultural texts . . . [and] how we understand our rights and obligations as citizens – whether in the political, economic, or cultural sphere” (Uricchio 2004: 139).

Audience publics in particular -- as publics predicated on shared content interests and affective sensibilities -- are dynamic formations, lacking the sort of defined collectivity typically

associated with political publics. Yet it is this very “lack” which enriches the potential of audience publics for enacting “a form of cultural citizenship . . . [that] have the potential to run head to head with established forms of political citizenship” (Uricchio 2004: 140). As Livingstone reminds us:

“As publics extend their scope, encompassing greater heterogeneity, they seem to lose power, fragmenting under internal dissent or the dissipation of shared values . . . Unlike publics, as audiences extend their scope, even beyond national boundaries, they do not necessarily lose power, thereby rendering audience participation potentially a source of strength rather than threat to the interests of publics” (Livingstone 2005: 28)

Audienceships, in other words, are more inclusive of differing members, practices, and motivations, offering more elastic constituencies, thereby making them particularly adept at accommodating forms of *transcultural* citizenship. Without the necessity of consensus-driven stability, audience publics are thus able to thrive according to an accretive logic that allows for ever more complex assemblages of difference and distinction across national borders and other institutional affiliations. Moreover data operates through persistence rather than permanence, such that the communication infrastructure develops resilience through reproduction and dispersal, through processes which allow for ongoing variation and change.

Audience practices such as the transnational circulation of East Asian television dramas online thus highlight rather than reduce the visibility of productive tensions and contentions between diverse social, historical, and cultural experiences. In doing so, they visibly remap the conceptions of the global and local along uneven and shifting cultural geographies, offering the possibility of encountering, if not necessarily unraveling, the ever-more complex articulations and subjectivities that emerge from living with and within difference. In short, they help illuminate the restless negotiations taking place in precisely the spaces in-between.



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