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JAPANESE ART, AMERICAN ARTIST

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ABSTRACT

On a bright October morning two years ago, while on a study abroad in Tokyo I fell in love on the train. He was perfect: handsome, stylish, with great taste in cell phone charms. I spent the entire ride silently admiring him, and when my stop came, I prepared to part from this silent stranger. When he suddenly reached to pick up his own bag and stand, my heart skipped a beat. Then it plummeted. He was short—desperately short. It was over in an instant. That experience, though brief and silly, came to encapsulate what it meant for me to be a foreigner residing in Japan, and later came to be the inspiration for my short film, *watashi wa gaijin dakara (Because I'm a Foreigner)*.

With this project, I set out to explore the challenges faced by someone trying to step into a new world. Two years ago, that new world was the world of Japan. In creating this project, it was the world of animation. I had to teach myself the new languages needed to successfully navigate several film programs, while simultaneously learning how to put my knowledge of Japanese to use in order to express myself. My goal was to create a tight project with artistic direction and style that served to emphasize its message about the position of an outsider or a newcomer, and in creating this project I made the journey from newcomer to insider several times over.

Key words: animation, japan, foreigner.

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INTRODUCTION

I first decided I wanted to go to Japan while in middle school. A good friend of mine was half-Japanese and obsessed with this aspect of his heritage. He convinced his mother to teach him a few kanji (one of the three Japanese systems of writing), and invited me over to watch video tapes of Japanese television sent by his Japanese relatives. Soon enough, I too, was hooked. I began to study Japanese while in high school. In my junior year of college, I finally went abroad: I studied in Tokyo for a semester. By that time I had already absorbed as much about Japan as I could while tethered to the United States, and yet I quickly found that there was much more to learn.

I had many memorable experiences during my time abroad. Getting lost. Misinterpreting cues from my host family. Finding myself suddenly illiterate—reduced to eating mystery flavors of my favorite convenience-store snacks. I still recall the words of one of my professors from my time abroad. When you enter a new culture, she explained, you become a child again. In the face of a culture so radically different from the one you are used to, you lose all cultural competency. You cannot read signals from those around you; you cannot transmit signals properly. Everything is foreign.

Of course, to the locals, *you* are foreign. In Japanese, there are two words people use to refer to foreigners. The first—more proper—word, *gaikokujin*, is formed by three kanji which mean, in order: outside-country-person. However, there is a second, more colloquial word generally reserved for non-asian foreigners: *gaijin*. Here, the kanji for country is dropped, leaving the word to read literally as outside-person. It's quite common for westerners in Japan to embrace the word, to even use it to identify themselves to others; after a while, it may be common to internalize the identity of foreigner. You begin to think, *I am foreign*. And yet, as

always happens with humans, the desire to view things from your own point of view takes over. You are foreign, and yet everything around you is foreign. This interplay fascinated me, and the question of what it means to be foreign—what it means to be an outsider—came to be the crux of my project.

Animation became my medium of choice for the film for two primary reasons. First, I have always had a love for animation, and a desire to attempt to make an animated film of my own—I was particularly interested in learning to navigate the popular and widely used program Adobe After Effects. Second, because of my chosen theme, animation was the pragmatic route to take. I knew that I could scarcely hope to recreate the look of Japan by making a live-action film. Thus, animation was not just my wish, but a necessity. Once I had settled on the idea of creating an animation, I set out to begin pre-production.

PRE-PRODUCTION

The pre-production phase of my project consisted of selecting the story, writing the script, conducting animation tests, and making stylistic and thematic decisions that would ultimately impact the manner in which I went about producing my animation. Because animation grants the author complete control over the visual aspects of the film, it in turn can be more demanding; when nothing can be attributed to accident, a higher level of conscientiousness is necessary. As most student films are quite low-budget, students are often forced to compromise artistic vision in order to accommodate given conditions—having such a high level of control over my project was, at first, rather foreign to me.

My first task was to develop my story and prepare a script. With my theme in mind, I generated a list of notable experiences from my time abroad, such as some of those mentioned in the introduction. I pinpointed which experiences would best encapsulate the feeling of being a foreigner surrounded by foreign things, and stitched them together. I found that writing with a developed theme already established rendered the writing process quite organic.

Once I had a draft, I reviewed it with my thesis advisor, Richard Sherman (the full text of the script can be found in the Appendix). Going over it with someone else was particularly valuable, as it allowed us to elaborate how I might best construct a visual style for my film that would enforce my chosen theme. As my story centered around a character trying to overcome a language barrier, we discussed how best to pass the feeling of confusion and isolation on to the viewer: the idea of subtitle confusion was born. After discussing a segment of the script that referenced being a 'cultural child,' I decided that the art style should evolve and transform as the characters did.

Though I knew the next step was to carry out some animation tests, one large hurdle remained: I had almost no animation experience. Though I had loved and admired professionally produced animated films since my childhood, I was fully aware of the fact that these films were produced by hundreds of animators over the course of years. I was but a simple girl with a computer and a few months. Setting out to research just how such a small specimen could carry out such a Herculean task, I fell into the work of Makoto Shinkai.

A successful director of Japanese animated films, Shinkai got his start making one-man animations in his spare time. His premiere animation, *Kanojo to Kanojo no Neko (She and Her Cat, 1999)*, which features minimal movement and relies primarily on its audio to communicate its story, was particularly influential to me.

Taking a page from Shinkai's book, I decided to keep my own animation style rather simple, and embarked on a series of tests. One thing quickly became apparent: I could never hope to match Shinkai in terms of scale or polish. A 10-second test-shot with only one or two moving elements called for hours of work, and my skill as an artist would never allow me to simulate Shinkai's level of professionalism. Instead, I chose to make a simpler, more stylized piece.

Looking at my script once more, I began to notice underlying themes of egotism surrounding my protagonist; I decided that perhaps it would not be to my film's detriment for it to look and feel like a one-man show. As I tried to find an art style, I found myself sketching in pencil a lot, and grew attached to the hand-made look of the sketches. This look ultimately became the look for my film: I performed more animation tests, this time using rough, hand-drawn images, and felt satisfied.

My next task, however, made me feel much more like the troubled protagonist of my story than the artist behind the tale: it was time to take my script and attempt to translate it into Japanese. At first the task was daunting: I realized that much of my script had not been written with a translation in mind. I found my script morphing as I moved from my English voice to my Japanese voice. And yet the changes were not unwelcome. Sentences flip-flopped themselves due to syntax differences, and yet became more powerful for having done so.

My other thesis adviser, Reiko Tachibana, was of much help as I worked to complete the translation. She helped guide my words, and showed me new ways of using the Japanese I already had in order to express my thoughts.

Finally, with script in hand and storyboards scrawled out, I moved on to production.

PRODUCTION

Production took place during the spring semester of 2010 through an independent study under the supervision of my thesis adviser, Richard Sherman. During the course of production I met regularly with professor Sherman to review my progress, and to discuss ongoing concerns or issues. This portion of the project was the one that contained the sharpest learning curve, as I found myself juggling several new, unfamiliar programs. However, as most of my film projects up to this point had been largely collaborative, completing this project allowed me a great opportunity to learn just what goes into the making of a film.

Each shot in *watashi wa gaijin dakara (Because I'm a Foreigner)* took three steps to complete: drawing, cleaning, and animating. First, the components of each shot were broken down and hand-drawn separately. Of course, these images were meant to be stitched together later, so image conformity was essential—I made good use of my light board throughout my work to ensure that the pieces would fit together later. Generally, the simple style of my animation only demanded three or four components, but some of the more complex shots had to be divided onto as many as six or seven pages. Typically I started with the background layer, as this would set the scale and level of detail for the rest of the components. Characters, props, and other details would then be drawn onto fresh sheets of paper, using the initial drawing as a guide.

The pages would then be scanned individually and imported into Adobe Photoshop to be cleaned. Lines would be tweaked if needed, colors corrected, and then the individual components would be divided onto different layers, much like paper cut-outs. Each component that was to move independently had to have its own layer. This task was often deceptively simple: even a simple close-up of a character's face could quickly balloon to nine or ten layers if I wanted the eyebrows to furrow, the eyes to blink, the mouth to frown. These layers would then be arranged

as they would be in the final shot, characters and props stacked atop the background image. But the work was not yet complete—the motion was still missing.

The third stage demanded the use of Adobe After Effects to set the layers I had created into motion. Once I had imported the layers from Photoshop, I would assemble them appropriately within the frame, and then begin the most difficult work of the film. As I had never used After Effects before, save for my animation tests, this portion of the process was the most time-consuming. But the additional work also offered additional opportunities: it gave me the ability to simulate depth of field, for example.

Once the shots had been assembled, my next task was to create the voice-over for my piece. As the story was a rather personal one, and the language was Japanese, I chose to provide the voice for my protagonist myself. Just as the translating of my script had been a good practice for my Japanese writing ability, so this proved to be good practice for my oral skills. Being both director and performer also gave me the ability to correct my performances on the spot; no time was lost in trying to communicate notes.

Production was completed in April 2010; a flash version of the film is embedded in Appendix B.

CONCLUSION

I have made several short films during my time as a Film-Video major, but in creating *watashi wa gaijin dakara* (*Because I'm a Foreigner*), I experienced a new sense of ownership over my work. Perhaps this is because previously, my films had all in some way or other, been created in order to fulfill certain requirements imposed on me by an established course. Or perhaps it was the new medium—animation—that sparked the change. Perhaps it was the unprecedented level of control that came with animation. Or perhaps it was something else altogether.

Regardless of the reason for the change in feeling, the result is a piece which has probably had more thought go into it than any other film I have made to date. I think much of the credit for this goes to my thesis adviser, Richard Sherman, who encouraged me to focus on making the film as tight and thematically congruent as I could. He constantly would question my decisions—not to show a lack of faith, but to ensure that I had a reason for everything I did. Creating this project was the first time I truly grasped the importance behind intent in film-making. This was the first time it really hit home that with everything we choose to show—or *not* show—the audience, a message is being sent. One example film professor Rod Bingaman often gives is of a thief who runs out of a bank with a sack of money and hops into his getaway car to escape. If there is a bunch of bananas sitting on the passenger seat, clearly visible in frame, the audience will assume that they serve some purpose to the narrative. What this means for film-makers—other than that we should never leave our groceries on set—is that with every shot we are given an opportunity to strengthen the narrative flow with the visuals we provide. It was not until I had to hand-make every element of every shot that I truly began to understand this.

This realization on my part was not one I had fully expected. I started my project realizing I would have much to learn about animation. I also realized I would have to push my translation skills as I had not attempted to before. These were the things I knew I did not know. But there are always the things we do not realize we do not understand. The intentionality of the art of film-making was just one such thing; making this project marked the first time I saw this intentionality not as a burden begging constant justification, but as a gift. I know that what I learned while making this film will influence all of my future works.

APPENDIX A

Script for *watashi wa gaijin dakara*

Int. Train - Morning

A few people sit on the train, each minding his or her own business. At the end of the train, a blond GIRL sits, holding a handheld game device.

On the screen, an enemy runs into the hero again and again, depleting his life, while the hero makes no move to dodge; the girl's fingers don't move on the buttons.

Girl (V.O.)

This morning, I fell in love on the train.

The girl's inattention is explained; she's busy staring at a BOY sitting across from her who's playing with his cell phone.

GIRL (V.O.)

He's handsome, and stylish.

GIRL

He's cool.

Despite the fact that she says this out loud, the boy doesn't look up; he has earbuds in his ears.

GIRL (V.O.)

But he could never like me. He could never be with me. He could never want anything to do with me.

On the handheld's screen the girl's luck finally runs out: a game over screen appears.

GIRL (V.O.)

Because I'm a foreigner. (Because I'm a white person.)

The word "Gaikokujin" (foreigner) appears on screen. After a moment, the middle kanji disappears, and the word becomes "Gaijin" (white person/outsider).

GIRL (V.O.)

I've been in Japan for three months, and I've come to understand only one thing so far. That I understand nothing.

Int. Living Room- Afternoon

Girl sits at the small table, a Japanese man, HOST-DAD, sits across from her, pages spread out between them, gesticulating wildly as he explains.

GIRL (V.O.)

The first mistake many gaijin make upon coming is thinking that they know what they're doing.

Host-Dad holds up two different-colored pamphlets, clutching each and explaining it in turn.

HOST-DAD

This train pass is cheaper, but you can only use it a certain number of times. This one is more expensive, but you can use it as much as you want.

Girl considers it for a moment, then points to the yellow pamphlet for the cheaper pass. Host-Dad watches her silently for a moment.

HOST-DAD

...This one is cheaper, but you can only use it a certain number of times. This one is more expensive, but you can use it as much as you want.

GIRL (V.O.)

Everyone else gets it; you're the only one who doesn't see how little you understand.

Girl hesitates, then points to the purple pamphlet. Host-Dad smiles and hands it to her.

Int. Convenience store - Afternoon

Girl looks over a cooler stocked with convenience food curiously, running a finger along a row of identical-looking rice-balls emblazoned with a series of different kanji on the wrappers.

GIRL

Tuna... and, um--

GIRL (V.O.)

Coming here is like being a baby again. You can't read.

GIRL

Purple's nice.

She picks the one with the purple sticker, then goes to the cashier. He spouts a number, and she bobbles with a few coins, setting them out on the counter with pronounced clicks. The cashier says something else; the girl stares for a moment.

GIRL (V.O.)

You can't speak.

Finally, the cashier just hands her the rice ball. She leaves.

Ext. park - a few minutes later

Girl sits on a park bench. She examines the rice-ball now in her hands. The wrapping has a diagram showing how to unwrap it. She tries to follow the steps, but as she makes the last tear the rice-ball plummets to the ground. It splits open, spitting an umeboshi plum onto the ground.

GIRL

(sullenly)

Umeboshi. I hate umeboshi.

INT. TRAIN - MORNING

Girl's face looking down at her rice-ball turns into her face looking down at her game; the game over screen is still looking at her. She looks up at the boy again.

GIRL (V.O.)

I can't even take a picture with my cell phone to remember him by. All the phones here have to make a noise when they take a picture. They had to, too many perverts.

An image runs through Girl's mind: a business man on a crowded train slides his cell phone under the hem of a school girl's skirt and takes a photo.

GIRL (V.O.)

To me it's so... foreign. Maybe I'm not what's foreign, maybe it's all of you. Maybe it's your weird clothes that are foreign.

She glances down the train to a stylish man sitting nearby: his shoes look nearly twice as long as his feet must be.

Girl (V.O.)

Your music is foreign.

Sickeningly sweet pop music leaks out of nearby headphones.

GIRL (V.O.)

The way you leave your stuff everywhere, as though no one would steal it is foreign.

The man with the long shoes rises to check the map, leaving his bag unattended. His wallet sticks far out of his pocket. As Girl continues, she grows more heated.

GIRL (V.O.)

Your customs are foreign; your terrible English is foreign; your cell phones and your cute hats and your girly faces.

She's looking at the boy now, really venting her aggression on him--everything she's pointing out describes him.

GIRL (V.O.)

You're the one who's foreign!

The train stops. A nasal voice declares it to be Shin Urayasu station. Girl rises, ready to march off past the boy, when he rises as well. She pauses.

GIRL (V.O.)

Same stop?

Boy stops rising. He's short. Very short. Girl dwarfs him easily. She stares. He gets off. She stares. The doors close. She stares.

GIRL (V.O.)

I'm an idiot.

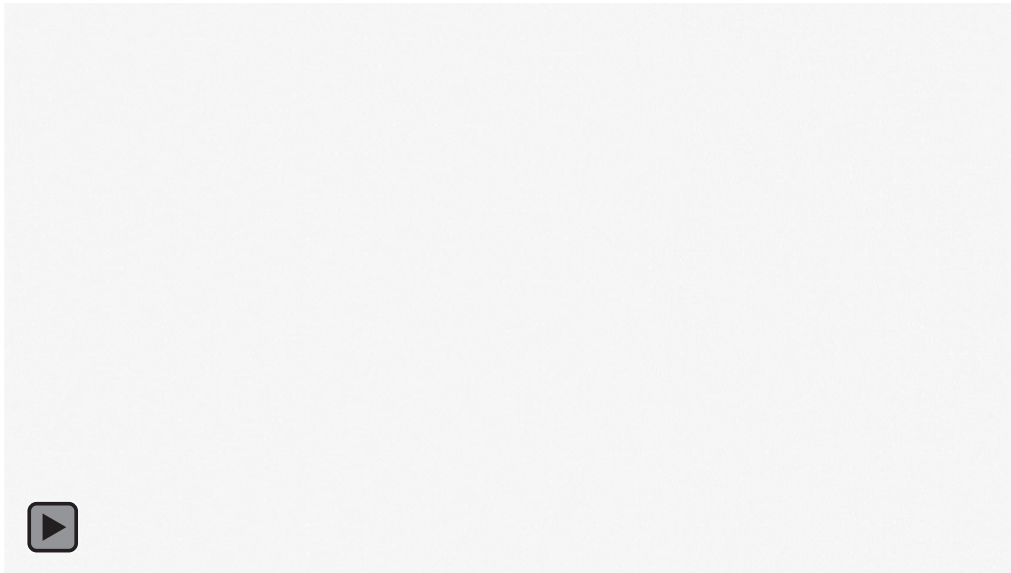
The train pulls away; the screen fades to black.

GIRL (V.O.)

And I'm going to be late now, aren't I?

APPENDIX B

Embedded film: *watashi was gaijin dakara (Because I'm a foreigner)*. Requires Flash 8 or higher to view.



Further Reading on Animation

Kanojo to Kanojo No Neko. Dir. Makoto Shinkai. Perf. Makoto Shinkai. Adv Films, 2003. DVD.

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The Sweater
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