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Negotiating Memory Across Borders

South Korean Decoding of Japanese Animated Films

Topic and Research Question

Japanese popular culture circulates widely in South Korea despite persistent historical tensions rooted in Japan's colonial rule and wartime past. This creates a particularly revealing context for examining how transnational media are interpreted when cultural familiarity coexists with contested collective memory. This thesis investigates the South Korean reception of four Studio Ghibli films, comparing wartime and non-wartime narratives to examine when historical memory becomes relevant to audience interpretation.

The Research Question is: **"How do South Korean audiences decode wartime and non-wartime Japanese animated films as mediations of collective memory?"**. The study connects media reception, cultural memory and transnational cinema by examining how unresolved histories shape the interpretation of contemporary cultural products.

State of the Art

Research relevant to this thesis combines scholarship on collective memory, mediated memory, audience reception and transnational media. Foundational approaches to collective and cultural memory conceptualize understandings of the past as socially constructed, selective and continually reshaped through cultural frameworks (Halbwachs 1992; Assmann & Czaplicka 1995; Erll 2017).

Research on mediated memory further demonstrates how film can create affective relationships to histories audiences did not directly experience and shape their ethical interpretation (Landsberg 2018; Ricoeur 2010). Of particular importance is Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, which understands audiences as active interpreters rather than passive recipients and distinguishes between dominant, negotiated and oppositional readings. Hall's model provides the central link between cinematic representation and South Korean audience reception in this thesis.

Scholarship on cultural proximity and transnational cinema complements this approach by showing how meaning changes across cultural and historical contexts (Straubhaar 1991; Higbee & Lim 2010). Bringing these approaches together allows this thesis to examine how collective memory shapes the decoding of Japanese animated films in South Korea.

Methodology and Approach

This thesis uses a qualitative comparative research design that combines close film analysis with South Korean audience reception analysis. The study examines four Studio Ghibli films in two paired case studies, each contrasting a wartime narrative with a non-wartime counterpart: *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988), directed by Isao Takahata, and *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988), as well as *The Wind Rises* (2013) and *Spirited Away* (2001) all directed by Hayao Miyazaki. This paired design provides a consistent comparative basis while allowing the analysis to isolate how explicit engagement with wartime history influences reception.

The analytical framework draws primarily on Hall's encoding/decoding model, theories of collective and cultural memory and approaches to cultural proximity and transnational media. Filmic meaning is analysed through three interconnected dimensions: emotional engagement, ethical evaluation and cultural proximity. These dimensions are examined both at the level of cinematic encoding and audience decoding.

The reception analysis is based on three types of South Korean discourse: online audience comments, professional critics' reviews and blog reviews. Material was selected purposively according to analytical relevance, interpretive richness, visibility or engagement where applicable and diversity of interpretive positions. Audience responses were then classified according to Hall's dominant, negotiated and oppositional reading positions.

By combining film analysis with multi-platform reception data, the study examines how cinematic representations interact with historically embedded memory frameworks in the process of transnational interpretation.

Main Facts

A clear contrast emerged between wartime and non-wartime films. Responses to *Grave of the Fireflies* and *The Wind Rises* frequently referred to historical responsibility, Japanese victimhood, war memory and the legitimacy of representing wartime suffering. Their reception contained a substantial number of negotiated and oppositional readings and viewers often acknowledged a film's emotional or artistic power while simultaneously questioning its historical framing.

By contrast, responses to *My Neighbor Totoro* and *Spirited Away* centred more strongly on childhood,

nostalgia, family, aesthetics and personal growth. These films were predominantly associated with dominant readings, while historical or ethical contestation remained comparatively limited.

Across the wartime cases, ethical concerns appeared across all three source types, but with different levels of intensity and elaboration. Short audience comments often expressed criticism in highly condensed form, while critics' and blog reviews more frequently contextualized their responses through broader discussion of historical responsibility, representation and Korea-Japan relations.

A notable pattern was that historically grounded criticism did not necessarily prevent emotional engagement. In several wartime responses, viewers expressed empathy or appreciation while still questioning the films' treatment of responsibility and victimhood. This suggests that resistance often took the form of negotiation rather than simple rejection.

As the study is qualitative and based on purposive sampling, these patterns are treated as interpretive tendencies within the selected material rather than statistically representative distributions.

Results

The cross-case comparison demonstrates that the activation of wartime memory was the decisive factor shaping South Korean decoding. Collective memory became especially relevant when the films engaged directly with Japan's wartime past, while it remained far less visible in the reception of non-wartime narratives.

In the wartime cases, emotional engagement was frequently accompanied by or subordinated to ethical evaluation. Viewers often acknowledged the films' emotional or aesthetic power, but simultaneously questioned how Japanese suffering, responsibility and historical legitimacy were represented. This produced predominantly negotiated and oppositional readings.

By contrast, the non-wartime films were more readily decoded through emotional and personal frameworks such as childhood, nostalgia and personal growth, aligning with the encoding of the films. Their preferred meanings encountered comparatively little historically grounded resistance.

A further key finding is that cultural proximity does not necessarily facilitate identification. In historically contested contexts, shared cultural and historical

knowledge can instead intensify critical distance by activating pre-existing memory frameworks.

Overall, collective memory functions not merely as background context but as an active interpretive filter that shapes whether preferred meanings are accepted, negotiated or rejected. Transnational media therefore do not simply transcend historical boundaries, but can become spaces in which memory, responsibility and national identity are continually renegotiated.

In answer to the research question, South Korean audiences decode Japanese animated films as mediations of collective memory in ways that depend strongly on whether wartime memory is activated. Wartime narratives are more often negotiated or opposed through historically and ethically grounded frameworks, whereas non-wartime narratives are more readily accepted through emotional and personal modes of interpretation. Collective memory therefore functions as an active interpretive filter in the decoding process.

References

All references can be found in the full version of the MA thesis available at <https://theses.univie.ac.at/>

About the Author

Michelle Köpfle holds a BA in Korean Studies from the University of Vienna and is currently enrolled in the BA programme in Philosophy and the MA programme in East Asian Economy and Society. Her academic interests include East Asian cultural relations, collective memory, religious studies and identity. She has studied in both Seoul and Tokyo, with particular interest in cultural exchange and Korea-Japan relations.

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