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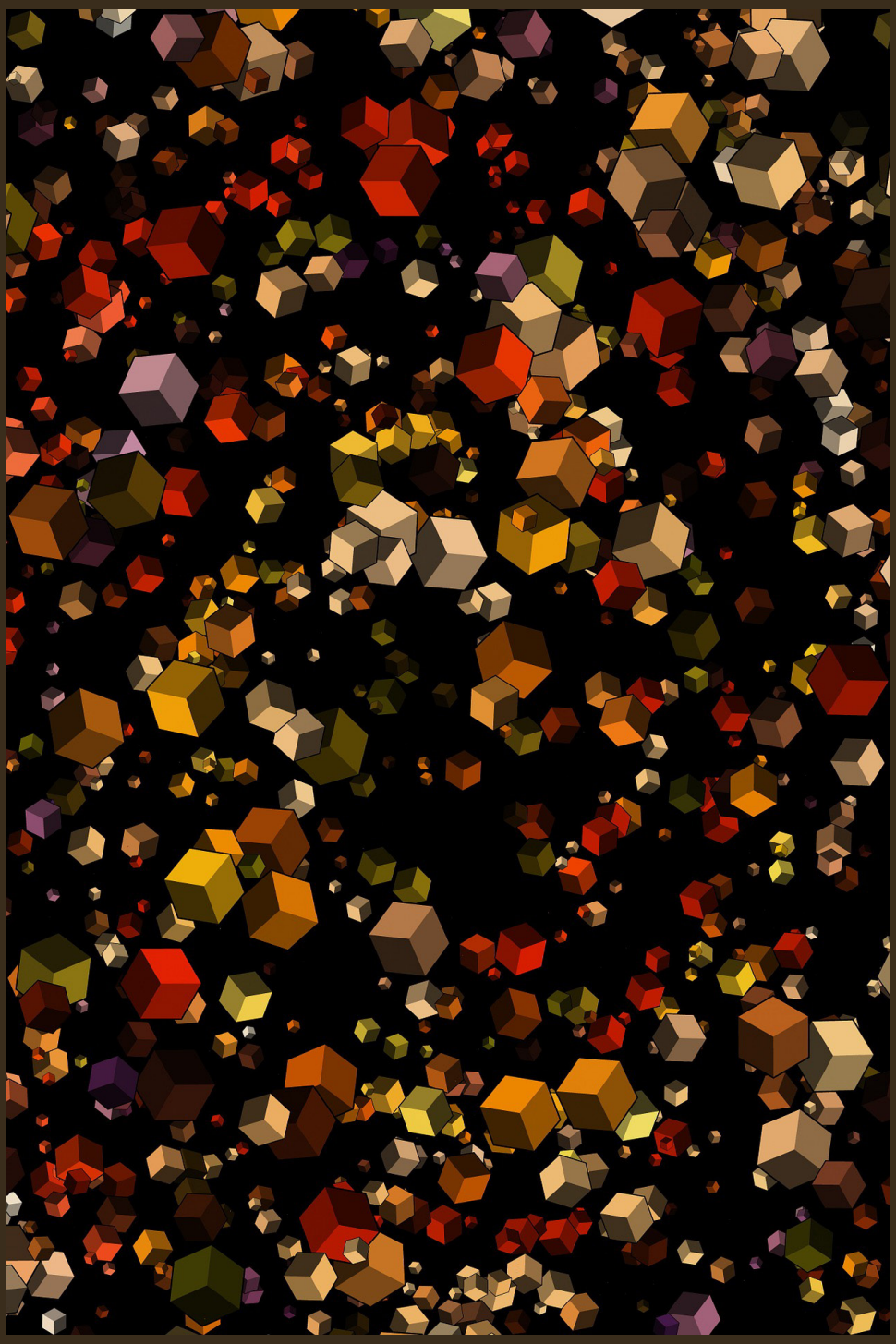

February 2023

IDEA – Interdisciplinary Discourses, Education and Analysis

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Issue n. 3 – *Identity and Otherness in Film, Television and Comics*

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Editorial Note

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Into the 21st, cinema, television, and other related media have become increasingly central both to individual lives and to the lives of peoples, groups, communities, and nations. Cinema, for instance, has become a major form of cultural expression and films both reflect and influence the attitudes and behaviour of people, representing their tensions and anxieties, hopes and desires and incarnating social and cultural determinants of the eras in which they were made. Cinema in its most recent developments, and other media like comics, have progressively shaped a series of dynamics where the tensions between belonging, alienation and the unknown, are explored as key issues in contemporary societies.

Historically, cinema has offered a rich variety of settings for understanding cultural interaction, however it functions within cultural canons and within certain political and ideological limits. It offers source material for an examination of what, in the modern world, we understand as 'otherness', the 'Other', constructed according to multiple perspectives. In which ways have cinematic narratives contributed to describe otherness? How has otherness been filmed and narrated? How can it be represented graphically? How is its discourse shared to audiences? And finally, which strategies in representing otherness can be detected and analysed in recent media productions?

IDEA's issue n. 3 is dedicated to representations of identity and of otherness in some recent examples in film, television and other media. Three authors propose their reflections on these subjects. In his article *Recapturing Old England – Nostalgia, Aristo-Anglophilia, and the Historical Roots of ITV's 'Downton Abbey'*, Felix Behler analyses the surge of interest in the English country house in the wake of the tv series *Downton Abbey* (2010-2015). Behler stresses how *Downton Abbey*, whilst giving anything but a proper historical account of late-Edwardian England, sparked an international audiences' fascination with country houses and the opulent lifestyle of the English aristocrats of the past. The series created by Julian Fellowes, with more than 120 million viewers in over 220 countries, is discussed as an example of audiovisual product having portrayed old England by reinforcing a nostalgic aristo-Anglophilia, which has ensured a strong symbolic survival of the country house and its inhabitants. The author also stresses how this audiovisual product has also exerted a major impact on certain branches of today's everyday life and economy.

Based on close-reading already conducted on topics such as nostalgia, nationalism, and identity in *Downton Abbey*, the author choses to confine his article to smaller bits of literary analysis by concentrating on situating this British prosperous heritage drama within its broader historical and literary-historical contexts. With a closer look at the way the series reacts to its historical setting and the shifting socio-cultural spirits in the run-up to the modern age, Behler considers *Downton Abbey* in the context of a literary tradition. The series can be seen as part of a larger nostalgia apparatus that, during the second half of the 20th century, began to counteract adverse myths about the country's aristocratic past. His article analyses how the producers' conservationist approach has continued this tradition, mobilising nostalgic fascination for a lifestyle that seems somewhat naturally anachronistic to our more egalitarian post-millennium world.

In Maria Abdel Karim's article *The Representation of Child Brides in Two Lebanese Films: Capernaum (2018) dir. Nadine Labaki and The Kite (2003) dir. Randa Chahal*, the focus is the issue of child brides as a provocative theme rarely explored in Lebanese Cinema. Her work aims to prompt discussions related to Feminism in Lebanon and consider aspects of gender inequality and patriarchy. The most recent and prominent Lebanese film that touches on the issue of child forced marriages and their consequences is the Oscar Nominated film *Capernaum* (2018) by Nadine Labaki. The author explores this film, set in post-war Beirut city and exploring a dystopian reality where people living as second class human beings, exist in belts of poverty in and around the city. Abdel Karim stresses how not only does the film highlight the dangers surrounding many child girls forced into arranged marriages by their family, but also presents other relevant issues related to child poverty, racism, and women's inequality in Lebanon. Similarly, Randa Chahal's film *The Kite* (2003), made fifteen years earlier and set in a Lebanese Druze village on the border between Lebanon and Israel, is approached as another example of audiovisual production tackling the issue of forced or arranged marriages of underage Lebanese girls living in the Druze community. Additionally, the author analyses how this film presents a prohibited love story between a Lebanese girl and an Arab-Israeli soldier on the borderland of the two counties in conflict, which prompts discussion around the self-other relationship within a Lebanese context. Utilising textual analysis of films, the article explores how both films promote and stimulate feminist voices, presenting ground-breaking insights into a pressing issue facing many young girls around the world. The directorial style, thematic concerns, and other creative choices are also adequately and thoroughly identified and examined.

Contemporary Japan is the cultural context from which Zoe Crombie's article, *The Monolithic Mode: Anime Auteur Mari Okada's Unusual Career*, challenges the notion that anime is a monolithic mode of cinema, by analysing the career, work and style of the often-overlooked screenwriter and director Mari Okada. Crombie analyses perceptions of anime both within Japan and overseas, emphasising how Orientalist attitudes have hindered anime directors' ability to achieve auteur status. Then she looks at Okada's status as othered in Japanese society as a female *hikikomori* (someone withdrawing entirely from society), before moving onto her early low culture work for television. From these beginnings, Crombie analyses how she has become in recent years one of anime's exceedingly few female auteur figures. The author shows how her primary case study, her feature directorial debut *Maquia: When the Promised Flower Blooms* (2018), demonstrates both a commitment to depicting the experiences of women through a personal lens, and the use of Europe as an otherworldly setting from a Japanese perspective. By investigating Okada's career and interrogating the meaning of being an anime auteur, the article deconstructs both the prototypical figure of the auteur filmmaker as a white Western man who begins in a high cultural context, and the treatment of anime as a monolithic mode with few acknowledged individual creators.

Recapturing Old England – Nostalgia, Aristo-Anglophilia, and the Historical Roots of ITV's *Downton Abbey*

Felix Behler

Introduction

"The surge of interest in the English country house that has followed in the wake of *Downton Abbey* demonstrates […] how genuinely interested people are in this aspect of our nation's history" (2013: 7), wrote Julien Fellowes, author of ITV's award-winning TV-series *Downton Abbey*, in the foreword of James Peill's coffee-table book *The English Country*

House. Whilst giving frankly anything but a proper historical account of late-Edwardian England, *Downton Abbey*, which aired between 2010 and 2015, has sparked larger international audiences' fascination with country houses and the opulent lifestyle of the English aristocrats of yore. With more than 120 million viewers in over 220 countries it has been classified, amongst other things, as "[t]he most popular European series ever." (Bondebjerg, 2016: 9) In this paper, I discuss how Fellowes' – admittedly rather wry – portrayal of old England reinforces a nostalgic aristo-Anglophilia, which ensures symbolic survival of the country house and its former inhabitants as remnants of prelapsarian days. As evinced, for instance, by recent newspaper headlines such as "Super-rich buying up 'Downton Abbey Estates'" (Neate 2020), the series does not only maintain a grip on contemporary imaginings of the past. It has also proven to exert a major impact on certain branches of today's everyday life and economy.

Some close-reading has already been conducted on topics such as nostalgia, nationalism, and identity in *Downton Abbey*. Noteworthy examples are, e.g., Rosalia Baena and Christa Byker's "Dialects of Nostalgia" (2015) or Christa Aakaer's "Idealized Nationalism in 'Downton Abbey'" (2018). Therefore, this article will be confined to smaller bits of literary analysis and concentrate primarily on situating Britain's perhaps most prosperous heritage drama within broader historical and literary-historical contexts. We shall begin with having a closer look at the way the series reacts to its historical setting and the shifting socio-cultural spirits in the run-up to the modern age. The paper's second part considers *Downton Abbey* in the context of a broader literary tradition. The series can be seen as part of a larger nostalgia apparatus that, during the second half of the 20th century, began to counteract more adverse myths about the country's aristocratic past. The article analyses the means by which the producers' conservationist approach has continued this tradition, mobilising nostalgic fascination for a lifestyle that seems somewhat naturally anachronistic to our ever more philanthropic and egalitarian post-millennium world. To demonstrate the scope of this new invocation of nostalgia, the essay concludes with delineating some of the most crucial repercussions that the series has bestowed on the real world.

Setting the Scene: *Downton Abbey* and the Spirit of Change in Late-Edwardian England

The original six seasons of *Downton Abbey* are set in England from 1912 to 1925. In 2019, the series was appended by a film that took fans into the year 1927, letting them accompany the house in preparation for a visit from King George V and his Queen Mary of

Teck. The sequel aside, *Downton Abbey* tells the story of the Crawley family, at the top of which stands Robert, the fictional Earl of Grantham. Set at a time of significant socio-economic upheaval, the Crawley's tale translates the topical struggle of the late aristocratic upper-class to survive against the backdrop of, to use the words of Grantham's mother Violet, a "brave new world" (*Downton Abbey*, 2011: S2/E6 4:08-4:11) – a world that had been essentially marked by new historical dynamics, such as the rapid growth of industrialism and capitalism, a changing composition of society, the long decline of the British Empire and, above all, the appalling effects of World War I. Whilst all of these developments played their very own part in making the age a particularly volatile one, it was especially the gradual advance of social revolution that put the aristocracy's habitual forms of existence under siege. As Pauline Gregg summarises in her *Social and Economic History of Britain*: the late 19th and early 20th centuries "saw the rise of the working class. […] [T]he working classes and the middle classes became more closely identified through […] the spread of education, the common bond of reading the same newspapers and some of the same books, and sharing the same entertainment." (Gregg, 1973: 539) This served to dissociate the aristocracy (both socially and culturally) even further from the rest of British society. "As the new century opened", Gregg continues, "the social onslaught quickened. […] For a few years, coinciding with the reign of King Edward, a brighter spirit developed, but after the First World War the mood of pessimism and uncertainty deepened." (Ibid.: 544-545). In many instances, *Downton Abbey* responds to the revolutionary airs of the age. The tussle between preserving the past and embracing the new forms one of the most important substructures of the plot. Nevertheless, the echoes of social reform appear relatively moderate. Overall, the producers seem particularly resolved to embellish the more uncomfortable facets of these developments. Apart from the early Tom Branson (the Irish chauffeur who ends up marrying Grantham's youngest daughter), political opponents of the old, aristophile world-order play a rather subordinate role and are typically dismissed as uncouth swashbucklers[1] and socialists befouled by "Marx and Ruskin and John Stuart Mill"[2] (*Downton Abbey*, 2010: S1/E6 34:45-34:50).

Whilst the essence of socio-demographic change is generally palpable, the series appears particularly eager to counterbalance troublesome aspects of modernity with nostalgic images of prelapsarian sturdiness – the strongest of which appears to be the family's country house. For instance, when season two opens with Matthew Crawley (the cousin and potential heir of Lord Grantham), caught in a battlefield-trench in France during a shell attack, the scene ends with him uttering: "When I think of my life at Downton… it seems like another world." (*Downton Abbey*, 2011: S2/E1 1:32-1:37) This characterisation of the house as a symbol of

hope, relieving Matthew at least momentarily from his horrific surroundings, is underpinned by the slow rise of string music setting in as he voices the words and the abrupt transition into the series-intro, which sets in with a shot of the house. On the whole, whilst occasionally shifting to the family's townhouse in London, most parts of the story are set within the microcosm of the titular country house, which, in reality, is Highclere in Hampshire.[3] In addition to outré evening dresses, tuxedoes, white ties, and expensive jewellery, the house functions as the most prevalent visual marker of the 'old world' which, historically, began to crumble drastically after the Great War. Hence, it is hardly surprising that larger segments of the plot deal with the potential loss of this iconic symbol of old England, which became incrementally threatened by different factors. In the series, that is, above all, Lord Grantham's difficulty to find a legitimate heir to the estate and the progressive danger of economical bankruptcy, which the family faces at the beginning of season three. Here Grantham realises that the fortune of his American-born wife Cora, which he thoughtlessly invested into a single Canadian railway company, was almost entirely lost.

However, despite all difficulties, the house appears to stand as a shining beacon in the gloom of an ever more hectic, unstable, and comparably unglamorous modern age, inviting contemporary viewers to vicariously cheer for its survival. Whilst commonly associated most with a sumptuous upper-class lifestyle, to convince contemporary audiences and dim negative stereotypes, oftentimes, the series appears to put a primary spotlight on the more general significance of the house as an economic and identificational resource for a larger variety of people including, e.g., farmers, suppliers, household-staff, etc. When Robert is informed about the loss of his family fortune, he instantly categorises the house as a harbour of stability and welfare past upper-class spheres: "I have a duty beyond saving my own skin. The estate must be a major employer and support the house, or there is no point to it… to any of it," (*Downton Abbey*, 2012: S3/E1 11:10-11:30) he posits, whereby characterising the Abbey as more than an elite social space. This notion is constantly reinforced by members of the staff, expressing gratitude and affinity for their extravagant workplace. For example, when Carson (the butler and frankly one of the most backward-looking characters in the series) welcomes Mr Bates as a new staff-member, he prides himself in saying: "Downton is a great house […] and the Crawleys are a great family. We live by certain standards and those standards can at first seem daunting." (*Downton Abbey*, 2010: S1/E1 18:50- 18:57) Moreover, upon his potential transfer to another house, owned by a representant of the new industrial middle-class, he laments: "If you're asking whether I'll regret leaving Downton… I will regret it every minute of every day"

(*Downton Abbey*, 2011: S2/E7 12:37- 1245), whereby, once again, underscoring his deep attachment to the house.

In summary, albeit the series does not entirely ignore the shifting *Zeitgeist* at the dawn of the modern world, it seems to turn the country house back into a more general reminder of "a period of great prosperity [and solidity] in British history." (Cady, 2014: 7). The series thereby exonerates country houses from their cumulatively defamatory image as "power houses," (Girouard, 1987: 2) inhabited by a small national elite who could dominate the popular classes and dictate the course of all the country's policies.

Counter-Mythmaking and the Rise of Nostalgia in 20th-Century-Britain

Downton's figuration of the country house as a signifier of optimism, stability, and multi-class prosperity starkly contravenes a literary trend which, since the end of the Edwardian period, set out to convert the country house into an anachronism. Initially, many writers seemed to assume that the wake of modernity had eventually delivered the ultimate *coup de grâce* to the country house and its potential as a symbolic marker of Englishness. Already in 1910, E. M. Forster prognosticated this in his famous novel *Howards End*: "[T]he literature of the near future will probably ignore the country and seek inspiration from the town." (112). Forster thereby forecasts the eventual triumph of the 'new world' – ever more industrialized, urbanized, and hallmarked by an expansion of the middle-class(es) – over the 'old'. In the novel this is symbolized foremost by the slowly forgotten and decaying country house, which is already owned by members of the new industrial meritocracy, for whom (in contrast to the old English gentry and aristocracy), apparently, the country house no longer holds any attraction. Given this growing tension between 'old' and 'new' at a time of formidable social and economic change, the inter- and post-war periods did much to rewrite and defile the cultural image of the country house and the oppressive power structures it exemplified. This is demonstrated perhaps most poignantly by Noël Coward's famous appropriation of Felicia Hemans' "The Homes of England" in 1929. By changing Hemans original text from "The stately Homes of England, / How beautiful they stand! / Amidst their tall ancestral trees, / O'er all the pleasant land!" (Hemans, 1827, in Wolfson, 2000: 406) into "The Stately Homes of England, / How beautiful they stand, / To prove the upper classes / Have still the upper hand," (Coward, 1929: 188) Coward turned the verses of the Georgian poet into socio-political satire. Additionally, progressive scepticism towards country houses and hypocritical upper-class rule

crystallised incrementally from mid- and late-century country-house-novels. Vita Sackville West's *The Edwardians* (1930), Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), or Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989) are only some of the more famous examples.[4] While they all follow their own argument, on the whole, these writers became particularly engaged with dismantling the 'shadow-sides' of the outwardly perfect lifestyle of the late upper-class's pretentious lifestyle. Putting themes like adultery, superficial snobbery, or the overall useless- or rather obsoleteness of the old ways centre stage, Sackville-West countered dreamier, 'National Trust-ish' images of old England as a place of harmonious insouciance;[5] Waugh's Sebastian Flyte quickly morphs into the very epitome of aristocratic excess and collapse; in Ishiguro's novel, Stevens, narrator and butler of Darlington Hall, sets out to dismantle (albeit subconsciously) not only his own existence as a product of restricted class-ideas. He also perpetuates negative stereotypes by hinting at his former employer's engagement in antisemitic- and anti-democratic thinking as well as the spread of Nazism in Britain. Notably, in many respects – e.g., his confinement and appreciation for traditional manners and values and his devotion to professionalism – Downton's Carson appears starkly modelled on Ishiguro's characterisation of an old English butler who struggles to admit to the 'new world'. However, in contrast to Ishiguro's more ambiguous and critical framing of his protagonist, Fellowes manages to detach his character from the vexing notions of blind obedience, melancholia, and misperception of (his own) reality.

And yet, since the 1970s, such critical views on the rural England of yore became increasingly thwarted with alternative images, founded, once again, in old myth and romance. The last third of the 20th century saw the ascent of what Ishiguro dubbed "an enormous nostalgia industry […] trying to recapture this kind of old England." (Vorda, 1993: 14) Amongst other things, this was the hour of birth for an array of conservative TV soap-operas and heritage-dramas such as *Coronation Street* (1970-), *Eastenders* (1985-), or LWT's *Upstairs, Downstairs* (1971-1975), the latter of which is often held as the direct forerunner of *Downton Abbey* (Clarke, 2019: par. 1). Although it is one of the first popular TV-productions that allows glances at life downstairs, similar to *Downton Abbey*, *Upstairs, Downstairs* began to rekindle a nostalgic aristophilia, which served to release the country house – at least partwise – from the image of "an unwelcome reminder of an elitist past." (Doughty, 2020: par. 10). Interests in rural heritage grew even stronger during the Thatcher period. Amidst the increasingly heritage-affine policies of the day, involving country houses in particular, the 1980s were marked by a continuous surge of stately-home tourism. The mounting demand for conservationism manifested itself further in the buoyant popularity of heritage institutions like

the National Forestry Organisation or National Trust. The National Trust, which had become "closely identified with the country house in the public mind", was able to increase membership-rates from 1,000 in 1920 to over 2,000,000 by 1990 (Mandler, 1997: 411). Often resembling more sentimentalised theme parks instead of properly historicised spaces, so-called 'stately-homes'[6] have since played their own part within a broader nostalgia-apparatus that began to restore fascinations with old England. In consequence, due to the ascent of distinct nostalgia industries, country houses have become part of "an 'imagined', idealised landscape, that has decreasing foundation in reality." (Berberich, 2006: 213). And yet, nostalgia-industries also sparked a growing interest of wealthy, international individuals, who appear still "drawn to the cultural cachet of a pseudo-aristocratic rural lifestyle," (Woods, 2013: 133) in British country house properties. As already indicated earlier, this process (albeit also impacted by other factors) appeared to gather new momentum in the wake of *Downton Abbey*, bringing a spark of Edwardian romance back to the real world – at least for some.

Nevertheless, along with the rise of nostalgia, antagonistic connotations with country houses and the old upper-class survived and continued to find expression in various forms. "Morning sunlight, or any light, could not conceal the ugliness of the Tallis home – barely forty years old, bright and orange brick, squat, lead-paned baronial Gothic, to be condemned one day in an article by Pevsner[7] […] as a tragedy of wasted chances, and by a younger writer of the modern school as 'charmless to the fault,'" (2001: 19) utters, for example the narrator of Ian McEwan's *Atonement*[8], whereby identifying the country house, once again, as a symbol of aristocratic decay rather than gloss. Public interest in the more depressing aspects of country houses – e.g., as markers of oppressive class-ideologies and colonial exploitation – increased during the latter years. This is exemplified (perhaps most prominently) by a recent article in the *New Yorker* titled "Britain's Idyllic Country Houses Reveal a Darker History" (Knight, 2021). In the face of this it seems that the cultural image of country houses and their former inhabitants appears to be symptomatic – to adapt John Hutchinson's terminology – of a sort of "mythic overlaying," (Hutchinson, 2005: 6) requiring contemporaries to shuttle between notions of disapproval and fascination. However, there is little doubt that *Downton Abbey* has done much to re-navigate public perceptions back towards the latter pole. Jerry Bowyer summarises this in the *Forbes Magazine* when saying that the series can be seen as an "entropic disruption to the background noise of revolt against the old world." (Bowyer, 2013: par. 5)

Refining Old England

There is no doubt that *Downton Abbey* has been the most recent peak within a larger nostalgia-scheme that – appropriating Eric Hobsbawm's terminology – set sail to '(re-)invent' ideas about national tradition (Hobsbawm, 1983). Whilst, as argued earlier, the house functions as a primary semiotic marker of stability, strength, and cohesion, other plot elements aid equally in turning the series into a fairly biased portrait of old England. For example, it is remarkable that the only more serious incident that troubles Downton's peaceful harmony during the first seasons is Lady Mary's affair with the Turkish ambassador Mr Pamuk, who is found dead of a stroke in the Lady's bed (*Downton Abbey*, 2010: S1/E6). Eventually, however, the event turns out as a minor *faux pas* that never reaches the level of a full-grown scandal (which is also due to the facts that it is, of course, the Turk who woos and tempts the English Lady in the first place). In turn, the affair lays the table for the construction of the more general master-narrative that "there is no tragedy which cannot be overcome with togetherness, loyalty and love." (Polidoro, 2016: 6). This is demonstrated most markedly when, after being informed about the details of Mr Pamuk's death, Lord Grantham pardons his daughter without further ado and thereby prevents her from an unhappy marriage with the London tabloid meritocrat Richard Carlisle, who has hitherto kept Mary's secret. "I don't want my daughter to be married to a man who threatens her with ruin," (*Downton Abbey*, 2011: S2/E9 50:04-50:08) he posits intently.

Another key to gaining appreciation for a world whose values do not, as Clive Aslet puts it, "in every respect accord with those of today" (Aslet, 2019: par. 3) seems to lie in the creation of identifiable upper-class characters and surpassingly balanced depictions of interclass relations. Bowyer synopsises this when saying: "The upper classes at Downton aren't repressed, they're restrained. They are not inbred, intellectually backward fools; they are intelligent and thoughtful. As a general rule, they treat their servants well, care about their welfare and are generally respected by them in turn. They are, in a word, admirable" (Bowyer, 2013: par. 4). Whilst overall sympathetic, generous, and caring, none of the Crawleys – save Matthew who is, as Nicoletta Gulance has put it, "everything a woman could wish for" (Gulance, 2013: par. 8) – turns out to be entirely flawless, which makes them generally more approachable. As a case in point, Lord Grantham takes on features of a 'tragic hero' – an Edwardian King Lear anxious about the future of his home and dynasty but haunted by his own flaws. His frequent miscalculations do not only cost him the family fortune, but also the life of his youngest daughter Sybil, who dies from eclampsia[9] after her father ignored the counsel of the village hospital's head doctor and relied instead on the ill-advice of his upper-class peer Sir

Philip Tapsel. However, the Crawley's tragic potential seems to boost the audience-empathies by mitigating the imagined distance between Downton's upper-class and the average viewer and supporting the aforementioned master-tale of "togetherness, loyalty and love" (Polidoro, 2016: 6) as the key-paraphernalia to overcome crises. Moreover, all tragedy aside, in contrast to some new-industrial-patriarchs featuring in the series – e.g., Richard Carlisle or Daniel Albridge, the new Lord of Sinderby[10] – the Granthams appear almost completely devoid of hypocritic stereotypes. After all, Lord Grantham turns out as the cliché of a rural English gentleman who loves his family and caters well for his servants and tenants. This impression is frequently supported by lower-class characters as well. As an example, whilst Tom, the chauffeur, usually typifies the aristocracy as "an oppressive class", he nevertheless holds Robert for "a good man… and a decent employer." (*Downton Abbey*, 2010: S1/E6 2:12-2:31) Later in the episode, Robert is instantly given the chance to prove his magnanimity. When Sybil is injured while attending the announcement of the 1914 by-elections, albeit blaming Tom for the incident, he lets him keep his position at the house. Even Robert's mother Violet (the Dowager Countess and, arguably, one of the staunchest representatives of old mannerliness and virtuosity) quickly morphs into one of the most likable characters. Most of her openly racist, single-minded, and contemptuous remarks are carefully clothed in charm and often provide sort of a comic relief, which tends to obfuscate their actual meaning. Upon the matter of the ambassador's death she comments: "Of course, it would happen to a foreigner. It's typical. […] No Englishmen would ever dream of… dying in someone else's house." (*Downton Abbey*, 2010: S1/E3 39:30-39:49) – a remark openly spiked with racial prejudice, ethnic and cultural nationalism, and a somewhat unethical irreverence for the Turkish attaché's death, and yet so overly ridiculous that it can be perceived with a laughing eye. Additionally, as Baena and Byker have noted, the fact that Violet is played by Maggie Smith, who millions of Harry Potter fans around the world have come to cherish, is used as a paratextual strategy (Baena and Byker, 2015: 264), identifying the 'old world' with a well-acquainted face.

On the whole, Downton's upper-class characters seem to refine our connotations with the old aristocracy "so that specific dominant qualities [such as charm, elegancy, or a sense of humour] stand out and become the primary impression with which the audience is left" (Aaker, 2018, 14). And yet, some characters seem particularly emblematic of the shifting dynamics within an ever more antiquated class system. On the part of the upper-class, Sybil emerges as one of the most progressive characters in the series. She is drawn to new fashions, devoted to the women's suffrage movement, and works as a nurse during the wartime episodes. Although her liaison with Tom starts off as a scandal, it quickly turns into an (over-)idealised – and fairly

unrealistic (Ibid.: 12) – love-story which seems to dissemble a mounting inter-class mobility and the long demise of traditional barriers. Tom's 'from-chauffeur-to-estate-manager story' stands out as the series' most prominent narrative about inter-class fluctuation. Whilst characterised as a prototype of an anti-bourgeoise socialist in the beginning, notably, his initial revolutionism is incrementally superseded by his growing affection for his in-laws, which he, being possibly one of the most relatable characters in the series, invites the audience to share. After returning from the United States, he concludes: "I had to go all the way to Boston to figure something out […] I learned that Downton is my home… and that you [the Crawleys] are my family," (*Downton Abbey*, 2015: S6/E3 48:19-48:28) which is apt to provoke another exhale of 'finally' on the part of the audience. On the other hand, being welcomed with open arms certainly adds, again, to the series' characterisation of the old English aristocracy as an overall open-minded and (comparably) forward-looking class.

Moreover, according to Kathrine Byrne, Thomas Barrow, the gay footman who graduates to supervisor of a military hospital set up at Downton during the war, can be seen as one of the most immanent symbols of social change (Byrne, 2014: 323). However, in spite of his relentless ambition to leave the servant quarters, he never really manages to get away from service. Although, in a way, his strive for higher goals epitomises more democratic ideas, Thomas proves to be a highly complex character in terms of likability. He is the only servant who seems to explicitly despise his masters. He is mean, insidious, sometimes pitiable, and a coward. We must not forget that what brings him back from the trenches as head of Downton's provisional hospital is a war wound which he intentionally inflicts on himself to escape front-line duty. Putting this into perspective with the series' higher aristophilia scheme, his wartime actions turn him into the very antithesis of Matthew, Downton's most compassionate (and again tragic[11]) aristocrat war hero. After all, in the case of Thomas we feel that it is his own flaws more than the oppressive system that hamper his social advancement. On the other hand, Matthew's embodiment of upper-class bravery, virtuosity, and altruism enhances audience-affections with the upper-class. Remaining, however, with the downstairs staff for a moment, there are indeed more upbeat effigies of social change. An example would be Gwen Harding (née Dawson), a housemaid who leaves service after getting a job at a telephone company. In difference to Thomas, her upward mobility appears to be rooted in hard work and commitment[12], which crystallise from the series as idealised attributes of the working class. Furthermore, notwithstanding her initial desire to get away from service, in hindside, she still grants that working at Downton "was a good job" (*Downton Abbey*, 2015: S6/E4 26:45-26:46) and emphasises the contribution of Lady Sybil to her later path of life, which presents the

upper-class, again, as exemplarily just and generous. In that sense, the house is defined somewhat as a steppingstone rather than a restriction or burden for emulative servants.[13]

In conclusion, it seems a little unprecise to say that, using Christa Rydeberg Aakær's words, the series bolsters a "re-education in history" (Aakær, 2018: 8) that "tone[s] down historical matters [that] would not fit present-day audiences" in order to "reconstruct a nostalgic memory of [a] common past." (Ibid.: 12). Whilst there is much merit in Aaker's analysis, concentrating primarily on the ahistoricity of the plot, it seems fair to state that certain up-to-date topics (i.e., social revolution, shifting political economic circumstances, or the overall forward-looking mood of post-Edwardian Britain) are not entirely mistreated. As Ashley Ross has argued in *The Time*: "The show has a solid track record of incorporating real-life historical moments." (Ross, 2015: par. 2). That is, e.g., the sinking of the titanic, which is interpreted as representing the demise of the 'old world' (Baena and Byker, 2015: 262), the Irish Revolution, World War I, or the suffrage movement – all of which Aakær fails to mention in her essay.[14] Nevertheless, this does not make the series' response to history any less feigned. Albeit taking note of the greater issues of the day, it is hardly deniable that *Downton Abbey*'s stubborn depiction of country-house idyll, a down-to-earth aristocracy, and "peaceful harmony […] despite […] social differences" (Aakær, 2018: 12) circulates a romanticised picture of old England that is primarily inspired by sentimental clichés. Yet, in lieu of eclipsing history, as an artistic strategy, the series appears resolved to overwrite unpleasant memories with more confident images, symbolisms, and an array of 'happy-ends'. Negative stereotypes are constantly counterbalanced with lovable upper-class characters and dreamy illusions of a country-house-microcosm that appears only peripherally touched by the shifting dynamics of the modern age. By portraying the country house as sort of a heterotopic rock in the turbulent waters of modernity,[15] Fellowes reinforces mawkish myths about prelapsarian elegancy, stability, and permanence. Thereby, his near-apologetic devotion to refining more unpropitious associations with the country's elitist past does not only resume a heritage-affinal counter-tradition that has its roots in the final third of the 20th century. *Downton Abbey* also seems to react – sometimes more and sometimes less directly – to certain present day issues.

Conclusion: Edwardian Romance and the 21st Century

Oftentimes, *Downton Abbey*'s biased portrayal of the old countryside appears to directly translate certain longings and anxieties of today. There is little doubt that the massive

success of the series links back to the large gap between the cosy world it displays and the realities of our own day. First and foremost, the series provided imaginary escape for contemporary viewers against the backdrop of an ever more hectic, instable, and faced-paced post-millennium world. In other words, by mobilising nostalgia for a time that can be more generally remembered as sort of the last bow of stability and prosperity, *Downton Abbey* has invoked an imaginary return to old paragons at a time of increasing volatility. It is, as Olive Cook already asserted at the onset of the greater nostalgia-movement, "the contrast between all that the country house stood for and our own way of living, between our uprootedness and the continuity and stability of the life led in the great mansions" (Cook, 1974: 7) that mesmerises contemporary audiences.

This is evinced by the fact that *Downton Abbey* reverberated well outside imaginary spheres. The merchandise market skyrocketed: there are multiple *Downton Abbey* cook-, cocktail-, and teatime books, behind-the-scenes volumes, and even servants' guides. Let alone items that are directly connected to the series, what Oliver Cox has called "the Downton effect" propelled demands "for Savile Row suits, bowler hats, butlers, afternoon tea, riding side-saddle, tiaras, vintage lingerie, luxury wallpaper and interior design." (Cox, 2015: 113-114) This suggests that people have become increasingly willing to imitate and integrate traces of nostalgic romance into their own self-concept and "liv[e] that lifestyle vicariously." (Gullace, 2013: par. 5) Since 2010 heritage tourism experienced another surge, which, for instance, the tourism website *VisitBritain* traced back, again, "to the fascination sparked by Downton Abbey." (2020: par. 5). Notably, the most popular estates in 2019 were Longleat, Blenheim, and Chatsworth, all of which boost attraction through the continued presence of a duke on the estate. (Doughty, 2020: par. 10) This attests an increased interest not only in the country house, but also in the way of life it once encapsulated. Browsing newspapers and magazines, one would also find the label "Downton Abbey estate" (Neate, 2020) to be today's perhaps most frequent real estate synonym for an English country estate. In line with that, 2020 has seen an enormous upswing in the high-net-worth country house market, spearheaded by the international super-rich who began looking, as Rupert Neate put it in the *Guardian*, "for their version of Downton Abbey." (Ibid.: par. 5).

Nevertheless, despite its far-reaching aftereffects, *Downton's* blend of (a)historical romance and euphemism entangled quite paradox reactions. When the series was broadcasted between 2010 and 2015, both the domestic and international press had been largely concerned with the question why so many viewers seemed, as the *Sun* put it, "powerless to resist Julian Fellowes' mix of historical drama and soap opera nonsense." (qtd. in Bondebjerg, 2016: 12)

Whilst many obviously indulged in old English romanticism, some sections of society perceived the series as rather "snobbish [and] culturally necrophiliac." (Bowyer, 2013: par. 6) Richard Vine puts this tension between admiration and speechless head-shaking in a nutshell when writing: "It'll be a while until ITV produces anything as ridiculous and successful as Downton Abbey." (Vine, 2015: par. 10). And yet, the paradoxicality of *Downton Abbey*'s roaring success appears far more complex. The series has acted, as Aakær writes in her essay, as "a significant catalyst in the renegotiation of national identity." (Aakær, 2018: 7) However, considering its transnational resonance, *Downton Abbey*'s effect(s) on contemporary perceptions of national identity, culture, and history are both more complicit and far-reaching. "It is", as Merle Tönnies reminds us, "by now a truism in cultural theory that identity definitions depend on difference and that no self can be securely established without a clear-cut boundary which separates it from the Other(s)." (Tönnies, 2006: 225)

The advent of progressively *blurring borders* between today's "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1983) relates to the series in different ways. The global age has, no doubt, incentivised the rise of more fluid, cosmopolitan and transnational identities. This has obviously enabled larger international audiences not only to follow, but to identify more easily with Fellowes' portrayal of old England, even so one of its main objectives seems to lie in rekindling a backwards-oriented view on Englishness as clearly distinguishable from other cultural identities. Aslet relates to this when saying that, today, Asian businessmen "want to have dinner in white tie (because dukes always wear white tie)." (Aslet, 2019: par. 4) Nevertheless, it seems still strange that a series that invokes nostalgic nationalism based on an assumed cultural superiority of the English over other cultures, has appealed so tremendously to non-domestic audiences. Overall, it might be that, again, the series' ability to create universally amiable characters has sufficiently obscured the occasional outbursts of ethnic nationalism, inhere to the pungent anti-continental or anti-American comments of, e.g., Violet, Robert, or Carson. Robert's commentary on Matthews new car, saying: "Well, at least its English" (*Donwton Abbey*, 2012: S3/E2 1:25) (and possibly withholding the 'and not American') is in fact one of the more moderate examples of this. However, despite its regular Americophobia, with over 12.3 million viewers ITV's hit series had become "the most popular drama in the history of the [United States'] Public Broadcasting Service." (Miller, 2021: par. 2) In addition, there has been a touring exhibition going round, bringing the experience of the country house, its fashion and history closer to audiences in the United States. An explanation would be that, regardless of narrower (national) contexts, Fellowes' incessant argument for pertaining a certain status quo seems to address more general issues and desires that came, for

instance, with the uptrends of globalisation and migration. However, exploring the oddities of *Downton Abbey*'s transnational popularity would be a topic for a separate occasion.

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The Representation of Child Brides in Two Lebanese Films: *Capernaum* (2018) dir. Nadine Labaki and *The Kite* (2003) dir. Randa Chahal

Maria Abdel Karim

Introduction

The issue of child brides is a provocative subject worldwide, that involves an international consensus for change (Arthur et al., 2017). This subject has rarely been explored in Lebanese cinema, until recently. The most prominent Lebanese film that touches on the issue of a child forced marriages and their consequences are the Oscar Nominated film *Capernaum* (2018) by Nadine Labaki. *Capernaum* was Labaki's most successful film to date, nominated in 2019 for both a BAFTA in the 'Best Film Not in the English Language category and an Oscar in the 'Best International Feature Film' (previously known as Best Foreign Language Film) category making Labaki the first Lebanese female director to ever be nominated for an Oscar (Newbould, 2019). Additionally, Labaki made history at the Cannes Film Festival in 2018 by winning the *Jury Prize* for *Capernaum* which made her the first female Arab filmmaker to win a major prize in the competition (Newbould, 2018). *Capernaum* was produced by Labaki's husband, the film composer and musician Khaled Mouzanar, who has also composed music for all Labaki's films. The narrative is set in post-war Beirut and explores a dystopian reality where people are living as second-class human beings in belts of poverty in and around the city. Not only does it highlight the dangers surrounding many child girls forced into arranged marriages by their families, but also presents various other issues related to child poverty, racism, and women's inequality in Lebanon.

Capernaum however is preceded by Randa Chahal's film *The Kite* (2003), made fifteen years earlier and set in a Lebanese Druze village on the border between Lebanon and Israel which dauntlessly tackles the issue of forced/arranged marriages facing underage Lebanese girls living in the Druze[16] community. Additionally, the film presents a prohibited love story between a Lebanese girl and an Arab-Israeli soldier on the borderland of the two countries in conflict, which prompts discussion of the self-other complex relationship between these two countries from a Lebanese viewpoint. *The Kite* (2003) was Chahal's last film[17] and the only to be released without censorship in the Lebanese cinemas, despite it being highly politically and

socially charged. Al Aris (2010) considers that *The Kite*'s (2003) successful impact in Lebanon was attributed to the film's 'national stand' within its core. It highlights issues of occupation and disputed borders focussing on the impact it has on the citizens of one nation who became unwillingly divided. *The Kite* (2003) was a Lebanese-French co-production, produced by the deceased French Producer Humbert Balsan (Menzione, 2003). It won the Grand Special Jury Prize, Laterna Magica Prize, and Cinema for Peace Award at the 2003 Venice Film Festival (IMDB, 2021). Chahal also received the "Chevalier of the Order of the Cedar" which is considered a very prestigious award given by the Lebanese government (Hoang, 2004).

This paper will explore[1] how both films appear to stimulate feminist voices, by presenting ground-breaking insights into the oppression facing many young girls around the world. The scenes which will be analysed have been selected as they appear to directly criticise a society where sex education is still a contested topic, lacking from the educational curriculum in Lebanon, and women's sexuality remains a censored, taboo topic which is not open for discussion. Yet, the laws in this society permit fragile and innocent pre-pubescent and/or preadolescence girls to be sold as brides and sent to become wives at a very early age in what could be considered a traumatic and violent practice. Jennifer Stith (2015: 84) indicates that "child brides are often forced into sex before they are ready, become pregnant too young, and face life-threatening hardships". Significantly, the paper will examine how 'otherness' is constructed in varying forms in each film. *The Kite* represents 'otherness' through people related to a religious ethnic minority where child marriage is a form of a traditional and cultural practice between members of this closed community to preserve the family line. Disputed geographical borders are another form of othering used in *The Kite*. As Jean-François Staszak (2020) states: "Borders do not segregate pre-existing distinct groups: they produce these groups as different". While 'otherness' is depicted in *Capernaum* in the form of social and economic marginalization where extreme poverty acts as a driver for parents to sell their daughter as a bride to keep a roof over the family's head.

It is important to note as well that the topic of child brides has been explored by Lebanese male film directors such as Khalil Zaarour and his film *Nour* (2017) which narrates the story of a 15-year-old girl, Nour, forced to marry a much older man, Maurice whom she detests. The film was driven by Zaarour's feminist considerations as he indicates in one of his

[1] Some of the material and analysis featured in this paper appears in more depth in my PhD thesis: Abdel Karim, M., 2023. Women's Voices in Lebanon Cinema: Crisis, Patriarchy, and Empowerment (PhD Thesis). Bournemouth University.

interviews: “I want to fight for equality, to abolish patriarchy, to live in a world where women and men have the same rights and opportunities” (Abirafeh and Nassif, 2018). Documentary films likewise have covered this subject such as Leyla Assaf Tengroth’s documentary *Not Like My Sister* (2009). This paper however is confined to exploring the representation of child brides in fiction films directed by women. This does not mean to say that films directed by men, nor documentaries, have not creatively contributed to the debates around child brides and that men cannot produce meaningful discourse on the subject area. However, my focus is placed upon the agency of women filmmakers directing fictional drama, illuminating their insight into this unsettling subject area, as self-reflexive social actors, and filmmakers.

Child Marriage

Child marriage is an abject signifier and abhorrent manifestation of gender inequality and is widely considered a human right’s violation (UNICEF, 2017; Stith, 2015). It is defined as “either a formal or customary union in which one or both parties are under eighteen” (Lemmon and ElHarake, 2014: 4). It is often considered to be an arranged or forced marriage between a girl under the age of eighteen, referred to as a “Child Bride” and an adult man, which Joumana Haddad (2010: 44) refers to as ‘institutionalised’ pedophilia. While some boys under the age of 18 may be compelled into child marriage, this practice most often subjugates girls (Welle, 2021). Lemmon and ElHarake (2014: 3) state that “An estimated one-third of girls around the globe become brides before the age of eighteen and one in nine do so before the age of fifteen.” Child marriage is often linked to poverty, and lack of access to education, and in some situations, it is “rooted in socio-cultural practices and religious beliefs” (Parsons et al: 2015). Even though many countries have been improving legal protection and policies against this practice, it is still affecting around 12 million young girls each year (Girls Not Brides, 2021). Additionally, “up to 10 million girls are at risk of child marriage in the next decade as a result of the pandemic” (United Nations, 2021). The pandemic increased the vulnerability of children, who may have been unable to seek help from authorities or the elder in society and were susceptible to pressures from close family.

In Lebanon, the legal age for marriage is determined according to the religious community that the person belongs to as Lebanon adopts personal religious-based status laws (Schaer, 2021). Therefore, there is no unified law for marriage, and each religious group sets

its own rules. However, in most religions, it remains legal for girls to marry under the age of 18 and in some, as soon as they hit puberty, while most sects agree that boys can only marry once they are 18 years old (Hutchinson, 2020).[18] It is no surprise that religious laws permit such violent practices to occur to very young girls. Some Muslims argue for example, that the youngest wife of the Prophet Mohammed, Ayesha, was reportedly nine years old when they got married (Stith, 2015) while according to Christianity it is believed that the Virgin Mary was possibly in her teenage years (12-16) when she gave birth to Jesus (Bricker, 2021).

Child marriage appears to be more prevalent in Lebanon among the Syrian refugees who were fleeing the Syrian war/crisis that started in 2011. Also, Palestinian refugees and a minority of Lebanese girls are subject to child marriage. UNICEF conducted a survey in 2015-2016 about the prevalence of child marriage in Lebanon:

> 6.0 percent of Lebanese girls and women aged 20 to 24 were married before the age of 18, compared to 12.0 percent of Palestinian refugees from Lebanon (PRL), 25.0 percent of Palestinian refugees from Syria (PRS), and 40.5 percent of Syrian refugees. (Hutchinson, 2020)

A law that would criminalise child marriage in Lebanon was introduced in the parliament in 2017 but it was never passed since it faced rejection from some political/religious parties (Schaer, 2021; Ramadan, 2021). Child marriage remains legal in at least 117 countries around the world (including the United States) according to the Pew Research Centre (Sandstrom and Theodorou, 2016). Also, some of the countries where the legal minimum age for marriage is 18 permit child marriage to occur under specific circumstances where either parental consent or judicial approval must be presented (ibid.). Child marriage is common in many Arab and Middle Eastern countries including Iran (HRW, 2020), Syria, Yemen, Kuwait, Djibouti, Sudan (Kehoe, 2013), etc. However, it is worth noting that in the past decade some countries are officially banning child marriage, raising the minimum age for marriage to 18 without exceptions such as Tanzania, Malawi, Dominican Republic, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, etc. (Macé, 2020) which it is hoped would set an example for other governments.

Child Brides in *Capernaum*[2] (2018) and *The Kite* (2003)

Capernaum (2018) tells the story of a 12-year-old boy, Zain, who wants to sue his parents for giving him life in this unjust and chaotic world. In her interview with Aridi (2018) for *The New York Times* Labaki mentions:

> He's actually not only suing his parents; he's suing the whole system because his parents are also victims of that system – one that is failing on so many levels and that completely ends up excluding people.

The film begins with this symbolic trial court scene, where Zain is accusing his parents of bringing him into this world in front of the judge and witnesses, which serves to embody the extent of neglect these deprived children are feeling. The trial was inspired by the research that Labaki did prior to creating the film, and the interviews she conducted with these children living in the slums. Labaki tells Bradley (2019) in an interview:

> I used to always ask them one question. 'Are you happy to be alive?' And most of them would say, 'No, I wish that I was dead.' Some kids even committed suicide or tried to commit suicide. And they told me, 'I don't know why nobody loves me. I am beaten up every day. Why do people treat me this way?'

Zain is a figure who comes to represent these underprivileged 'othered' children. He lives with his parents and siblings in one of these very poor neighbourhoods that have formed belts of poverty around the city of Beirut. They all sleep on dirty mattresses on the floor in a messy, overcrowded room which frames their state of chaos. He and his siblings are forced into child labour on the unwelcoming streets of Beirut. Instead of attending school like other children of their age, they live in extreme poverty and their parents use them as a source of income. His favourite sibling is his eleven-year-old sister Sahar. Once their parents find out that Sahar has started menstruating, they decide to marry her to their landlord's son who is

[2] A section of *Capernaum* scene analysis discussed in this paper was also featured in previous work:
Abdel Karim, M. (2023). 'Dystopian Images of Beirut in The Lebanese Oscar-nominated Film Capernaum (2018)'. Networking Knowledge: Journal of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network, 16(1). Retrieved from https://ojs.meccsa.org.uk/index.php/netknow/article/view/676.

more than twice her age, in exchange for some chicken and the rent. Sahar then becomes a financial transaction. Labaki (2020) revealed that before doing the film, she was surprised by how many children were being sold in this way in Lebanon, apparently because their families are poor. She used to be judgemental and very angry at her parents however, it took her a few conversations with them to understand their situation:

> When I used to sit down with the mother, or the father and we used to talk, it just takes me very little to understand that I don't have the right to judge. I'm not in a position to judge as I've never been in this situation… I don't think you can take a position because sometimes you feel for these parents and sometimes you hate these parents, so you find yourself in this very contradictory position. (Labaki, 2020)

Forced child marriage is very common in these marginalised communities despite the reality that these children are neither emotionally nor physically prepared for what is an adult commitment. Alex Gray (2016) emphasizes that girls who get married at this young age "are more likely to leave education early, suffer domestic violence, contract HIV/AIDS and die due to complications during pregnancy and childbirth". The film represents the consequences of child marriage and what implications it would have on Sahar and her family.

The Kite (2003) follows the story of Lamia, a 15-years old girl who resides in a Lebanese Druze unnamed village along the border with Israel and is forced to wed her cousin Sami who lives in the Israeli occupied territory of the village. This unnamed village is represented as divided because of Israel's 1982 annexation of southern Lebanon (Alkassim, 2020). The geographical location and political situation of this film is set to resemble Golan Heights' Quneitra province, home to Syria's Druze community[19] who live under Israeli occupation since Israel occupied the Golan Heights in 1967's six-day Arab Israeli war and later annexed it in 1981 (Kirrish, 1986; Quilty, 2008). Chahal thus, "transposed the Golan Heights to the Mount Hermon area in Lebanon, which is similar in geography" (Snaije, 2003). Friends and relatives who live on opposite sides of the border can only see their loved ones through binoculars and communicate by shouting through megaphones as they stand behind the barbed wires separating them. Chahal mentions:

> I chose the subject because of the absurdity of the situation," […] I like the continuity in communication even though there's barbed wire separating the people ... (Cited by Hoang, 2004)

The passage from one side of the border to another is only permitted for the newlyweds - mainly the brides only - and the coffins of the dead who are to be buried in their native village (Alkassim 2020). Therefore, Lamia is the one who must cross over the barbed-wire border separating both sides of the village to be united with her soon-to-be husband. Khabbaz (2014: 130) indicates that "by crossing these borders Lamia will be passing from childhood into adulthood" which according to Samirah Alkassim (2020: 210) "allegorizes the zone of the barbed-wire, a dangerous place where she enjoys flying kites with her younger brother and other boys his age."

Lamia and Sami who have never met before and do not hold any emotional bond are forced into a marriage they both despise. On the other hand, Lamia's heart belongs to Youssef, an Arab-Israeli soldier guarding the Lebanese-Israeli border who also shares a strong infatuation with Lamia. This attraction is forbidden because although Youssef is a Druze, he is considered as an outlaw or an 'Other' by his community for being part of the Israeli army. Therefore, Lina Khatib (2008: 145-146) suggests that the film "uses the body of a woman as a bridge between the Self and the Other. […] Lamia steps outside the patriarchal circle and falls in love with an Other." However, Lamia and Youssef's love story remains a platonic attraction throughout the film, where they only gaze at one another through the binoculars. The only way this couple could be together is expressed in the last scene of the film through Lamia's fantasy where she stands next to him in the watchtower and removes his military uniform or 'costume' (as she calls it) so she can finally see him as a normal human being and not a forbidden, 'other'.

The Kite (2003) reveals that the arranged marriage within this Druze community is usually decided and agreed on by the village male elders. Women in this tribe seem unable to oppose the men's decision and must obey without any resistance. This is evident in the wedding arrangement scene which shows a group of old men sitting on the floor wearing their traditional Druze outfit and a *Qaloosa* (white cotton head cap) on their head while discussing Lamia's marriage to Sami. In parallel, Lamia stands anxiously behind the door in another room while her aunt, Shirine, is comforting her mother, Amira, who does not seem to be happy that her daughter will be married. The reality is that once Lamia crosses the border to be united with

Sami, she would not be able to return to her village or see her family, since the permission will be granted once, on the condition that she is a bride. Lamia's desperate look on her face and her mother's unhappiness is contradicted by a parallel image of the men in the living room celebrating their victory of arranging the wedding while sipping on their Arabic coffee and exchanging knowing smiles after her father gave his final agreement. This is one of the many forms where Lamia is objectified in the film because of patriarchal control, in addition to being denied her freedom of choice which she admits to her friend, Zalfa, when asked if she will accept the wedding "Do I have a choice?" and Zalfa responds "No!" By denying her the free will to choose how she wants to live her life, Lamia is reduced to a commodity that can be used and exchanged across the border to "preserve the family line" and fulfill her biological mission, procreation (Alkassim, 2020).

Even though Amira does not seem to agree with her daughter's marriage, she did not resist or oppose the men's decision and carried on with the marriage preparations. We find her communicating with Sami's mother, Mabrouke, on the border via a megaphone about Lamia's qualities which she considers would make her 'good wife material' as is revealed through the following dialog:

> My daughter Lamia is going to be 15 years old, and we must marry her
> She has brown eyes and brown hair, her skin is white
> She is a good, well-behaved girl.
> She has everything one could ask for, from her toes to her fingertips
> She's been menstruating for two years now.

From the following dialog, it is assumed that once a girl in that community starts menstruating then she is ready to be wedded, even if technically she is still a child. Menstruation also indicates that her body is now able to procreate. A woman in that community is regarded as a reproductive tool and her sole duty is to leave her parents' house to become a wife, obedient to her husband and a mother for their children. The dialog also implies that marrying Lamia is regarded as a matter of urgency since Amira mentions that 'we must marry her'. Marrying a girl at the age of 15 which should be considered a moral and a human 'crime' is instead celebrated and regarded as a necessity for this community. Emphasis is placed on the word 'well-behaved' which presents her as a girl who adheres to traditional gender norms of behaviour "such as docility and obedience to husbands and in-laws" as Nina Buchmann et al.

(2021: 3) indicate. From the following dialog, it sounds as if the mother is advertising 'her daughter as chattel' by describing her as a beautiful and physically functional human being who will be able to perform the household chores and her duties as a wife. This reduces the woman to a useful drudge of child-bearing age. Even if the mother does not wish harm to her daughter and is clearly unhappy with this decision, she appears powerless and unable to protect her either.

The film appears to succeed in criticizing the situation of women and young girls in Lebanese society, and the Druze community in particular, who force their girls from an early age into marriages they detest and must unwillingly accept their fate. Lamia who has absolutely no idea about what is awaiting her after marriage, her duties as a wife, or even the slightest idea of how a couple procreates asks her friend Zalfa in a naïve way:

- Do you know how a woman gets pregnant?
- Of course, everybody knows, you lay naked in bed with your husband, I read about it in a book my cousin brought with him from Canada. You stick things inside you.
- What kind of things?
- I can't tell you.

This scene seems to directly reveal the irony of sending a very young girl to get married, without providing her with the least knowledge or access to sex education of what she may encounter. Even an open discussion about sexual relationships with her peers seems to be out of reach. Sex is still considered a contested subject and a taboo not to be discussed openly and publicly in Lebanon and almost lacking in schools' curricula due to opposition from religious authorities (Porter, 2017). Zalfa who was bragging that she had access to read all about this in a book brought from Canada, is reluctant and embarrassed to discuss the act of sexual intercourse and reproduction with her friend. She cannot even name the male sexual organ and instead refers to it vaguely as a 'thing' that is stuck inside a woman. "Too many women are ashamed of and embarrassed by reproductive and other aspects of their bodies" (Chrisler, 2013: 128). Women or girls who grow up in patriarchal Arab societies bound by religious and traditional values "have been deprived of expressing their bodies for so long" (Haddad, 2010: 64) and often find it hard to open up about their sexual health.

Chahal also points to the cultural difference between Lebanon and the west, regarding the topic of sexual health education by emphasizing that Zalfa was informed about the act of

sexual intercourse through a book that her cousin brought with him from Canada, thus adding to the self-other distinction. Through this detail she is suggesting that western countries are more open when it comes to sexual health education. Canada like many other western countries provide sexual health education for pupils at school from an early age which covers various topics including puberty, pregnancy, STIs, etc. (Connell, 2005). While there was an attempt to introduce sex education in the school curriculum in Lebanon in 1995, "it was retracted shortly after when it faced harsh criticism from conservative and religious parties" (Mansour, 2021). McGrath (2010) mentions that sexual health education in Lebanon can only be seen in private secular schools. What makes this scene appear more ironic, is seeing Lamia dressed in her school uniform discussing her arranged marriage to Sami, which will eventually result in her dropping out of school and missing the opportunity of getting an education. Jennifer Parsons et al. (2015) indicate:

> When girls are married early, their educational trajectory is altered. Formal schooling and education often cease, which means they stop acquiring knowledge and skills that would carry them through life, including as productive members of their households and communities.

Without an education, these adolescent girls grow up being dependent on their husbands, who take advantage of the situation to abuse them mentally and physically and do with them as they like since they consider themselves to be superior. Thus, the school uniform that both girls are wearing in this scene appears to be a tool used to make a statement against child marriage and to emphasize that girls like Lamia need to be in school getting an education, instead of a marriage and a stolen childhood.

Similarly, in *Capernaum* when Sahar first acknowledges that she started menstruating, she appears naïve about sexuality. It was Zain who first spotted the blood on her shorts and brought her attention to the topic. Talking about menstrual periods remains a taboo that is rarely discussed openly amongst families and rarely depicted in films. Gloria Steinem's satirical essay, *If Men Could Menstruate* (2019) resonates here, asserting that if menstruation was associated with men and manhood, it would be a subject of pride and acclamation, rather than shame and stigma as applied to women. Gender-oriented double standards are manifested through various facets in the Arab world, especially when it comes to women's sexuality. A woman's virginity in the Middle East is indexical of a family's honour, while "men are free from this social imperative" (Ghanim, 2015). A great deal of Arab men would not accept

marrying a woman if she is not a virgin (Haddad, 2012) while many men brag about their various pre-marital sexual adventures among their peers and social milieu. This further reveals how a woman's body is prone to stigmatization in the patriarchal Arab world (Haddad, 2012; Ghoneim, 2020).

Many girls do not get proper communication or education about their menstrual cycle before experiencing it for the first time, and their first experiences are usually accompanied by shame and fear (UNFPA, 2021). In Sahar's situation, the education system cannot be blamed for not teaching her about sex education as it was the case with Lamia (*The Kite*, 2003) since Sahar does not attend school in the first place. It then becomes the responsibility of the parents to provide their daughter with information about this topic. However, in a dysfunctional family like the one Sahar belongs to, the parents lack proper communication with their children and abuse them physically and emotionally, therefore it becomes very hard for a girl like Sahar to receive any awareness or knowledge about her sexual health.

Zain, who appears to intuitively understand what was happening with his sister better than she did, starts convincing her to conceal her menstruation from their parents, assuming that they will marry her to Assad once they knew. He alerts her by saying:

- If mom finds out, she'll get rid of you. She'll give you to Assaad
- But Assaad's really nice
- He's a fart!
- But he gives me ramen and liquorice for free.
- He'll give you shit to eat! They'll give you to Assaad to get rid of you.

Sahar is vulnerable, innocent, and naïve, seeming to not mind being forced to marry Assaad, their landlord's son, and the owner of a mini market where Zain works as a delivery boy. Ironically, she presumes that Assaad is benevolent only because he gives her free liquorice and ramen. A cheap packet of noodles is enough to win her heart. Vulnerable girls like Sahar, lack proper education and are taught from an early age that marriage is the only future for a woman and a prime achievement. Many young girls in low-income countries and poor families see that marriage would grant them a better life and facilities (Ouattara et al., 1998). However, Zain warns her about marriage suggesting that she'll become Assad's property, and a prisoner in his house where he would have full control over her. From the dialog, it is also revealed that the children feel that they are a burden on their parents, not a blessing. Zain mentions twice in this scene that they want to give Sahar to Assaad to 'get rid of her' making his sister

acknowledge that she is a burden on their parents. This is a feeling he knows very well as it is revealed at the beginning of the film when he tells the judge that he wants to sue his parents for bringing him into this life of hardship and neglect.

The choice of filming in an unsanitary toilet with pale earth colours serves as an appropriate backdrop to explore these children's suffering framing their dystopian life and feeling of otherness. The camera movement is utilitarian offering a sense of realism, and the scene setting and sound similarly evoke a sense of uncomfortable and unwanted intimacy. Sahar is pictured sitting on a dirty toilet seat while Zain was washing her undergarments which got bloodied by her unexpected menstruation. Labaki presents a nuanced emotional delicacy in directing this troublesome scene without sexualising young Sahar remotely. Zain then rolls up his t-shirt and gives it to her, but she confusingly asks what she should do with it. This small but nuanced detail further elaborates on Sahar's lack of awareness about what a menstrual period is or how to behave in this situation. Ironically it was her 12-years-old brother, who had to demonstrate to her what she should do and how she could use his t-shirt as a pad. At that moment Sahar could not have access to feminine sanitary pads so her brother had to resort to his t-shirt as a temporary solution.

Even though this film was made prior to Lebanon's devastating economic collapse, it is worth noting that this scene foreshadows the reality of 'period poverty' that many Lebanese women and girls are experiencing during the political and economic crisis that began in 2019 following the October 17 uprising and is still ongoing till the date of writing this paper (2022). Due to this dire economic crisis in Lebanon, feminine hygiene products have become a luxury since their prices have become exorbitant, and many females who cannot afford them are resorting to unhealthy alternative means during their menstruation (AFP, 2021).

As the narrative evolves, Sahar's destiny and inevitable fate are decided by her father agreeing to marry her off to Assaad in exchange for keeping a roof over his family's head and some chicken. The marriage proposal scene between Sahar and Assaad is represented through Zain's perspective who arrives home after a long day of making deliveries, only to find some chicken roaming freely on the stairs that lead to his tiny accommodation. After acknowledging that Assaad is the one who gave them these chickens, Zain finds out that Assaad and his father are paying a formal visit to his parents. The camera reveals, through Zain's POV, Assaad sitting on the sofa next to Sahar who is dressed up in a pink dress and wearing full makeup on her face. Joining them in the living room was Sahar's father, holding one of her baby siblings in his lap, and Assaad's father. From the way Sahar was dressed, Zain knew that a marriage

proposal is the highlight of this visit. Zain then goes to confront his mother who was preparing juice for the guests in the kitchen that he is aware of the abusive arrangement that his parents are planning for his sister which he is clearly against. Hot-tempered Zain instructs his mother, Souad, by saying "Tell that son of a bitch he has no business here". The mother feeling helpless tries to silence Zain, by slapping and pushing him into another room because she fears they would lose the roof over their head if their guests felt unwelcomed or disrespected. Souad then enters the living room to welcome her guests and offers them the juice while asking Sahar to take her baby sister and go to the other room.

Like *The Kite*'s proposal scene, *Capernaum* also reveals that the marriage is agreed upon by the men in the absence of the child bride. This reduces the child into an object and diminishes her role as a human being who has a say in her fate or a voice. Virginia Caputo (2018: 202) indicates that the patriarchal system allows for women and girls to be treated like "property or commodities in a system that devalues and dehumanises children and infantizes women". However, both parents appear desperate after taking this decision which will put their daughter's life in danger as shown later in the story. Poverty in the case of this film would be the main factor that forces the parents to sell one daughter to avoid becoming homeless with the rest of their children and in the hope that marriage would grant her a better life, one they cannot afford. While researching for the film, Labaki found that the parents are as many victims as their kids in the sense that:

> the mother in most of the cases was already married at a very young age just like her daughter and […] unfortunately in 75% of the cases […] the child repeats the same pattern. (Labaki, 2020)

Sahar's story unfolds by her being forced to marry Assaad and later dying from a pregnancy complication. (Lemmon and ElHarake, 2014) explain that many child brides who become pregnant at this very young age might experience issues in their pregnancies which puts their health and the health of their children in danger. Sahar's body was clearly not ready for this pregnancy, as she suffered extreme bleeding, and she couldn't be admitted into any hospital because she is an undocumented child. In our interview, Labaki (2020) points out:

> Children are born and dying without anybody knowing because they're not being registered because unfortunately parents have to pay money to register

> their children […] they are completely invisible from the system that did not find solutions for them.

While Sahar was victimized throughout the whole film, Lamia tried on many occasions to show resistance against her family's decision to wed her to Sami, although no one cared for her opinion and the wedding proceeded as planned. However, once she arrives at her new home, she rebels against Sami and his family by refraining from speaking, eating, or even allowing her husband to sleep next to her. This leads Sami to confront her and propose that he is ready to divorce her so she could go back to her family. However, he makes sure to shed light on the social stigma surrounding divorced women in the Arab world by saying "If we divorce… no one will want you anymore. Or marry you. You'll be alone." While men can divorce and remarry whomever they want without any shame, a divorced woman in Arab societies is shamed and unwanted in many traditional patriarchal communities which gives her little chance of remarrying (El Saadawi, 1977: 2015). As Fatima al-Khulaidi comments in an interview for *Middle East Eye*: "Arab culture has made divorced women look like they are half women, and they are the last option for men" (cited by Alghoul, 2017). Additionally, in misogynistic communities, a woman is always blamed for a failed marriage regardless of whose fault it is (Alghoul, 2017). This is reflected in the film when Lamia eventually returns to her family and her village, and one of the male villagers who owns a bakery gives her a reproachful look and refuses to take money from her for the bread she was buying by saying "we don't accept the money of dishonour." According to Samirah Alkassim (2020: 211) she is "scorned by the village men for her failure to uphold her social/biological responsibility." Thus, in the eyes of her village, she is blamed for the failure of her marriage with Sami, ignoring the fact that she is just a child and should not be wedded in the first place.

Conclusion

While *The Kite* reveals that the arranged child marriage occurred to preserve tradition and to foster a sense of community, *Capernaum* takes a different angle, by revealing how a failed state and poverty would lead parents to sell their daughter as a bride in the hope that they could keep a roof over their head, and she could have a better life. Both directors were able to voice their opinion about this topic and succeed in criticizing the situation of women and young

girls in Lebanese society, who are forced from an early age into marriages which they likely detest and must unwillingly accept their fate. These films argue that both girls were sent to become brides without sex education or an understanding of the adult commitment of marriage. Both characters are unaware of what is expected of them and end up either dying as it was the case with Sahar or ostracised and shamed for a failed marriage as it was the case with Lamia. The fact that the films are fifteen years apart, yet the theme they both tackle is contemporary, reveals that the status quo is not changing. In the absence of legal protection, marriage practices for young girls are alarmingly increasing in Lebanon due to the pandemic and the ongoing dire economic crisis at the time of writing (Shaer, 2021). As a result, many girls from poor families are forced into marriages which are debilitating to their life chances, compromising their physical and psychological health, and there is no visible solution for the near future. Both films reveal that girls represented as the 'other' living in marginalised communities and those who belong to an ethnic minority are often more prone to find themselves trapped inside this dangerous practice in Lebanon, and maybe anywhere else around the world, which puts their life at risk on all levels. Therefore, more pressure from grassroots activists and global organizations such as The United Nations (UN Women, 2022) should be placed on countries to implement rules against child marriage which I believe is a form of violence against females worldwide and should be regarded as a crime.

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

Zoe Crombie

Perceptions of Anime Within Japan

Unlike in the West, where anime tends to be viewed as a niche interest confined to the realms of fan cultures and cinephiles, the viewership of anime in Japan is far more mainstream. Until recently, the highest grossing film of all time in Japan was Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* (2001) – it was only recently displaced by another anime film, *Demon Slayer* (Haruo Sotozaki 2020), with the Hollywood hit *Titanic* (James Cameron 1997) sitting in third place (McCurry 2020). In fact, as of 2021, five of the top ten highest grossing films in Japan are anime films, and the *Doraemon* anime series (beginning with *Doraemon: Nobita's Dinosaur* (Hiroshi Fukutomi 1980) remains the highest grossing film franchise (Kogyo Tsushinsha 2021). Clearly, this indicates that anime is widely consumed by a large portion of the Japanese population, even more so than many live action Japanese films. However, from an aesthetic point of view, the popularity of these films also suggests that the appetite for anime is not just

restricted to a single genre or target audience. Although three of the films were made by Hayao Miyazaki, *Spirited Away* is a contemporary fantasy, *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004) is an adaptation of a British novel, and *Princess Mononoke* (1997) is a historical epic that contains scenes less suitable for young audiences. Similarly, of the other two highest grossing anime features, *Your Name* (Makoto Shinkai 2016) is a high school romance, and *Demon Slayer* is a violent dark-fantasy period film adapted from a pre-existing manga series. Although all these films tend toward fantasy, possibly because of animation's inherent capacity to depict what cannot be replicated in real life, they also diverge enormously in generic terms, and have significantly different themes and narrative structures. This implies that rather than viewing anime as a genre of media separate to that of live action film, Japanese audiences group anime within the context of any other kind of popular narrative cinema, watching it for a variety of reasons not strictly related to that of its medium.

Anime and Orientalism

While consumption of anime outside of Japan might suggest a Western desire to understand Japanese art on a deeper level, questions surrounding how the global popularity of anime has flourished often seem to arise from an Orientalist perspective. To clarify, the use of the term "Orientalist" here refers to Edward Said's theorising of the cultural phenomenon in which the West is granted a "detached superiority", meaning that Eastern cultures can essentialised and disregarded for colonial gain (Said, 2014: 348). Scholar Ian Condry suggests that investigations into the transcultural appreciation of Japanese works imply "that there are some general, overall characteristics of Japanese popular culture that explain its success, regardless of whether success is defined in terms of aesthetic excellence, market achievements, or impact with an audience" (Condry, 2013: 19). Although the colonial relationship between Japan and areas like Western Europe and the United States is more complex than Japan being a formerly conquered land, particularly due to Japan's involvement in World War II, this attitude still reflects Orientalist perceptions of East Asian art. There is particular relevance to anime filmmakers with regard to Said's theory of the way Arabs were (and are) depicted in Western media: "the Arab is always shown in large numbers. No individuality, no personal characteristics or experiences" (Said, 2014: 286). Though this is referring to a different ethnic group, I believe that this can be applied to Orientalist perceptions of people like the Japanese, and that by "othering" a group as different, all other individual traits are disregarded. I argue that this assumed lack of individuality is often applied unconsciously to Eastern creators by

Western critics as a contemporary form of Orientalism, and that this has contributed to a tendency to view both anime and anime filmmakers as a monolithic group not worthy of more nuanced analysis. Similarly, Andrew C. McKevitt, referring to American anime consumption, states that the "most early U.S. anime fans accepted a mediated Japan through the consumption of anime texts", emphasising that "it was possible to be an anime fan and have never met a Japanese person" (McKevitt, 2010: 917). While McKevitt acknowledges that contact with Japan cannot inherently stop someone from "reproducing the most malevolent strains of Orientalism" (McKevitt, 2010: 917), it does mean that many Westerners consume anime with no real knowledge – or acknowledgement - of its creators.

Interestingly, anime is often considered in terms of its position as a Japanese cultural export and positioned as an alternative to Western forms of animation, as opposed to a mode of animation within the broader framework of global animation history. For instance, recent articles on the topic of anime's global popularity often refer to it as "unique" or as "far more aesthetically-pleasing and eye-catching than American animation" (Salemme, 2019), with some going as far as to say that it serves as "a window into what life is like on the other side of the world" (Smith, 2020). By implying that anime is a homogenous product that is intrinsically separate to Western (specifically American) animation, articles like these often reproduce Orientalist views of Japan, suggesting that the state of being Japanese is a category of art unto itself. This is reflected in the categorisation of anime on streaming sites such as Netflix, in which it is placed in a section unto itself, rather than the films being dispersed among other genres such as horror, romance, or science fiction. Although one could argue that the assertion of anime's superiority negates Orientalist implications, I believe that this reasserts another form that Orientalism takes: fetishism. Toshiya Ueno's theory of "techno-orientalism" is highly pertinent here, particularly with regard to the academic tendency to loosely connect anime works to false notions of Japanese culture, leading discussions to become "deeply caught in cultural essentialism" (Ueno, 1999: 98). He explains that "Japanimation [or anime] is defined by the stereotype of Japan as an image of cybersociety" (Ueno, 1999: 98), using the Orientalist cyberpunk aesthetic of an American film like *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott 1982) as an example of how the essentialist Western perception of Japan has evolved. Although the west may be "seduced and attracted" (Ueno, 1999: 98) by these images, their homogeneity encourages a wholesale rejection in favour of the perceived variety of the West. For those who do not reject this image, there remains a fundamental misunderstanding of what constitutes Japanese culture, exemplified for Ueno as "the illusory image of Samurai which never existed" (Ueno, 1999: 98)

but that gained popularity as a singular image of Japan in the West. It is within this essentialist misunderstanding that fetishism arises, with fetishism in most senses referring to the "displacement of fundamental values" onto a surrogate object (Tanaka, 2011: 134). In the case of anime, one can argue that the Western viewers who view anime works as a "window" onto Japan are perhaps displacing a sense of purpose and awe onto the "object" of Japan, with anime as the mediator of their concept of the nation's culture.

Regardless of any psychoanalysis, however, the misconceived appreciation of anime's Japanese qualities for Western viewers appears to be somewhat contradictory, especially within the passionate Western fan cultures that anime has acquired since the rise of the internet age. This is exemplified by the term *otaku*: while it translates from Japanese literally to "your house", derogatorily referring to individuals who do not leave their homes, it has been reappropriated by Western anime viewers to indicate a high level of dedication to watching anime and being involved in anime subcultures. In a way, this use of language can serve as a metaphor for fans with Orientalist perceptions of anime and Japan, the misuse of the word from its original context representing a fundamental lack of understanding of the culture they purport to be experts in. Scholars of anime have extensively researched the *otaku* phenomenon, with Annalee Newitz arguing that "they eagerly watch an anime because it comes from 'far away.'", and "because it allows them to feel as if they have specialized knowledge ordinary Americans do not" (Newitz, 1994: 3). Therefore, one can extrapolate that the Western *otaku* culture is highly dependent on the possession of a centralised Western gaze – they are, in effect, a modern version of the colonisers discussed by Said, who set out to distant lands in order to recover "mysterious" and "unknown" treasures. This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that, within Japan, *otaku* typically identify themselves with a prefix that describes their niche interest, from "anime *otaku*" to "motorcycle *otaku*" (Newitz, 1994: 1). This suggests that *otaku* within Japan are focused on niche interests that are not defined by their relationship to their home country, whereas Western *otaku* define themselves upon a scrutinous gaze upon Japan, or in some cases East Asia more generally. As *otaku* are one of the primary groups of anime consumers in Western regions like the UK and US, I believe that this contributes significantly to the view of anime as a singular genre. Although individual *otaku* will likely have preferences regarding the anime they consume, they are united in their interest in the mode as a whole, a generalised stance that may cause those unfamiliar with anime to assume a level of uniformity.

The Existence of Anime Auteurs

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

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

Patalita posits in their thesis that Hideo Kojima is an auteur of video games with an "immediately identifiable" mark (Patalita, 2018: 2). However, I would also like to clarify that my application of this label is not just reserved for directors who are entirely distinct or unique in their field – rather, I aim to highlight the similarities and nuances within their own filmographies to demonstrate the value of their artistic contributions beyond broad generic categorisation.

Mari Okada's Prolific Career

Mari Okada is a highly active screenwriter of anime, primarily known for her work on youth drama series, who began working in the late 1990s and has recently begun directing her own feature films and TV series. However, scholarly explorations of the filmmaker and her filmography are scant, with only interviews and non-academic articles covering her and her work currently. One of the few well-known female directors amongst a "scarcity of women at the highest levels in Japanese animation" (Scateni, 2020), her distinct catalogue of work can certainly – and somewhat subversively - be viewed in the context of auteur theory. Within Japan, partially due to the release of her best-selling memoir *From Truant to Anime Screenwriter: My Path to "Anohana" and "The Anthem of the Heart"* (Okada, 2018), Okada is known as a filmmaker as much for her personal struggles as for her creations.

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

Okada's career trajectory up until now has been somewhat unusual, and a far cry from the high cultural value that the label of auteur typically implies. For example, among the various writing jobs she took up early in her career was a position writing scenarios for direct to video pornography, which she credits with helping her learn to write things that she had "never experienced" (Zatat, 2018). She even stated that directing a short pornographic film gave her the experience necessary to direct her anime feature debut *Maquia: When the Promised Flower Blooms* (2018), as it taught her about technical considerations like "the position of the camera" (Ibid.). This demonstrates the unorthodox approach Okada takes to her work, and reveals how her inspirations and background stretch beyond the more conventional literary and filmic inspirations utilised by anime auteurs like Hayao Miyazaki. This background in pornography, though brief, also shows Okada's willingness to work within a "debased low culture genre" (Attwood, 2002: 93), marking her rise to the status of auteur more dramatic and unusual. She then began working freelance transcribing interviews, at which point she received a job typing up an anime writer's handwritten manuscripts – she was asked to contribute her own ideas, and *DT Eightron* (Amino, 1999-2000), directed by her future collaborator Tetsuro Amino, became her first written anime work (Morrissy, 2018). This entrance into the anime industry is considered unusual, as directors typically begin by making connections through assistant or journalistic work (Ibid.) – Okada could not participate in this socialising due to her severe anxiety. Again, this suggests that Okada's auteur persona is that of an outcast or underdog, an ostracised woman who works within a globally othered mode of filmmaking – in the context of her work, this gains deeper significance. Popular female *mangaka* (authors of manga) have existed for decades, and female anime directors like Naoko Yamada and Saya Yamamoto who also emerged in the 21st century have seen success with films like *A Silent Voice* (Yamada, 2016) and series like *Yuri!!! On Ice* (Yamamoto, 2016). However, Okada is a rare creator within anime, receiving considerable budgets to create works that are, broadly speaking, by women and for women.

Although Okada's work possesses several thematic similarities with popular male anime directors like Hayao Miyazaki, particularly her use of young female protagonists and fantastical European imagery, these stories are typically categorised solely as belonging to the *shoujo* tradition for young girls rather than as a part of Okada's own original vision as an auteur filmmaker. This reflects an ongoing issue with media targeted towards teenage girls as an audience, in which these creative works are typically disregarded as unfit for critical or academic analysis. Feminist scholar Catherine Strong identifies that "in Western societies, cultural products associated with girls or women, either as the creator or the main audience,

have often been positioned at or near the bottom of the cultural hierarchy" (Strong, 2009: 1), and I argue that the perception of anime is no exception. For instance, Wendy Ide writing for "The Guardian" described the melodrama present in *Maquia* as "overwrought", "sentimentalised", "screechy", and perhaps most revealingly as "neutered" (Ide 2018), suggesting an innate aversion to stories coded as more stereotypically feminine in nature. Therefore, an appraisal of Okada as an auteur is important – not just to further legitimise the study of anime through poetics, but to also reassess the perception of work overtly created with women's stories in mind.

Okada As Auteur

A significant criticism of auteur theory is that it is most often deployed in reference to white Western men who create live action cinema. Discussing this phenomenon in her essay 'Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema', scholar Claire Johnston describes how "some developments of the auteur theory have led to a tendency to deify the personality of the (male) director" (Johnston, 2004: 186). However, she still emphasises the power that this method of analysis holds in challenging "the entrenched view of Hollywood as monolithic" (Johnston, 2004: 186) – a forebearer to my current analysis of filmmakers working in the anime industry. While Johnston is discussing misogyny in the American film industry here, I believe that it applies effectively to the creation of anime being seen as mechanical or monolithic, an idea only worsened by Western racist and orientalist perspectives. Okada herself represents several traits that often hold filmmakers back from the deification of the auteur title; she is a Japanese woman who has worked in television and pornography, and whose work occupies a realm of melodrama intended for a young female audience. Okada is also relatively unique within her own industry even after becoming a prolific screenwriter, saying in an interview that "it's not normal in the animation industry for a writer to become a director" (Brady, 2018); indeed, both Hayao Miyazaki and his fellow Ghibli founder Isao Takahata began their careers as animators. Okada's own public airing of her personal issues and visibly humble beginnings also sets her apart from directors like Miyazaki and Takahata, who are each often referred to in deifying and reverent tones as "the father of anime" (Priddle, 2015).

While Okada's directorial career is still relatively young, as is her possession of a high degree of creative control in her work in general, there are still a few distinct traits that can be marked out in her work, particularly her personal, autobiographical style of storytelling. Okada favours entirely original stories of her own creation, imbuing them with her own experiences,

and in some cases using them to work through her own personal trauma. For example, when writing the mother character in the series *Hanasaku Iroha* (Okada, 2010-2012), she chose to base her on her own abusive mother in an attempt to understand her having reached a similar age to her mother when she was raised (Morrissy, 2018). In choosing to include some of the more traumatic moments of her life in her work, much of it therefore enters a realm of emotional intensity and aesthetic exaggeration typical of that of melodrama. This is assisted by her use of narrative hyperbole and metaphor for dramatic purposes – for instance, *The Anthem of the Heart* centres around a protagonist who, upon witnessing her father having an affair and telling her mother, resulting in the divorce of her parents, finds herself symbolically "cursed" and completely unable to speak out of guilt and fear. Beyond common narrative features, Okada does favour certain aesthetic choices, often describing scenes in great visual detail in her screenplays and using photographic references to capture the desired feeling of a scene when working with designers (Chapman, 2018).

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

Roland Kelts in an interview with Okada, he believes that *Maquia* in particular seems to be "grounded in a woman's experience", with Okada's life and background being central to the unique successes of her work. This is significant from the perspective of feminist theory, specifically that of the "female gaze" defined by Lisa French as "the communication or expression of female subjectivity" (French, 2021: 67). Where male anime directors are able to depict female characters in a respectful manner with a high degree of critical success, it is directors like Okada who bring their own subjectivity and nuanced perspective on womanhood to their work, and who therefore have a greater ability to faithfully depict the condition of being a woman.

Maquia: When the Promised Flower Blooms

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

Okada has utilised a variety of Western aesthetic inspirations throughout her career and has kept these influences consistently as she gained more creative independence in the anime industry. While her directorial career is still young, having only directed *Maquia: When the Promised Flower Blooms* so far, her next project *Alice to Teresu no Maboroshi Kojo* currently has a teaser trailer that alludes to similar Western aesthetics (Beltrano, 2021). *Maquia* is arguably her most Western work visually and in terms of world building, as can be seen in the opening scenes, which establish the Iorph and their world. The Iorph themselves are

characterised by long blonde hair and draped white clothing, reminiscent of elves from influential European fantasy texts such as within J.R.R. Tolkien's "legendarium" (Tolkien, 1977), who are similarly immortal and live in a paradise away from other fantasy races. Additionally, while dragons are a significant part of Japanese folklore, the dragons present in *Maquia* have traits that distinguish them as aesthetically Western European: they are winged and have legs, in contrast with East Asian dragons that are more serpentine in appearance (Zhao, 1992: 38). Although Okada has cited no particular European influence in interviews, she has stated that the fantasy setting exists to serve the melodrama: "if we tried to convey these deep relationships in a real city or our world, it might seem fake because the emotions are so deep" (Chapman, 2018). This reflects Cobus Van Staden's theory of Europe in anime as distant and "beautifully past" (Van Staden, 2009: 24) – although *Maquia* takes place in a more literal world of fantasy, the concept of Europe as a place beyond our world in Japan is still pertinent. This also makes *Maquia*'s status of an anime work, while still valid, somewhat less stable – though aesthetic conventions of anime are utilised within the large eyed characters and dynamic camerawork, her use of European references questions the innate Japaneseness that many attribute to anime, as does her own insistence upon the universality of "strong emotions" (Chapman, 2018).

Arguably, the high fantasy world of Okada's creation is primarily used to encourage a greater suspension of disbelief in the viewer and therefore increase the impact of the more emotional scenes, instead of to construct a fictional society for the purpose of allegory or for other stories to take place there in future media. For example, a close analysis of the scene immediately following the Mezarte nation attack on the Iorph reveals that while the destruction of their land is an interesting spectacle, the focus remains on Maquia's personal response to this traumatic event. After hearing audio of her friends calling on her to join them from an earlier scene, Maquia contemplates jumping from a cliff and ending her life, a moment that undercuts the sense of relief felt from her escape. The stillness of the wilderness backdrop contrasts with the chaos that immediately preceded the scene, and encourages the audience to meditate on the ramifications of the violence, instead of moving onto the next visual set piece. Maquia then moves along to a site full of tents, tripping over a civilian murdered by bandits and wailing in shock before discovering that a baby is in the arms of the corpse. In addition to introducing a theme of sacrificial motherhood, that will later be questioned and subverted, this sequence once again combines the horrific realities of war with the intense emotions of melodrama. This is exemplified by Maquia forcing back the stiffened fingers of the corpse to retrieve the baby, these closeups juxtaposed with an extreme closeups of Maquia's teary eyes

with each break. This editing pattern creates a connection between the tragic physical destruction of a mortal being and Maquia's misery, a grief that is heightened by her near endless lifespan and the vulnerable teenage appearance she has throughout the film in spite of her actual age. This small physical gesture having a greater narrative impact than the widespread destruction of her home also reveals the focus on interpersonal relationships and intimate emotions that the film will prioritise, despite its generic appearance as a fantasy epic. As an early scene in the film, this moment also sets a precedent for the melodrama to follow, implying with its placement in the text that later moments will only become increasingly intense.

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

Okada's previously stated preoccupation with motherhood, partially based on her own past, is explored thoroughly throughout *Maquia*, as are the emotional struggles that arise from the roles women have historically been required to play in society. The character of Ariel presents an interesting interplay between masculinity and femininity – Maquia even names him without knowing that Ariel is a name typically reserved for women, simply viewing it as pretty. His initial closeness to his adopted mother is ultimately hindered by Ariel appearing to be the same age as his mother – one interpretation of this difficulty could be how men are typically

seen as more authoritative than women their own age, and that Maquia's own authority over him is harder to handle in a world that creates these roles. The primary reason for their physical ten-year separation is also his becoming a soldier for the very country who attacked Maquia's homeland, fulfilling a societal expectation of him as a young man while simultaneously severing the connection he previously had with his mother figure. As well as presenting another instance of the grief of motherhood – ultimately losing your child to the rest of the world – Okada also suggests that societally prescribed masculinity as a barrier to meaningful and functional relationships between men and women. By presenting this issue within a *shoujo* style *bildungsroman* narrative, Okada is presenting problems specific to women's experiences to the presumed target audience of young women and girls, and positioning herself as an artist imparting her experiences onto a younger generation. This sense of subjectivity is reinforced by the fact that Maquia is a character who plays a conventionally feminine role, rather than "a girl who happens to take on a role conventionally performed by a boy" (Kelts, 2018). Although depicting this kind of gender nonconformity can certainly be used for feminist ends, the exploration of feminine roles in *Maquia* functions to present the trials inherent to fulfilling these roles, rather than to depict a rejection of them. This interpretation is supported by one of the more significant subplots of the film – Maquia's friend Leila is captured and forced to bear the child of the prince of Mezarte, a struggle specific to her womanhood that runs parallel to Maquia's own. Though subjectivity and autobiographical inspiration is by no means unique to Okada as a director, the specificity of her experiences as a Japanese woman are relatively unique within the world of anime, and particularly of animation globally. While it is unfair to characterise Okada as an auteur purely for these labels, they no doubt have a broader impact on the presumptions surrounding what it means to be an auteur filmmaker.

To elaborate somewhat on the subject of *shoujo*, Maquia herself can be theorised as a *majokko*, or Witch Girl, a popular character centred subgenre in *shoujo* anime. Kumiko Saito defines this genre as series or films in which "the female protagonist's superhuman power derives from her pedigree as a princess of a magical kingdom or a similar scenario", and "she wields her power to save people from a threat while maintaining her secret identity" (Saito, 2014: 145). However, Okada seems to be mobilising these tropes in order to subvert them, perhaps suggesting the realities of being a young woman are more complex than the "cute power" of this genre may usually suggest, particularly at the conclusion, in which Maquia returns to her homeland with no more son to care for. Rather than encouraging "girls to envision marriage and domestic life as a desirable goal once they have passed the adolescent stage" (Saito, 2014: 146) as *majokko* works often do, Okada presents an alternative, implying that

while motherhood has deeply affected Maquia, it is by no means the end of her story, with her eternal adolescence suggesting that this open approach to the world never has to end. Additionally, Maquia as a character is never presented in a sexual light; she is covered up, wears simple clothing, and while beautiful, is unique for her determination in living in a foreign land. This contrasts with *majokko* protagonists, such as Cutey Honey, whose "eroticism" serves to visually undermine her other abilities (Saito, 2014). Though one cannot say with certainty that Okada's female directorial gaze is the reason for this alternative take on the *shoujo* tradition, the lack of any sexual objectification of her female characters can be seen to directly correlate with the director's own insertion of female subjectivity.

Expression and Resolution

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

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Notes

[1] This is demonstrated, for example, in the by-election scene in the sixth episode of the first season. As a member of the liberal party announces the results of the election, a group of angry and obviously drunk and (judging from their costume) working class men enter the scene and turn the crowd into an angry mob.

[2] The principal economists and philosophers that advocated for the working class and new liberalist policies during the late Victorian Era and whose works grew extremely popular amongst members of the lower classes during that time and "became the professed basis of belief of a section of the working class-movement notably of the Social Democratic Federation and later of the Communist Party" (Gregg 1973, 544).

[3] Designed by the Victorian architect Charles Barry in the early 1840s.
[4] While Baena and Byker are possibly right when arguing that some later screen adaptions of such classical novels part of a mounting nostalgia industry (2015, 260), the images disseminated by the original texts had been of a different kind.
[5] Most tellingly, the apparition of Leonard Anquetil, a middle-class polar explorer, incentivises the novel's aristocratic protagonist to question the worth and destiny of his class.
[6] The term remains ambiguous but is now most commonly used to describe country houses that are at least partly or occasionally open to the public as crystallises, e.g., from Mandler's book.
[7] A German-British art-historian, best known for his 46-volume series *The Buildings of England (1951-74).*
[8] The novel is set in 1935.
[9] A disorder of pregnancy.
[10] As an example, Carlisle, to whom Mary becomes engaged after Matthew has been wounded in the war, is snobbish, unromantic, and (as opposed to the old upper-class) overall more interested in money than people. Thus, Mary eventually cancelling the wedding can be read, again, as a symbol of repulsion against a 'new world', which seems to be dictated by ruthless capitalism rather than virtuousness. Once again, the fact that he is played by the somewhat naturally grim-faced Iain Glen – which most viewers might already associate with villainy as he is known best as Dr Alexander Isaacs, the main antagonist of Paul Anderson's *Resident Evil* (2002) – adds to the figuration of Carlisle as the quintessence of the inherent wickedness in the run-up to the modern world.
[11] For he is wounded during the war and (at least initially) faces a permanent paralysis of his lower body due to a potential spine-damage.
[12] As opposed to intrigues and hypocrisy, which are some of the major traits of Thomas.
[13] Mr Molesley, the butler who becomes a teacher at the village school, and Alfred, leaving his position as footman to take his chances as a cook in London, are further examples of this.
[14] Except for World War I, which is, however, referenced only peripherally (Aaker 2018, 13).
[15] Which presents itself, however, not completely sealed off from historical progress.

[16] The Druze as Kirrish explains (1986, p.70): "are a religious/ethnic minority group who inhabit four Middle Eastern states: Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel. Their historical origins lie within the broad framework of Islam and particularly in the Isma'ili sectarian movement"
[17] Chahal passed away in 2008 in Paris after a long battle with cancer (Millet 2017).
[18] "Lebanon has 15 separate personal status laws for its 18 recognised religions, which stipulate different ages from which a marriage can occur, but there is no civil code covering issues such as marriage" (Hutchinson 2020). Table 1 in Hutchinson (2020, p.12) reveals Lebanon's "marriageable age by confession and sex" which could be accessed through the following link:
https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/5.%20Mapping%20responses%20to%20Child%20Marriage%20in%20Lebanon_EN.pdf
[19] A film called *The Syrian Bride* (2004) by Israeli filmmaker Eran Riklis was released one year after *The Kite* (2003) and presents a similar narrative to the latter where a Syrian girl aged 15 years must cross the disputed border, from the Israeli occupied Golan Heights into Syria to be wedded to her distant cousin in a similar arranged marriage procedure (Brister 2014).