

Jane Hanley
Macquarie University

Rinko Kikuchi in Space: Transnational Mexican Directors' Global Gaze

Abstract:

Alejandro González Iñárritu and Guillermo del Toro are contemporaries and compatriots who have charted different paths in their careers as makers of major international releases. Between Babel's realist network narrative and the science fiction spectacle of Pacific Rim, the actor Rinko Kikuchi offers one connecting thread which can provide us insight into different transnational visions of the global. Pacific Rim establishes the typical global stakes now a cliché in expensive blockbusters, which increasingly depend on international markets for profitability and cannot incorporate too much locally specific experience incomprehensible to non-U.S. audiences, however del Toro's particular vision suggests a more complex reading of subjectivity in transnational space than the humanity vs. aliens plot may initially suggest. In this context, the figure of Kikuchi's Mako Mori is arguably the central character in terms of the narrative despite the film apparently being framed around Charlie Hunnam's Raleigh Becket. On the other hand, Kikuchi's performance as Chieko Wataya in González Iñárritu's Babel is at the centre of one story in the geographically dispersed but intersecting meditation on the relationship between the locally specific and global systems, with the Tokyo setting emphasising the alienation experienced by the character. Ultimately, Babel reproduces a sense of isolation whereas del Toro's global aesthetic and speculative world-building underpin transgressive intersubjective, intercultural, human-machine and human-monster communions.

Key words: del Toro; Iñárritu; borders; alienation; liminality; science fiction film.

Introduction: Transnational Themes in Transnational Productions

Films which encompass transnational issues and endeavour to engage global audiences must necessarily situate themselves differently from films which cleave closely to a specific culture or subculture, co-located with the film's projected audience. One aspect of this is the approach transnational films take to their central characters. How can their relationship to their environment be understood by different audiences, and how does this spectrum of legibility mesh with the thematic preoccupations of the film? Films provide one medium for exploring the way globalised experiences and connections produce contemporary subjectivities. This idea frames the interpretation of the characters played by Japanese actor Rinko Kikuchi in two quite different but related transnational films: Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Babel* (2006) and Guillermo del Toro's *Pacific Rim* (2013). Del Toro and 2015 Academy Award winner Iñárritu are two of the so-called 'Three Amigos', along with 2014 Academy Award winner Alfonso Cuarón.¹ (The awards are worth mentioning for the way popular reception and generic conventions frame characters for the audience.) The three directors are at the centre of a recent perceived boom in Latin American cinema, a construct related to select Spanish-language works finding an international audience. All three have also made successful well-financed English-language films, though quite distinct in terms of material and reception.

While the directors are important in each other's careers and share the same cultural moment, speaking of their work as Mexican is to apply an artificial categorisation related to an outdated concept of nationally-based film production. Their cinematic works are quite distinctive, as Peter Hutchings has pointed out.² Their shared context is of interest however for the ways in which their professional trajectories are informed by both their origin and aesthetics, and how these inflect their portrayal of the global. All three have been acclaimed, but Cuarón and Iñárritu have been lauded for a higher degree of perceived seriousness. In comparison, Del Toro's most lauded cinematic achievements are positioned in opposition to his supposedly more commercial works that explicitly belong to the genres of horror and science fiction, especially when these works are in English. Hutchings remarks on this fetishizing of non-English language films, noting that in del Toro's Spanish Civil War films the specificity of Spanish history and memory anchors the content in a national cinema,

¹ Cuarón, Iñárritu and del Toro are the surnames commonly employed to refer to these directors in the English-speaking world, and will be used throughout.

² Peter Hutchings, "Adapt or Die: Mimicry and Evolution in Guillermo del Toro's English-Language Films", in *The Transnational Fantasies of Guillermo del Toro* ed. A. Davies, D. Shaw and D. Tierney (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p.84.

making palatable categorisation easier.³ Of course, this Spanishness is complicated, since both *The Devil's Backbone* and *Pan's Labyrinth* engage more with displacement than with belonging.⁴ The former in particular is informed by Mexico's own reception of Spanish Civil War exiles, and was originally conceived as a Mexican Revolution narrative. Neither film tells a story bounded by a particular national moment; both break barriers between the real and unreal and between memory and imagination.⁵ Audiences—especially international audiences with less awareness of the particular transnational features of both the Spanish Civil War itself and the ways it is represented in these films—can more easily fit the films into the Spanish national mould. In contrast, del Toro's English-language films with their more recognisable genre elements supposedly 'lack significant ex-generic referents to endow them with "cultural heft"'.⁶ Geek culture may rule the twenty-first century box office, but it convinces critics and juries only rarely. Yet both films fit into del Toro's career trajectory in its fundamental unpredictability of genre and aesthetic. Del Toro is 'the imperfect mimic, the perpetual outsider who imitates more or less successfully but who is also an awkward, troubling presence who moves back and forth across national borders and cultural distinctions without becoming assimilated'.⁷ Davies similarly identifies all del Toro's films as 'gleefully impure'.⁸ A breadth of influences mingle together, horror merges with art, refusing genre classification. *Pacific Rim's* action science fiction grew out of cult monster movies, but the narrative structure, according to del Toro himself, is essentially of a sports film.⁹

Babel and Pacific Rim

Both *Babel* and *Pacific Rim* have a transnational crew and cast, notably in their significant focus on characters played by Japanese actor Rinko Kikuchi. This is not coincidental, since Kikuchi asked Iñárritu to put her in contact with del Toro to arrange an audition after hearing that del Toro was seeking a Japanese actor for a project.¹⁰ Nor is she the

³ Peter Hutchings, p.85.

⁴ *The Devil's Backbone* (2001, Guillermo del Toro); *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006, Guillermo del Toro).

⁵ Jane Hanley, "The Walls Fall Down", *Studies in Spanish and Latin American Cinemas* [*Studies in Hispanic Cinemas*] 4:1 (2007), pp.35-45.

⁶ Peter Hutchings, p.86.

⁷ Peter Hutchings, p.96.

⁸ Laurence Davies, "Guillermo del Toro's *Cronos*, or the Pleasures of Impurity" in *Gothic Science Fiction 1980-2010* ed. S. Wasson & E. Alder (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), p.88.

⁹ DVD director's commentary.

¹⁰ Sergio López Aguirre, "En entrevista con la protagonista de Pacific Rim, recuerda su filmografía" *Cinepremiere* 9 July 2013, <http://www.cinepremiere.com.mx/30555-rinko-kikuchi-habla-de-titanes-del-pacifico-babel-murakami-y-mas.html> date accessed 17 March 2015.

only cast or crewmember the two films have in common, reflecting the ongoing cross-fertilisation in production conditions between the three Mexican contemporaries, drawing on their long acquaintance. In addition to these transnational material conditions, various features of the stories reflect an encompassing transnational vision of a sometimes confused sort. Many performances in both films require degrees of cross-cultural roleplaying, with *Babel* aiming for but sometimes missing greater verisimilitude, speaking to the challenges and potential compromises involved in putting together a work of this nature. Kikuchi contends with the least of this compared to other major cast members, as she is not performing a national origin different to her own in either film. Nevertheless, her characters in both films do still suppose forms of doubling in their positioning for a global audience both in terms of aesthetic and the pairing of language and culture.

In *Babel* Kikuchi plays Chieko Wataya, an adolescent girl with deafness. Her performance therefore is sub-national but still cross-cultural in her portrayal of a teenager in the Japanese deaf community. Chieko is the main character in one of the four interlocking stories of the network narrative. The film switches between Morocco, Japan, the U.S. and Mexico via the plot device of the accidental shooting of a U.S. tourist (played by Australian Cate Blanchett). Chieko's story is the most narratively disconnected from the other three, which all pivot around the family of the U.S. couple at the core of the film whose story is the only one that reaches traditional resolution. The Japan sequences are designed to serve the film's central themes of miscommunication and the capacity or incapacity to overcome differences via empathy. These resonances, as encoded via Chieko's grief after her mother's death, her general feeling of alienation, and her use of minority language (Japanese Sign Language), are only connected to the rest of the plot itself through the contrivance of her father having left in Morocco the gun involved in the shooting.

Pacific Rim is a typically explosive CGI-heavy action/sci-fi blockbuster featuring pilots of giant robot-suits (jaegers) defending Earth from invading monsters (kaiju). It was explicitly conceived and designed in tribute to mecha (the robot-suits) and *tokusatsu/kaiju* or monster-based Japanese cultural products. The film's aesthetic deliberately references the effect created by such films' live action performances in monster suits, despite relying heavily on current technology to generate the action.¹¹ This aesthetic and narrative DNA is obviously significant for the film's engagement with Japanese culture and the portrayal of Rinko Kikuchi's character Mako Mori, the only Japanese character with a substantial presence in the film. Mako is a pilot candidate for the jaegers, raised by military marshal Stacker Pentecost after losing her parents in a kaiju attack on Tokyo. The trauma occasioned by this event is the principle obstacle to Mako realizing her heroic role as a pilot via the 'drift', the film's conceit of two or

¹¹ Norma Jones, "Review of *Pacific Rim*", *Film & History* 44:1 (2014), p.45.

more pilots uniting telepathically via their memories in order to jointly control their jaegers. Both the presence of a significant female protagonist in an action-focused narrative and the exploration of linking or fusing with other people and with technology are common features in certain genres of manga and anime.¹²

Along with creating robot and monster designs that principally refer to existing popular texts, the places in which the narrative unfolds are similarly imaginary and play more on science fiction cityscapes than real contemporary cities. The shatterdome from which the Jaeger launch, the cinematic future city version of Hong Kong, and the Tokyo of Mako's memories (informed by the Tokyo of the director's memories of past kaiju-film urban destruction) are intertextual inventions. Future cinematic Hong Kong, in particular, where most of the action unfolds, is a purely imaginary space, the defining referents being other urban images from popular culture, even though in some instances they might imposed over real-life Hong Kong terrain. Humans do not traverse *Pacific Rim* Hong Kong and shape it with their bodies; it has been designed to be broken through and brought down by the destructive enormity of the kaiju. The fragments of the city respond to the future-imaginary of need and desire for both creators and audience. While *Pacific Rim*'s specific referents are from Japanese cultural products that achieved cult status outside Japan, the orientalisng of the future has been normalised in Hollywood cinema since *Blade Runner*¹³, and in some sense is what audiences expect from portrayals of the future. To better understand Chieko Wataya's interaction with and situatedness within the much more realist aesthetic of the Tokyo of *Babel*, it helps to frame this city, in contrast to *Pacific Rim*'s Hong Kong, as a Foucauldian heterotopia.¹⁴ In the particular consideration of transnational cinema with varied audiences, it is useful to follow Raussert's lead in extending Foucault's concept via Massey's exploration of place-as-process wherein places are discursively rather than geographically bound, existing 'within consciousness rather than physical borders'.¹⁵ This facilitates the application of the heterotopia not just to the theatre and the interaction of screen, experience, fictional space and real space, but also to the multiplicity of ways the spaces portrayed in film are experienced by both the characters and the audience.

Babel-Tokyo mirrors Tokyo-as-lived (with the mirror being one of Foucault's examples, alongside the theatrical stage, both with obvious resonances for film). The cinematic reproduction of Tokyo, however, takes it out of specific time and place, and

¹² The most obvious mecha referent that might come to mind for non-Japanese audiences, *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, is, according to del Toro, not a direct influence on the aesthetic of *Pacific Rim* in the way that some earlier mechas are (DVD director's commentary).

¹³ *Blade Runner* (1982, Ridley Scott).

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, "Des espaces autres. Hétérotopies." *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* 5 (1984), pp.46-49. The heterotopia now routinely appears in film analysis.

¹⁵ Wilfred Raussert, "Inter-American Border Discourses, Heterotopia, and Translocal Communities in Courtney Hunt's Film *Frozen River*", *Norteamérica* 6:1 (2011), p.23.

creates an unstable and constantly mutating function underscoring both the radical absence of Tokyo and the absence of the viewer themselves as they are transported into each other. *Babel's* Tokyo has both intertextual referents and real referents, and a shifting significance both diegetically, for the inhabitants portrayed, and non-diegetically, for the film's diverse viewers.

Asia as Global Space

The analysis of Chieko Wataya and Mako Mori draws together different critical threads. The first is the projection of global space in transnational films in relation to the Mexican directors' trajectory. Deborah Shaw has extensively explored the function of the transnational in both the production and the reception of these directors' work, noting that 'culture is rarely, if ever, "pure" and that there is no neat distinction between "Western" and non-Western: transnational movements of people and ideas must be considered'; and that it is false to categorise films as 'Latin American'.¹⁶ If Mexico is having a moment, partially thanks to these three high profile directors, it is only understood as such by defining the cultural spectrum from an Anglo-American centre, since their work both in English and Spanish (or multiple languages, in this case) is understood in the Spanish-speaking world according to different definitions of mainstream film production. Shaw still sees value in contrasting directors and works that share production characteristics, even if only to highlight differences in intent and effect. It would be equally artificial to declare *Pacific Rim* and *Babel* incomparable because of their disparate apparent genres. Indeed, genres have provided as incomplete a set of working categories as national cinemas. It is productive to explore not only the divergences, but also the parallels of different kinds of cinematic space.

The second major critical thread is the analysis of Hollywood images of Asia and Asian people, drawing on Jane Park's concept of oriental style, which reinforces Shaw's assertion of the impossibility of a pure national or ethnic product. Cultural creation and reception are all fissures.¹⁷ Park and Marchetti both describe the emergence of post-modern pastiche as a prevailing aesthetic mode for global blockbusters, in which Asia becomes, in Marchetti's words, 'an imaginary construct of past representations from

¹⁶ Deborah Shaw in Saer Maty Bà and Will Higbee "Moving away from a sense of cultures as pure spaces. An Interview with Deborah Shaw." *De-Westernizing Film Studies* (London/NY: Routledge, 2012), p.236; Deborah Shaw, *Contemporary Cinema of Latin America: Ten Key Films* (London: Continuum, 2003), p.5.

¹⁷ Jane Park, *Yellow Future: Oriental Style in Hollywood Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p.199.

other mass-mediated sources'.¹⁸ Park makes the additional critique that the ironic mode of using racial signifiers detaches race from the history of power and actual inequality, drawing on Nakamura's concept of cosmetic multiculturalism.¹⁹ This charge can be levelled at *Pacific Rim*, but with caveats that become clear through further analysis of the film's multicultural characters.

Some existing critical approaches to the representation of Asia, particularly Marchetti's, start from a standpoint of considering films within the context of consumption by U.S. domestic audiences. The transition Park described in its early stages is now complete: contemporary mega-blockbusters have to make their money back in the international market. This market constraint can either further or limit creativity, and certainly produces interesting effects in terms of the varied legibility of character and space in different markets. This constraint applies even for *Babel* and other films at the art film end of mainstream Hollywood. Despite their more limited financial expectations, spaces in these films must nevertheless be intelligible to an extremely diverse projected audience.

In *Babel*, Iñárritu tries to tell a situated but global story, both accessible and inaccessible at the same time. It explores the limits of communication but allows multiple entry points for different audiences to engage with the narrative. The film pivots around a single temporal point (the shooting) that represents a crisis occasioned by and occasioning violence. The strategy is the same as in the director's breakthrough *Amores perros*.²⁰ However, with connections between the different characters even more dispersed than in the class-variegated Mexican setting of the earlier film, the use of a dramatic pivot point is less effective. As a result of tensions between the thematic ambitions and projected global audience of the film, the images of Chieko and her movement through Tokyo are neither truly local nor disruptively specific. Shaw's discussion of the global gaze agilely critiques *Babel*'s use of a tourist perspective in contrast to the art film signifiers of Carlos Reygadas's *Japón*.²¹ The tourist gaze provides an organizing function. Iñárritu and cinematographer Prieto's production designer Brigitte Broch portrayed Tokyo through a pink-purple palette representing the 'diluted blood of futuristic essence' in contrast to Mexico's primary red for 'straightforward Mexican passion', with the overall aesthetic distinctions between locations geared at enhancing, according to Prieto, 'the experience of feeling like you are in different places

¹⁸ Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p.202.

¹⁹ Jane Park, p.xi.

²⁰ *Amores perros* (2000, Alejandro González Iñárritu).

²¹ Deborah Shaw, "(Trans)national images and cinematic spaces: The cases of Alfonso Cuarón's *Y tu mamá también* (2001) and Carlos Reygadas' *Japón* (2002)", *Iberoamericana* 11:44 (2011), pp.117-131.

geographically and emotionally'.²² Tokyo is the now-cliché site of hyper-modernity (versus Mexico where emotions are supposedly unmediated). It is a prevailing image of that city, with the small benefit of partially disrupting the 'classic Orientalist spectrum of progress' which situated Asia in the past.²³ Shaw suggests that *Babel's* Tokyo responds to the demands of the international art film genre and its intended audience via employment of 'familiar and expected locations and types', in which 'Japan is hyper-modern, featuring the latest mobile phones, cool clubs, trendy cafés, and impressive neon-bright cityscapes'.²⁴ Early in the Japan sequences the film presents now-stereotypical elements of urban Japanese adolescence, such as pop music videos and arcade games.

Rinko Kikuchi's Globalised Body

Chieko herself, and her frustrated desire for a human connection and a way to physically express her grief and guilt, partly embodies the alienation associated with technologized modernity and the failure of technology to replace human contact. She uses technological aids for the deaf to assist in interacting with her environment and communicating with people. However, here these aids do not symbolise the Asian future's technological erosion of the human, but the character's intimate reality, an important difference. In critiquing *Babel's* reinforcement of global images of Japan, Chieko's specific experience notably disrupts some established readings of spaces, because they are intermittently silenced as the film shifts into her sensory point-of-view. Hearing members of the audience are required to make a cognitive leap to understand the difference in Chieko's experiences of space. She perceives only part of what the hearing viewers do. In that partial perception, non-Japanese hearing viewers may also approximate something of the partiality of their own comprehension and the spatial experiences that are opaque to those outside the deaf community.

It is also interesting to consider, following Isabel Santaolalla's analysis of the figure of the mute woman in cinema, the connections between Chieko's relationship to language, her physicality and her sexuality.²⁵ Then 25 year old Kikuchi plays a teen girl who seeks power or reconnection through sex. *Babel* reproduces, among other tropes,

²²Rodrigo Prieto in Jeff Sneider, Rodrigo Prieto, 'Babel'. *Variety* 3 January 2007, <http://variety.com/2007/film/awards/rodrigo-prieto-babel-1117956612/>, date accessed 15 September 2015.

²³Jane Park, p.5.

²⁴Deborah Shaw, "Babel and the Global Hollywood Gaze", *Situations* 4:1 (2011), p.21.

²⁵Isabel Santaolalla "Bodyscapes of silence: The figure of the mute woman in the cinema" *Journal of Gender Studies* 7:1 (1998), pp.53-61.

a sexualised schoolgirl as the natural vessel for situating ‘urban Japanese teenage angst’.²⁶ However, Chieko’s sexual agency is presented without any kind of erotic charge geared at viewers. It emerges from her feelings, initially mysterious to the viewer and only gradually revealed as her sexual gambits intermingle with other seemingly aberrant behaviours to present a panorama of performances of confusion, guilt and pain. Analyses suggesting Chieko’s character functions as a sexually available version of the classic Orientalised woman who cannot reply and is presented purely for scopophilic consumption are unconvincing. Her relationship to both language and sex is more complex. Santaolalla has outlined the close association in certain films of the normalisation (the achievement of communication, especially speech) of the mute woman with social and sexual control—even, often, sexual violence and rape.²⁷ At the same time, Santaolalla is careful to underline the complexity of the interrelationship between body and silence/language, allowing that both, together or apart, may offer sites of resistance and challenge. In a key moment in *Babel* after a flirtation is derailed by the boy’s realisation of her deafness, Chieko signs that the hearing ‘look at us like we’re monsters’, and describes her vulva as the ‘hairy monster’. Sex is an attempt to reframe her own position in the eyes of others, to challenge their assumptions, and transform her experience of her own monstrousness (her guilt over her mother’s death) into something active.

The complexity of the body-language relationship also links to the tongue’s role as the instrument of speech. Chieko does not have audible speech, but uses her hands, the instrument of touch. Her tongue, meanwhile, becomes an instrument of touch in ways that unsettle the expected pathways of communication: she licks her dentist, and later she sucks on the policeman Mamiya’s finger. The written word, which provides an alternative channel for language, is only semi-legible to viewers. It is ultimately completely obscured when her final note to Mamiya, tucked into his hand, is concealed from the audience, contents unknowable. Chieko’s physical, emotional, and auditory isolation is the ultimate form of sovereignty, but she is desperate to breach it, to connect, to be human.²⁸ Entanglement and messiness are pathways to community. However, ultimately Chieko does not achieve this horizontal community, and certainly not on the terms by which she sought it.

The positioning of women’s bodies as sites for performing power goes beyond the narrative to extradiegetic features. The *Babel* team explicitly marked futuristic Tokyo with a pink-purple palette and gave the actor purple streaks in her hair to match the

²⁶ Paul Kerr, “*Babel*’s network narrative: packaging a globalized art cinema”, *Transnational Cinemas* 1:1 (2011), p.47.

²⁷ Santaolalla, pp.57-58.

²⁸ Elizabeth Anker, “In the Shadowlands of Sovereignty: The Politics of Enclosure in Alejandro González Iñárritu’s *Babel*”, *University of Toronto Quarterly: A Canadian Journal of the Humanities* 82:4 (2013), pp.950-73.

colour design. Del Toro similarly marked Mako through blue and also gave Kikuchi blue streaks in her hair.²⁹ However, in *Pacific Rim*, the blue is Mako's own grief and trauma, the ongoing influence of her memory of loss, whereas in *Babel* the purple is remote from Chieko's individual trauma and merges the character with the city. If Chieko's image stands in for the future metropolis, it is vital to consider Chieko's physical relationship to inside and outside spaces. Bringing together the disruptive opacity of her silent experience of space and her positioning in tension with the stereotypical sexualized Japanese schoolgirl are her public and semi-public nudity and partial nudity, for example, as well the intersection between the audio and the visual, and Kikuchi's performance oscillating between disruptive monstrosity and other forms that suggest the cultural encoding of speech and body.

Shaw has also noted that to be effective a text must recognise its own limitations and the impossibility of universalism.³⁰ *Babel* relies on emotion for audience empathy rather than interrogating the function of class in a global system in determining the range of possibilities for its characters and its viewers. Empathy for supposedly universal human emotions leaves the audience mournful, perhaps, but also helpless. This emotional universalism tends to undermine the estrangement provoked by the moments in which the character's experience remains resolutely illegible to an "outsider" (hearing and non-Japanese in the case of Chieko) viewer. Death, grief, and familial love are legible, but they are not human experiences that provoke action out of solidarity. If Chieko finds some solace or connection at all, it is through the closeness of death in the film's flirtation with suicide and, perhaps, the reestablishment of a family unit—order—in her father's embrace.

Mako, in contrast, has a conventional hero narrative, as can be seen in her triumph over trauma and realization of vengeance for past losses. The film is at least equally Mako's, and del Toro describes her story—and her childhood memory—as the film's heart (*Pacific Rim* director's commentary). The male protagonist Raleigh and his brother Yancy are the initial heroes. Raleigh is framed as an impetuous youth who audiences expect will be tempered through undergoing some drastic trial, based on conventional Hollywood narrative. Hunnam is a large white man to put on posters and do English voiceover during battles. While the story of the U.S. couple (Blanchett and Brad Pitt) clearly propels *Babel*, despite the prologue of *Pacific Rim* showing the backstory of Raleigh rather than Mako it is her story that anchors the film. After Yancy's death and Raleigh's departure from the program, we discover that the Becket's jaeger (Gypsy Danger) was drastically altered by Mako, who is also shown to have technical skills and jaeger-combat abilities surpassing those of any other pilot candidate. Mako adds to Gypsy Danger a massive sword, allowing her to enact a samurai's revenge for the loss

²⁹ DVD director's commentary.

³⁰ Shaw "Babel", p.26.

of her family and community as she thrusts it through the body of a kaiju in the climactic battle. In another move with shades of *Babel*—unexpected in a film positioned in the action blockbuster marketplace—Mako speaks mostly Japanese. Her farewell to Pentecost—*sensei, aishitemasu*—is untranslated.³¹ The full significance of a moment easily milked for sentiment is restricted to a knowing audience.³²

In contrast to *Babel*, in which a known figure—the Japanese schoolgirl—is both used to make Japan swiftly legible to global audiences and disrupted by Chieko’s relation to sexuality and to language, the character of Mako draws on types perhaps less familiar outside Japan. Del Toro said of Mako that ‘She’s not going to be a sex kitten, she’s not going to come out in cut-off shorts and a tank top, and it’s going to be a real earnestly drawn character’.³³ To the extent that the Mako-Raleigh relationship has any erotic component, it is in her gaze on his body. In contrast to the nudity Chieko uses as part of her arsenal of challenging behaviours, Mako Mori is very clothed throughout. ‘As a means to, even the substance of, a commutable persona, clothing as performance threatens to undercut the ideological fixity of the human subject’.³⁴ This performative element of the subject, however, is also read differently by different audiences. Chieko’s nudity and Mako’s clothing/armour link to the audience’s reading of their characters as Japanese, or more generically as Asian women.³⁵ Inside Japan, both characters correspond to or subvert particular aesthetic traditions (principally from manga), whereas outside Japan this intertextual reading may be less obvious. Images of Asian women outside Asia are less nuanced; they do not draw on the full spectrum of female figures from all areas of cultural production as is naturally the case inside Asia. Instead, racial and gendered characteristics are often linked together in reductive essentialism. Shingler has outlined the way this expectation requires Asian stars to vacillate between stereotypical and universal subjectivity.³⁶ In terms of Asian women performing

³¹ Jones p.46.

³² Rinko Kikuchi does not herself consider being Japanese an essential part of her role in the film, citing instead the universalism of stories (in Todd Gilchrist, “Comic-Con 2012: *Pacific Rim*’s Rinko Kikuchi Says She Was Jealous of Co-Star Charlie Day”, 19 July 2012, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/comic-con-2012-pacific-rim-rinko-kikuchi-charlie-day351981>, date accessed 28 September 2015). The signs of nationality in the intercultural space of *Pacific Rim* are empty; it is interpersonal fusion that is important.

³³ DVD director’s commentary.

³⁴ Annette Kuhn, *The Power of the Image: Essays on Representation and Sexuality*. London: Routledge, 1985) p.54.

³⁵ The omnipresence of the schoolgirl needs little elaboration. For an exploration of female warrior types in manga and anime see Tamaki, Saitō, *Beautiful Fighting Girl* transl. by J. Keith Vincent & Dawn Lawson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011). These types are discussed mainly with reference to girls rather than women, but Tamaki’s analysis is still informative for understanding the aesthetic and narrative for the character of Mako Mori and the complexity of presenting her in a non-sexual way.

³⁶ Martin Shingler, *Star Studies: A Critical Guide* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p.179.

opposite white men, Marchetti described the way 'interracial sexuality' and the use (and generally domination) of Asian women to confirm the heterosexuality of the hero had become a part of the 'stylistic mélange' of contemporary Hollywood filmmaking.³⁷ Charlie Hunnam is an imposing physical presence in the film; however, his character's relationship with Kikuchi's does not unfold along these lines. He is intermittently shirtless and Mako—and the audience—look at him, but despite the film's projection of a jocular macho environment among male jaeger pilots and support staff involving the casual objectification of women, Mako herself is not sexually objectified either by the camera or by any character, including Raleigh, within the film. This environment contributes rather to the locker room effect of the male-dominated sports world, with Mako seamlessly assuming the role of untested but talented rookie.

The two characters, rather than potential lovers, are mirrors, with matching and converging narratives. In the choreography and the mise-en-scène Raleigh and Mako, when appearing together, are framed as physical counterparts, in balance with each other. At their first meeting, Mako awaits him on an airstrip at the Shatterdome, and the two look at each other, each holding a black umbrella. (Umbrellas are prominent visual and narrative elements in manga and anime, although the constant rain also triggers comparison to *Blade Runner*). This initial encounter is bookended by the final shot of the two together in the film, their heads inclined towards each other, foreheads touching, and bodies in compositional symmetry as they kneel atop a life raft at sea. Between these two framing images there are many other instances of the two characters physically mirroring each other as they converge.

Among the most significant of these are the hand-to-hand fight choreography, supposed to indicate their elite combat capabilities but also, more importantly, their combat compatibility, and the subsequent sequences of them piloting Gypsy Danger side by side, clamped into synchronised interfaces. There is a dual doubling at work, with each other and with the machine, taking to a new level science fiction's fascination with the limits of the human and the appeal of the non-human, especially where the non-human serves as the human's double.³⁸ While the first and last shots of the two together suggest their joined character arcs, the choreographed mirrored sequences support *Pacific Rim*'s central concept of the drift, the memory-based telepathy allowing two (or more) compatible pilots to jointly control their jaeger.

³⁷ Gina Marchetti, p.203.

³⁸ Telotte suggested that the spectatorial fascination of the double in science fiction is a narcissistic impulse that may suppose the dissolution of the desire for the other. J.P. Telotte "The Doubles of Fantasy and the Space of Desire" in *Alien Zone* ed. Annette Kuhn (New York: Verso, 1990). In *Pacific Rim*, however, doubles—Raleigh/Mako, Raleigh/ his brother, other drift-compatible pilots, scientist/alien, the two scientists, and of course pilot/jaeger—are unstable and multiply, suggesting the fluidity and possibility of transcending the limits of the individual self.

Isolation *versus* Fusion in the Global Gaze

The experience of the drift serves as a motif of communion in terms of contrast to the individual isolation and alienation of *Babel*, an important point of contrast for the two films' presentation of globalised subjects. The fusion of characters in *Pacific Rim*, the ways in which they are relational and intermingled even in how they experience their memories of their own past selves, is a more challenging concept of subjectivity than that put forth in *Babel*, which ultimately reinforces the integrity of the individual self and the obstacles in the way of transcending our isolation. This difference is not that surprising considering their different genres, with *Babel* in the realist art-film vein taking emotion—emanating from the self and building on the specificity of individual experience—as its centre, whereas *Pacific Rim*, in the way of science fiction, engages with the limits of the human.³⁹ Both films use central characters—notably Kikuchi's Mako and Chieko—to show aspects of the human response to trauma and our capacity to understand the emotional components of our reaction to external threats on a global scale.

In the context of thinking about the interconnection of threat and trauma, it is relevant to analyse the two films' treatment of the security apparatus that is supposed to reinforce our sense of integrity against an external force. The connections between borders and enclosure and the relationship between security and exclusion in *Babel* are obvious, but there are several ways in which *Pacific Rim*'s engagement with these concepts is more disruptive. *Babel* shows the profound incapacity to communicate or transcend barriers. Its representation of unequal power and its relationship to global networks has already received a great deal of critical attention, which its explicit engagement with the consequences of globalisation positively invites.⁴⁰ *Pacific Rim*, in contrast, has one very obvious critique of the politically-motivated folly of building a wall that cannot hold, and the central plot of coming together to face a common enemy is a simplistic cliché. To consider this cliché in the context of the critical question of global visions in contemporary transnational film, the coming together of diverse characters may represent 'the apotheosis of the transnational qualities so often

³⁹ *A priori* definitions of the genre are problematic, but Kuhn notes that effective science fiction films have often prompted critics to zero in on the way speculative fictions can interrogate the prevailing preoccupations of their moment. Annette Kuhn "Alien", p10.

⁴⁰ For example, Dolores Tierney, "Alejandro González Iñárritu: director without borders. *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 7:2 (2009) pp.101-117; Victor Carreno, "Travels and Borders in the Representation of the U.S.-Mexico Border: Cartographies in Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Babel*", *International Journal of the Arts in Society* 4:4 (2011), pp.265-274; Richard Locke, "Globalization and its Discontents", *The American Scholar* 76:2 (2007), pp.114-117, among others.

associated with del Toro, with the giant robots dependent on the support of a racially and ethnically mixed group of human beings who can interact very effectively across national differences'.⁴¹ In practice, however, beyond these clear representations of two different immediate responses to outside threats, the ways that both bodily and cultural boundaries are represented in *Pacific Rim* is more interesting.

Park relates Morley and Robins' 'techno-orientalism' and Hollywood's use of Tokyo as the 'quintessential postmodern metropolis' in which Japanese people are machine-like, suggesting that the self-hatred of modernity is displaced onto Asia.⁴² Fear of modernity as symbolised by alienation in techno-mediated Tokyo is perhaps evident in *Babel*. In *Pacific Rim*, however, the prevailing mode is technophilia. Walls are not the solution. Fusing with technology is the solution. Even fusing with and loving the enemy is the solution. Boundaries, which are comforting illusions, must be transgressed. This transgressive tendency is one of the benefits of the genre. 'Borders and markers in the science fiction film are seen as extendable—and their contents as spilling over into each other, possibly merging'.⁴³ From the film's beginning, we see that the jaeger is as much a fantasy protection as the giant coastal wall, for Yancy Beckett is ripped out of Gypsy Danger's skull—and ripped out of Raleigh's mind—with ease. It is clear from that moment that jaeger fighting kaiju, though the film's primary spectacle, cannot offer a solution. Only fascination as a starting point for becoming/assuming the cloak of the kaiju can liberate humanity from its coming destruction. The jaeger alone is imperfect, incomplete and penetrable. Similarly, the human characters are imperfect, incomplete and penetrable. Mako herself loathes the kaiju. But as del Toro explains, the characters in *Pacific Rim* are limited types that are really all one character. The characters move through different positions in a series of dyads of love/hatred, fascination/fear, technophilia/xenophilia, reason/instinct, obedience/rebellion, and arrogance/self-sacrifice. These, however, must somehow be fused or collapsed together for humanity to overcome its obstacles.

This is not to overstate the case the film makes for fusion as a mechanism for overcoming the alienation of contemporary human subjectivity, as *Pacific Rim* remains a story essentially about violently expelling aliens. In *Babel*, crossing boundaries and understanding the other, while nearly impossible and accomplished only *in extremis*, allow empathy and communion. While the narrative spans the globe, however, the focus on the intimacy of individual experience as a source of empathy means an answer for the disconnection and miscommunication between people remains elusive. In *Pacific Rim*, empathy, communion and understanding the other facilitate destruction and exclusion; at least when the other is the monstrous alien. By focusing on the continuities

⁴¹ Peter Hutchings, pp.95-96.

⁴² Jane Park, pp.7-8.

⁴³ Vivian Sobchack, "The virginity of astronauts" in *Alien Zone* ed. Annette Kuhn (New York: Verso, 1990), p.113.

in del Toro's work, his 'focus on liminal characters caught between worlds', this destruction and exclusion is undermined.⁴⁴ If *Pacific Rim* has indeed been successful enough to trigger a *Pacific Rim 2*, it would be unsurprising to see greater complexity brought to this conclusion—the kaiju were pushed back and cut off, not annihilated, after all. A triumphalist representation of the sacrifice of the jaeger and their pilots for the greater good of a united humanity, given the venality and pettiness of the wider world hinted at in the film, is unlikely to remain the prevailing vision. In del Toro's worlds, barriers, whether between races, genders, species, past and present, or reality and fantasy, are rarely allowed to stand.

References

Anker Elizabeth, "In the Shadowlands of Sovereignty: The Politics of Enclosure in Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Babel*", *University of Toronto Quarterly: A Canadian Journal of the Humanities* 82:4 (2013).

Bâ Saer Maty, Higbee Will, "Moving away from a sense of cultures as pure spaces. An Interview with Deborah Shaw", in *De-Westernizing Film Studies*, ed. Saer Maty Bâ and Will Higbee (London/NY: Routledge) (2012).

Carreno Victor "Travels and Borders in the Representation of the U.S.-Mexico Border: Cartographies in Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Babel*", *International Journal of the Arts in Society* 4:4 (2009).

Davies Laurence, "Guillermo del Toro's *Cronos*, or the Pleasures of Impurity", in *Gothic Science Fiction 1980-2010*. ed. S. Wasson and E Alder (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press) (2011).

Foucault Michel, "Des espaces autres. Hétérotopies", *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* 5 (1984).

Gilchrist Todd. "Comic-Con 2012: *Pacific Rim*'s Rinko Kikuchi Says She Was Jealous of Co-Star Charlie Day", 19 July 2012 <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/comic-con-2012-pacific-rim-rinko-kikuchi-charlie-day351981>, date accessed 28 September 2015.

Hanley Jane, "The Walls Fall Down", *Studies in Spanish and Latin American Cinemas* [*Studies in Hispanic Cinemas*] 4:1 (2007).

⁴⁴ Peter Hutchings, p.93.

- Hutchings Peter, "Adapt or Die: Mimicry and Evolution in Guillermo del Toro's English-Language Films", in *The Transnational Fantasies of Guillermo del Toro* ed. A. Davies, D. Shaw and D. Tierney (London: Palgrave Macmillan) (2014).
- Jones Norma, "Review of *Pacific Rim*", *Film & History* 44:1 (2014).
- Kerr Paul, "Babel's network narrative: packaging a globalized art cinema" *Transnational Cinemas* 1:1 (2010).
- Kuhn Annette, *Alien Zone* (New York: Verso) (1990).
- Kuhn Annette, *The Power of the Image: Essays on Representation and Sexuality*, (London: Routledge) (1985).
- Locke Richard, "Globalization and its Discontents", *The American Scholar* 76:2 (2007).
- Lopez Aguirre Sergio, "En entrevista con la protagonista de Pacific Rim, recuerda su filmografía" *Cinepremiere* 9 July 2013, <http://www.cinepremiere.com.mx/30555-rinko-kikuchi-habla-de-titanes-del-pacifico-babel-murakami-y-mas.html> date accessed 17 March 2015.
- Marchetti Gina, *Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction*, (Berkeley: University of California Press) (1993).
- Park Jane, *Yellow Future: Oriental Style in Hollywood Cinema*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press) (2010).
- Raussert Wilfred, "Inter-American Border Discourses, Heterotopia, and Translocal Communities in Courtney Hunt's Film *Frozen River*", *Norteamérica* 6:1 (2011).
- Santaolalla Isabel, "Bodyscapes of silence: The figure of the mute woman in the cinema", *Journal of Gender Studies* 7:1 (1998).
- Shaw Deborah, *Contemporary Cinema of Latin America: Ten Key Films*, (London: Continuum) (2003).
- Shaw Deborah, "Babel and the Global Hollywood Gaze", *Situations* 4:1 (2011).
- Shaw Deborah, "(Trans)national images and cinematic spaces: The cases of Alfonso Cuarón's *Y tu mamá también* (2001) and Carlos Reygadas' *Japón* (2002)", *Iberoamericana* 11:44 (2011).
- Shaw Deborah, *The Three Amigos: The Transnational Filmmaking of Guillermo del Toro, Alejandro González Iñárritu, and Alfonso Cuarón*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press) (2013).
- Shingler Martin, *Star Studies: A Critical Guide*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan) (2012).
- Sneider Jeff "Rodrigo Prieto, 'Babel'", *Variety* 3 January 2007, <http://variety.com/2007/film/awards/rodrigo-prieto-babel-1117956612/>, date accessed 15 September 2015.

Sobchack Vivian. 1990. The virginity of astronauts. In A. Kuhn (ed.) *Alien Zone*. New York: Verso.

Tamaki Saitō, *Beautiful Fighting Girl* transl. J. Keith Vincent and Dawn Lawson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press) (2011).

Telotte J.P. "The Doubles of Fantasy and the Space of Desire" *Alien Zone* ed. Annette Kuhn (New York: Verso) (1990).

Tierney Dolores, "Alejandro González Iñárritu: director without borders", *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 7:2 (2009).