

“Constructing an authentic cultural representation beyond the text: Learning about Japanese culture through watching the author waving his samurai sword.”

There is a significant body of children’s and young adult fictions which base their construction of the fictional worlds and characterisations on Japanese culture. Some examples are Lian Hearn’s *Tales of the Otori* series (2002 – 2007), Chris Bradford’s *Young Samurai* series (2008 – 2012), and Zoe Marriott’s *Shadows on the Moon* (2011). I am showing you a few examples written in the 21th century, but the trend can be traced back to Katherine Paterson’s earliest works published in the 1970s such as *The Sign of the Chrysanthemum* (1973), *Of Nightingales that weep* (1974) and *The Master Puppeteer* (1975). But those works are written before the digital age, and they were not marketed with “book trailers” in the manner of a movie trailer. This is an example of the book trailer of Bradford’s *Young Samurai* series – “Young Samurai: The Ring of Sky - Chris Bradford” (<http://youtu.be/6Gr4uc-Eow0>) (“Young Samurai: The Ring of Sky - Chris Bradford,” 2012).

What I will be discussing in this paper today is not just book trailer, but the role of multimodal paratext of fiction written in English which features Japanese culture. The key issue that I am exploring is how the culture is represented in the light of its authenticity. I will talk more about the theoretical framework I am working on and then illustrate with one example.

On “culture” and “representation”

I will start with a straightforward definition of culture suggested by Raymond Williams. Among his 3 general categories of culture, the social definition defines the term as “a description of a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour” (1961, p.57). People tend to see culture as something existing objectively in the real world, and therefore, there must be a true, correct and “authentic” way of representing it. However, a “representation of culture” is neither simple nor straightforward, as the process of representing a culture is

also an interpretation of it and the construction of it. Said's *Orientalism* provides a clear illustration of how the west shape the Orient by representing it within a whole web of forces. These forces bring the representation of the Orient into the Western discourse which then takes root as an extrarealistic *other* (Said, 1978). Given the dynamic quality, it is complicated to assess its authenticity.

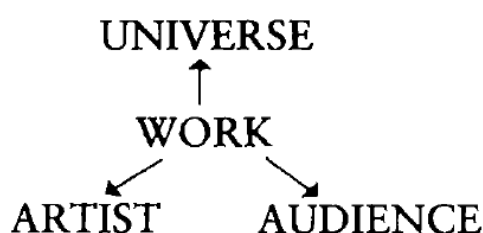
On "cultural authenticity"

But scholars, teachers, parents and readers would not let go of the issue of cultural authenticity. It is also a politically charged issue because people feel strongly about their own culture, how it is represented and who is representing it. These are the questions explored in postcolonial literature, and more recently multicultural literature. Scholars have suggested various definitions for cultural authenticity. Here are some examples:

- [Authenticity is] determined by how close the author's perspective is to the reader's perspective. (Gopalakrishnan, 2011, p. 37)
- "feels alive" (Guevara, 2003, p. 57)
- "make readers from the inside group believe that [the author] 'knows what's going on'" (Bishop, 2003, p. 29)

Many people tend to believe that "the insider" of the culture would be the best judge of cultural authenticity. Most of the existing definitions depend too much on a member of that culture to be the final authoritative judge. But a definition founded on subjective judgements is insufficient in academic discussion for the purpose of literary analysis.

At this point, I shall borrow Abram's handy diagram (Abrams, 1953, p. 6).



As I develop a theoretical framework to examine how cultural authenticity is created in a text, I approach the text from these different angles. I have briefly mentioned that we cannot solely compare the text with the universe, because culture cannot be taken as some object that exist in a static form in the real world with a checklist of characteristics to be reproduced in text. Facts are necessary, but not sufficient. As for audience, individual's lived cultural experiences are important. After all, authenticity is also a matter of identification from the reader who knows what it is really like in real life. It would be a fascinating empirical project on reader response. Unfortunately this paper does not have the space to discuss these two angles. Instead, I will focus on the production end – the author. I will examine the devices at the author's disposal which helps build up reader's expectation on perceiving the text as culturally authentic.

On the author side of the text, the author work towards creating an authentic cultural representation. In this sense, I would argue that cultural authenticity is a literary effect the author tries to achieve. It is helpful to borrow the concept of the "Reality Effect" suggested by Roland Barthes (1989); which refers to the apparently gratuitous descriptive details which do not advance plot, reveal characters, contribute to suspense, or generate symbolic meaning, produce a 'reality effect' because the sole purpose for the details to appear in the text is to signify the literary text is real to life. (Culler, 2002). I would suggest the "cultural authenticity effect" is created by "textual and paratextual devices employed to suggest the cultural representation in a work of fiction as credible and true in real life." In the remaining space of this paper, I hope I can share with you my understanding on how paratext are used to achieve such effect.

Paratext, in short, is anything outside of the text but still related to it. Here is the definition suggested by Genette (1997) who, subdivide it into peritext (p.4) and epitext (p.344). Peritext means the paratext which appears in the same volume of the text, while epitext are the paratext that exist outside of this print volume. I will use *Young samurai* series to illustrate my points.

The series is about a teenage English sailor Jack Fletcher who got shipwrecked

and was rescued by a swordmaster Masamoto Takeshi and started his training to become a samurai in a samurai school with his friend Akiko, who is Masamoto's niece.

In traditional print medium, author's biography, editor's notes, reviews etc. are included in the peritext to influence readers' expectation. For example, in the first page of the book, the author is introduced as such:

Chris joined a judo club aged seven where his love of throwing people over his shoulder, punching the air and bowing lots started. Since those early years, he has trained in karate, kickboxing and samurai swordmanship and has earned his black belt in Kyo Shin *taijutsu*, the secret fighting art of the ninja. (Bradford, 2008)

Genette suggests that paratext carries an "illocutionary force" (1997, p. 10), which means, by providing certain information, the intention of the author's or the publisher's is being communicated. The intention of the biography can be interpret as building up the credibility of the author's knowledge in Japanese culture due to his life-long martial arts training and exposure to Japanese culture.

But in multimodal epitext, this illocutionary force spirals into a much more complicated layering of information to purport authenticity. Epitext is defined as "... any paratextual element not materially appended to the text within the same volume but circulating, as it were, freely, in a virtually limitless physical and social space" (Genette, 1997, p. 344). I don't know what comes to your mind when you read this description - "virtually limitless physical and social space", but it seems a perfect description of the internet. The website of the *Young Samurai* series (Bradford, 2013) not only contains the book trailer, it has a line of dropdown menus providing various materials relating to the text, such as:

- *Video*

These are "lessons" you can take at the Samurai School. It is similar to the "how-to" videos so common nowadays on YouTube.

- *Duelling cards*

Readers can print out, cut out and play with their fellow Young Samurai fans.

- Teacher's discussion guide for classroom use, completed with assignments and worksheets
- Competitions
 - Readers can design a duelling card which the winner's design will be published on the website.
 - One lucky reader (and his/her parent) can win a trip to Japan.

Multimodal epitext has picked up its forces by shifting in at least three different aspects from traditional peritext, in media, setting and dimension.

From Text to Video

Compare to the traditional print peritext, which may come in the form of a glossary or editor's notes, the use of video tutorials exposes readers to more direct experience. For example, when the author talks about a samurai sword, he shows it in a video. (<http://bit.ly/15EqnBo>) (Bradford, n.d.) Compare to a textual description of the same object, the video shows a more concrete artefact. Also, while in text readers have to figure out themselves how to pronounce the transliteration of the Japanese word for sword, *katana*, the viewer of the video listens to the author (who is now a presenter) reading out the word and explaining information related to the sword. Other paralinguistic features such as tone, facial expressions, the pace of his speech and pauses etc., also conveys the information as factual, realistic and objective. As the website is maintained by the author himself, he doubling as the presenters of these lesson videos is to further establish himself as a reliable source of knowledge in Japanese culture.

From informal to formal settings

The epitext is also used to move the text from informal settings, such as web browsing and playing duelling cards with your friends in your leisure time, into the formal educational settings by providing teacher's discussion guide. By introducing the text into the classroom immediately adds authority to the text. The discussion guide is also designed to correspond with the subjects taught at

school, further formalizing the status of the text side by side with school knowledge. Some questions seem to be designed for opportunities to self-reference. The Language Arts assignments, for instance, suggest readers to look for answers in the author's book and his website. He has also explicitly listed his own website as one of the few "great websites that can give you information on Japan". A complete cycle of non-fiction information flow is created, sealing his status as the Japanese culture specialist.

Despite his attempt to establish credibility by stating up front his qualification as a certified teacher, the quality of the discussion guide is questionable. Discussion questions such as "What is *Bushido*? Why is *Bushido* important?" encourage students to approach complex ideologies in a superficial manner, settling for answers which are essentialized icons.

From fictionality to reality

Through the website, the author organizes and advertises activities which allow readers to experience the culture. He puts links to martial arts and Japanese lessons in the UK, to cultural tours to Japan. This bridging between fictionality to reality makes his website a porthole through which readers can encounter Japanese culture in real life. Readers of the text, therefore, are initiated into the culture, and gradually moving closer towards it in real life. As the text is the starting point of this cultural journey, its cultural representation is therefore legitimized by its destination on Japanese soil. Furthermore, by partnering with a member from the cultural group, and not just any member, but a descendant from an old samurai family, Akemi Solloway, the author finds a strong witness to his knowledge about the culture.

At this point, it is apparent that the author, using multimodal epitext, has constructed a system which establishes and reinforces himself, the creator of the cultural representation of the fictional text, as a reliable source of knowledge. The force gathered in this system to validate this work of fiction is drawn from "facts", a realm which is often defined in *opposition* to fiction.

The truth

The reader's expectation is built up essentially by constant references to "the truth" and to bridge the readers' textual experience to reality. An example taken from the Q&A asks the author whether he has met a "real" samurai. Also, the author lists out "the truth" behind his work of fiction. It is done to reinforce the realistic basis for the fictional text, and thus achieve the authentic effect.

What is counter-productive is the "disclaimer", which frees the author from any responsibilities. He is telling you, "Trust me, I know a lot about the culture, but don't blame me if I am wrong." The issue of artistic licensing versus accountability will take another paper to discuss.

Conclusion

What I have looked at in this paper today is how multimodal paratextual elements functions in building up readers' expectation to perceive a work of fiction as an authentic cultural representation of Japanese culture. What I have no time to discuss, and which is crucial to answering the question of authenticity, is the issue of "accuracy". Seeing how the multimodal epitext functions as a systematic force that aims at influencing readers' expectation, we can then examine the result of utilizing such paratextual devices but failing to couple it with accurate information, and then study reader response and draw implications from it.

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