South Korea and the Sub-Empire of Anime: Kinesthetics of Subcontracted Animation Production

The relationship in the animation industry between Japan and South Korea has been as close as the geographic distance between the two countries. Since the mid-1960s, South Korean studios and workers have manufactured Japanese animation in a mode of production referred to as *hacheong* in Korean and *shitauke* in Japanese, both of which mean “to subcontract.” In the global anime wave that started in the 1990s, this material condition of production has often been neglected or ignored, by academics as well as fans. Meanwhile in South Korea, since the mid-1990s when the government started to promote film and animation as a new national industry, the Korean term *hacheong* has been replaced by the English acronym OEM (original equipment manufacturing), despite no substantial changes in the condition of subcontracted production, as the former term seemed likely to offend many South Koreans’ national pride. Indeed, the issue of internationally subcontracted animation production in South Korea has long been viewed and spoken of from a nationalist perspective. While intentionally ignoring the material reality of subcontracted work that has acted on the majority of the country’s animation industry, the South Korean mass media has not hesitated to propagate the notion that South Korea is the third-largest producer of animation in the world.
Subcontracted production in the Japanese animation industry, which I will explore in the main part of this essay, was encouraged by politico-economic factors that included location, diplomatic agreements, wage levels, and exchange rates, and then materialized by a Taylorist work organization that went along with technologies of celluloid animation. My focus is, however, not on the perennial issue of developed countries’ transnational exploitation of underdeveloped or developing countries’ labor. Rather, subcontracted production is widely experienced at a domestic, as well as international, level, and the Japanese animation industry has long used a subcontracted production system within the territory of Japan. What I will bring into focus in this essay is the dominant discourse in this mode of animation production that places manual labor and laborers at a lower rank in the artistic-production hierarchy of brain over hand. Imagined and reproduced internationally through the animation subcontracting between South Korea and Japan (and possibly going further to the United States), this cerebral/manual dichotomy is a discursive construct I wish to call into question, with regard to animation’s aesthetics as well as its kinesthetic processes.¹

ANIME SUBCONTRACTION IN HISTORY

Subcontracted production in South Korea for foreign animation industries traces back to Ōgon batto (Golden bat) and Humanoid Monster Bem (Yōkai Ningen Bemu), first broadcast in Japan in 1967 and 1968, respectively. These were animated TV series produced by the Japanese animation company Daiichi Dōga and subcontracted to a South Korean TV station named TBC (Tongyang Bangsong); this station was part of the South Korean mega-conglomerate Samsung and is currently one of the state-owned TV stations, KBS 2. However, TBC stopped animation production a few years later. As suggested by Jeong Wook in a documentary television program about the South Korean history of cartoon animation, Lee Byung-chul, then chairman of the Samsung Group, did not judge animation to be a promising business because it was contingent on manual labor, noting in particular that Tōei employees in Japan had gone on strike at that time.² Today, the Samsung Group is well known for its technology-intensive businesses and for not allowing the activity of labor unions.³

Tōei Animation also prevented employees from forming a union. Yamaguchi Katsunori suspects that the Tōei management was concerned about such a movement because it was looking to coproduce animation with the U.S.
Finally, Tōei’s ambitions of international coproduction came true in 1966 with The King Kong Show, an animated TV series from the U.S. company Videocraft International, which was followed by other coproduced (actually outsourced) projects with Western companies until the 1980s. In his 1960 interview with Shūkan asahi (Asahi weekly), Ōkawa Hiroshi, then president of Tōei Animation, referred optimistically to this mode of animation production as a promising business. For Ōkawa, who was dreaming of Tōei Animation as the “Disney of the Orient,” the United States may have been a new resource for ideas to be simply absorbed and then materialized by the animators’ skill. In contrast with Ōkawa’s expectations, however, young animators were not content with merely drawing pictures as ordered, but rather wanted to play a creative role in animation production. One example that makes clear the studio’s situation is The Little Norse Prince (Tayō no ōji, Horusu no daibōken), the 1968 animated feature directed by Takahata Isao. The film was made both creatively and manually by the production crew—all union members—individually and against the studio’s management. This film is well known for the fact that Miyazaki Hayao, who had just started his animation career as an in-between artist, made a much greater contribution than he had in previous roles, providing a lot of creative artistic and technical input.

In 1971, Tōei Animation suffered more substantial changes. Ōkawa passed away, and his once-Disneyesque studio was cut in half in terms of workspace, number of employees, and technical resources. It was in the same year that Takahata left the company with Miyazaki and Kotabe Yōichi, who were to become longtime colleagues. Two years later, the studio’s management began outsourcing the manual process of animation production to small overseas studios located in neighboring Asian countries, one of which was South Korea. Along with these changes, the practice of animation was increasingly dealt with as a mechanical skill, not as an artistic activity. A relevant example might be the business run by a Japanese company named Minwasha for a few
years until 1974. With the sales pitch of “animation as a second job,” Minwasha sold housewives a correspondence course in animating skills and hired some of them, calling them "home staff." The growing fragmentation of animating labor took place in parallel with the growth of subcontracted animation production at home and abroad.

Although continuing to some extent even now, Japanese studios’ subcontracted or outsourced animation production for Western companies began to show a sharp decrease in the mid-1980s. Having worked on as many as seventy projects from the United States by 1984, Tōei Animation pulled out of this production business around 1988. This was largely due to the commercial success of Dragon Ball and the studio's other animated television series starting in 1986, and at the same time to the waning of the U.S. dollar’s strength against the yen during the period of the Japanese bubble economy.

On the other hand, the studio paved the way to further outsource its own productions, establishing a studio to handle in-between cels, backgrounds, and finishing in the Philippines in 1986; since the Filipino studio was turned into a subsidiary of Tōei Animation in 1999, it has covered seventy percent of the animation production. In this sense, neighboring Asian animators and animation workers deserve to be recognized as having supported the animation boom in 1980s Japan and the “anime” wave that started in the 1990s.

What is noteworthy is that this new geography of Japanese animation production in Asia was literally effaced in terms of cultural politics. According to Sawada Yukari, the names of Korean animators or in-betweeners were often replaced with fictitious Japanese names in the credits of animated series broadcast on television in the 1980s. It was necessary to disguise overseas subcontracting, given that there were sometimes noticeable visual inconsistencies, supposedly due to overseas animators’ not fully controlled labor, in one and the same animated television series. “Made in Japan” did and still does function as a national myth of animation production in Japanese society, and it was not until the mid-1990s that audiences could see many South Korean (and soon Chinese) names in the credits of Japanese animation, while more often the credit titles featured the names of the subcontracting studios (both Japanese and non-Japanese) rather than the names of their workers. The sub-empire called “anime” today is based on these subcontracting structures, set up under specific socioeconomic conditions in Asia. A grotesque vision of those studios and workers is seen in Banksy’s controversial 2010 title sequence for the “MoneyBart” episode of The Simpsons, in which he imagines a South Korean animation sweatshop, and displays his critical view of the Fox media empire.
I have examined how the manual labor of animating has been marginalized in the anime industry, within and outside of Japan. Now I will proceed to discuss the discourses that pertain to this way of deploying human resources in animation production.

**DISCOURSES OF BRAIN AND HAND IN ANIMATION AND ART**

In South Korea in the late 1980s there were attempts to change the fact that most of the country’s animation production was dependent on foreign industries. Yet, one of the main strategies was centered on the dichotomous hierarchy of brain over hand—in other words, on a strategy for replacing the foreign brain with a national one. The cerebral element of animation production was often described as creativity, ideas, or the ability to write original stories and screenplays. On the other hand, there was no critical discussion of the techniques of animators trained in subcontracted production. First, it was feared that raising these technical issues would hurt animators’ professional pride; and second, artistic issues have been regarded as irrelevant to the field of animation because the concept of art in South Korean society has long been one associated with Western “High Art” like classical music or oil painting. In the context of this cerebral/manual split, government institutions and the private sector tried to find a way to combine Korean ideas with the Korean animating skills that could supposedly materialize them. Such a simplistic combination was just an inverted version of what Ōkawa Hiroshi had attempted in dreaming of the internationalization of Tōei Animation in the 1960s.

In South Korea, the quasi-Romantic view placing human mind or spirit over materiality and corporality in artistic production has manifested itself again under the state-led project named BK 21 (BrainKorea21), in which the moving image (along with information technology, life science, design, traditional Korean medicine, and the like) was chosen as an emerging industrial field. The aim of the project is to foster “core experts” in advanced scientific and/or cultural technologies by supporting master’s and PhD students in those fields. If not appropriated for three-dimensional computer graphics or mediated by new digital devices, however, the manual labor and skills of animation are unlikely to find their proper place. Higher education tends to be dominated by a traditional Korean value system that has placed manufacturing work below literature for centuries. Much the same view is found among some “brain-oriented” Japanese experts, too. The animation
journalist Kakizaki Shundō evaluated South Korean director Lee Sung Gang’s 2002 animated feature *My Beautiful Girl, Mari* (*Mari iyagi*) as the result of the simple combination of an outstanding director, with animators trained through subcontracted production. He viewed the animators as having been waiting for just such a talented person. And on a Japanese television talk show which discussed South Korean animation as an emerging competitor, Kubo Masakazu (the Shōgakukan editor and producer who had huge success with *Pokémon*) took a biological-sounding tone: he stated that the “brain,” as well as the ability to develop and write scenarios, was not mature in South Korea’s animation production.

Such cerebral/manual splits can trace back as far as the Renaissance in Europe, well before the appearance of the modern film industry. E. H. Gombrich suggests that poets who “wrote” with their brains were loved by Renaissance snobs, but the artists who worked with their hands were not. The Renaissance painter Giotto could obtain fame and distinguish himself from shoemakers or other craftspeople only through his scientific pursuit of mathematics and anatomy. Furthermore, Da Vinci argued that the manual labor of a painter working with brushes was not as essential as that of a poet writing with a pen. Gombrich denounces their view as snobbish and points to Aristotle as most responsible for its creation. Likewise, in the field of live-action cinema, Alexandre Astruc proposed the movie camera as a new pen in the first half of the twentieth century. In contrast, at the beginning of the twenty-first century Lev Manovich attempted to introduce the idea of a “kino-brush,” in which cinema becomes closer and closer to animation through digital image-processing technology. In his view, animation is located somewhere other than where cinema has been for the last century.

What I am concerned with here is not the distinction or relationship between the two concepts of “cerebral” pen and “manual” brush, which would be too big a project for this essay. Rather, I am interested in how it is possible to get over—in a practical way—the dichotomous hierarchy that seems to remain at work despite Manovich’s sophisticated conceptualization of digital filmmaking. The fact is that we can immediately experience something emotional or mental from a series of subtle bodily gestures in an animated character, even if we “know” it to be merely composed of pixel-based, virtually three-dimensional images or flat, discrete, hand-drawn pictures. Such experience tells us that our sensation of animated visuals is not determined simply by cerebral intelligence. Rudolf Arnheim understands the relationship between brain and hand not in a causal way but rather as a structural similarity that allows a resonance between them. He refers to “isomorphism” in discussing...
perception, stating that there are a series of different levels—psychological, electromechanical, mechanical, and geometrical—each of which is structured to resonate with its neighbors (Figure 1). Significantly, the psychological state of mind does not occupy a privileged, dominating place over the geometrical shape and movement of the body and other physical levels; Level II is not the product but the correlation of Level I.

It should be noted that Level I and V in the observed person are mediated through hypodermic operations that are neural, muscular, and kinesthetic; these are not as visible as bodily shape and movement but not as supposedly mental as mind or perception. In Arnheim’s view, dancers or actors are able (and trained) to enact bodily gestures, postures, and facial expressions that adequately correspond to their emotional or mental states through the kinesthetic correlation experienced while they are moving their own bodies. In a phenomenological sense, an observer can experience the kinesthetic and other isomorphic levels of the expressing person’s body, through resonance with its geometrical shape and movement. Given that people can become actors of sorts in specific social contexts, Arnheim’s two terms, observed and observer, should not be understood as essentially and permanently separated from each other.
It is not strange, then, that animators have often been referred to as actors or choreographers. This type of performing artist expresses her- or himself by animating the extrinsic body-object or body-image of a character, but the central locus of neural, muscular, and kinesthetic operations should be the animator’s body in the first place. For example, looking at his own face in a mirror, Peter Lord intentionally moves his lips and facial muscles to the recorded voice of the interviewee Bill Perry, while he is animating the lips of a clay figure that is Perry’s representation in his animated documentary War Story (1989) (Figures 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7). He could have relied on live-action footage of the interviewee telling his own story, but it is obvious that this cannot substitute for the hypodermic levels within the very body of the animator. These levels are required to function as the expressing (not just receiving) intermediary between the photorealistic representation of the interviewee’s moving lips, the animator’s eyes and hands, and the surface and mass of the clay figure. Another example is Miyazaki Hayao’s bodily demonstration seen during the production of his animated feature Ponyo (2008, Gake no ue no Ponyo). The director moves the entire upper part of his body, including his arms and hands, while talking with an animator about how to show to audiences the movements of a fictitious marine life-form that nobody has ever seen. William Schaffer’s investigation of similar practices leads to a post-Cartesian account of the relation between the animating human subject and the animated nonhuman object. He comments:

The animator finds himself reanimated in turn by the characters he animates and feels himself becoming a cartoon. Resonances of influence are conducted back through the pencil into the vibrating network formed by the strings of the artist’s nervous system . . . the multiple strings of the moving puppet are never simply controlled from a single point embodying the “will” of the puppeteer . . . The puppeteer or animator may initiate this dance of strings and displaced bodies; but once in set in motion, it reverberates unpredictably, takes on a life of its own, in which the artist’s entire body becomes but one of many dancing limbs.

If more attention is paid to hand-drawn animation that does not deal with characters as physical objects in space, Gilles Deleuze’s theory of painting should be taken into account. Deleuze’s approach differs from Da Vinci’s. In the French philosopher’s thought, there is a quality inherent to the painting, something material, physical, and dynamic on the canvas, something that originates from the hands; but we lose the capability of feeling it when the
Figure 2. Peter Lord with his clay puppet

Figure 3. A tape cassette player with his right hand

Figure 4. His facial movements in front of a mirror

Figure 5. His facial movements in front of a mirror

Figure 6. Animating the lips of the puppet

Figure 7. Bill Perry, the owner of the voice
manual is neglected by the cerebral. It is impossible to see anything on the canvas with the eye, the retina, and the optic nerve, as long as they are dominated by the brain. Remind yourself of the apples of Paul Cézanne or René Magritte, and you are likely to think you see apples in their paintings, trained to do that in accordance with your given languages and schemata (apple, ringo, sagwa, pomme, and so on), but they are not what you believe you see. Similarly, you might think you see Ponyo in Miyazaki’s animated feature, but you have never seen her before. In drawing the line of flight from such a visual field, you can see something tactile, visceral, and motile from the deterritorializing girl-fish and the other protean figures on the screen, then feel it in your retina, neural networks, kinesthesia, and muscles. This mode of sensation is the same for the clay figure of Peter Lord, even when it aims at representing a human interviewee in a documentary film. We can see the mushy clay mass in flux, and the animator’s manual marks on/beneath/around its surface, at almost the same time we see a human being smiling or talking. Keeping this in mind, now I will discuss how the global subcontracting structure of animation production can twist and fragment the embodied identity of both the animator and the spectator.

GESTURE AND IDENTITY: HOW TO MOVE AND LOOK LIKE A GENTLEMAN

In 1981, a South Korean national newspaper ran a disturbing story about the economic boom in South Korean animation. With an optimistic tone, an interviewee argued that on-the-job training in overseas productions will help Korean animators learn better techniques and make them more skillful at expressing the emotions of Western people. One of the most important goals required of South Korean animators at that time was not to express their own emotions but the emotions of others—most of whom had never met, nor lived with in the same community. Encouraged by studio owners and the government, and appropriated by subcontracted production, South Korean animators’ hands in the 1980s became more and more coded to specific cultural-industrial types of emotional and bodily expression. Their hands were trained to draw lines in the styles demanded by the Japanese and Western animation industries. During this process, the animators’ bodies were broken down in time, through the process of breaking down characters’ bodily movements, and the former also in-betweened through in-betweening the latter. My suggestion here is that the hand and body of the animator (particularly
working in industry) is not entirely autonomous but likely to be controlled by industrial powers. For example, when discussing American animator Chuck Jones’s self-referential animated short *Duck Amuck* (1953), William Schaefer points out that animators regularly find themselves to be puppets or cartoon characters manipulated by invisible controlling powers—slaves to the mechanical operation of capital. Working in communist Czechoslovakia, Jiří Trnka also expressed this notion that the animator does not only animate extrinsic objects but is also animated through them, by extrinsic powers. Trnka’s last animated film, *The Hand* (1965), portrays a puppet character forced to be a propaganda artist by the hand of a dictator.

The voice heard in the 1981 news story about incorporating animators’ or in-betweeners’ bodies into the engine of capital was reproduced with a different inflection in a recent interview. The story, which covers a South Korea–based studio owner and his success in working on the U.S. animated television series *The Legend of Korra* (2012), reports:

> His success was backed up by a thorough analysis of the U.S. market. . . . He researched intensively the emotional codes of U.S. audiences. The protagonist of the heroic story . . . was set as a gentleman who covers up for a female partner.37

Here, attention is paid not to manual skills but rather to the cerebral ability to analyze a market and research emotional and behavioral codes. The brain-centric logic delivered and reinforced here by the South Korean press looks only at how U.S. audiences prefer a person to act in terms of social norms: a gentleman should cover up for a female partner. It does not seem to have any interest in the way the gentleman will move in terms of gesture. Arnheim suggests that gentleness as a gesture should be embodied in the velocity and acceleration or deceleration of moving limbs, the shape of their curves, and other elements, but these will vary with the identity of each finite and socially situated human being. Heather Crow suggests that the corporeal articulation of gestures is subordinated to the systems of representation (film, stage, social milieu), which make them perceptible and thereby manage their circulation and repetition. She cites film scholar Leslie Stern’s notion that gestures are performed but not owned by an individual: directly related to identity, gestures are foreign but familiar, public but private, wandering homeless ghosts that are ready to haunt human bodies. According to Yoo Sun Young, many Korean audiences in the early twentieth century seem to have been possessed by gestural ghosts invoked in the
new medium of film. In her view, their bodies were imbued and animated with
the gestures of Hollywood actresses or actors, as they imitated ways of walking
and laughing, and came to feel that eating a piece of cake with a fork was more
cultured than eating kimchi with chopsticks.41 Yoo conceptualizes this trend
as a process of early Korean modernization under colonization, where people
were forced to be “naked” individuals who lost traditional communities.42 My
suggestion is that animation is an optimal medium for examining such wan-
dering and haunting ghosts, because it enables us to deal with bodies not as
given from a “real” world but as artificially constructed from discrete elements,
in an infinitesimal, differential, and fluxional manner—frame by frame, or
even pixel by pixel. At the heart of this discursive practice is the animator as a
neurally, musically, and kinesthetically processing/processed entity.

This raises two questions regarding the news story about the U.S. code
of gentlemanly behavior. The first asks what gestures will be imparted to the
heroic gentleman character for U.S. audiences who embrace many different
and diverse communities. The second question asks about the attribution of
gentlemanly behavior to U.S. society, although the animated story enacts sup-
posedly Asian (male) protagonists against Asian-looking scenery. With this,
it seems to follow that such behavior should not be South Korean or Chinese.
How many Asian children audiences will agree on such an idea? Certainly,
the word, “gentleman” (shinsa in Korean) is likely to be associated with the
“English gentleman” (youngguk shinsa), something foreign in South Korea; but
nonetheless the word does not discourage one from imagining such a charac-
ter as proper to another society. In relation to embodied identities and morals,
these issues will be important for many young audiences who are situated in
given social contexts (or situate themselves in different, chosen ones). Any of
them could be animators in the future.

Notes

1. When the cerebral is spoken of here and other places in this essay, it does not
only imply the intellectual but also refers to the brain itself. Indeed, many discourses in
artistic production have attributed intelligence to the human brain, as will be shown later
in this essay. In them, the brain has been understood as a superior locus, not just as a
lump of meat, distinguished from the other biological organs of the human being by virtue
of the metaphysical, often transcendental, notion of intelligence. The diametric view has
been applied to limbs and their physical operation. But there are theories opposing this
deep-rooted, brain-centric view of intelligence. For broader conceptions of intelligence,
refer to Howard Gardner, Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences, 3rd ed. (Phila-


5. Ibid., 106–7.

6. Ibid., 132.

7. Ibid., 116; Kusanagi Satoshi, *Amerika de nihon no animeishon wa dô mirarete kitanoka?* (The way in which the USA has seen Japanese animation) (Tokyo: Tokuma Shoten, 2003), 93, 183.

8. Ibid., 35–36.


22. Ibid.

23. Ibid., 223.

24. Ibid.


28. Perception can be dealt with as distinct from sensation, especially in terms of theorist Gilles Deleuze, whom I will refer to later in this essay.

29. Ibid., 67–70.


31. See the documentary television program Purofesshonaru shigoto no ryügi supesharu Miyazaki Hayao no subeta: Ponyo mitchaku 300 nich (Professional, the way of work: All about Miyazaki Hayao with 300-day close coverage of Ponyo), TV (NHK, 2008).


34. For more on deterritorialization, see Gilles Delueze and Félix Guattari, Anti-Oedipus: Capitalization and Schizophrenia (New York: Penguin Classics, 2009), 206.


40. Ibid., 49–50.


42. Ibid.