

Indexing the past: visual language and translatability in Kon Satoshi's *Millennium Actress*

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The recent explosion in so-called “fan subbing” of Japanese animation has shown that translation is not as esoteric a skill as is sometimes thought. Similarly, it proves that cinematic materials can be accessible to international audiences even without professional mediation. As recent studies show, these fans use methods that are challenging not only how we think about interlingual subtitling, but even about the process of translation itself. At the moment, however, these techniques are rather limited in scope, since they tend to concentrate around a few anime genres.

This paper will re-examine current cinematic translation practices through director Kon Satoshi's full-length animated feature *Millennium Actress* (*Sennen joyū*, 2001). Given its nostalgic mid-20th century storyline, this film does not target the interests of most of the young international fan community. While there are English, French and German subtitled versions available, no fan-subbed versions exist, and there are no plans to dub the film professionally. Though the implied target audience – middle aged Japanese – no doubt has something to do with why the film has not been extensively localized, there is another, equally compelling reason: it applies, and expects, a fairly deep and broad knowledge of both Japanese history and the history of Japanese film.

The notion that culturally specific knowledge is “required” to watch anime is nothing new: the plethora of guides and encyclopedias of anime in foreign languages attest to fans' intense desire for authenticity. The reason this paper turns specifically to *Millennium Actress*, neglected by most of the foreign fan subculture, is because *so much* of the knowledge required to understand the film is culturally specific. In this film, where the protagonist recounts her life in movies in a realistic historical setting, imagery is the primary medium of communication. Narrative action and dialogue, considered the main components of cinema by many viewers, take a back seat to a visual iconography that indexes a real cinematic past. The real “story” is the history of one of Japan's proudest cultural products: live action cinema, particularly that of the “golden age” of the 1950s and 60s.

The aim of this paper is not simply to “translate” for the uninitiated viewer the many components of the film that cannot be efficiently communicated through subtitles, nor is its goal to suggest better methods for translating such material. Instead, because *Millennium Actress* arguably presents more difficulties to the conventional translator than does the average film, I plan to use it as a vehicle for demonstrating the shortcomings of our current text-based ideas of translation. Of course film is primarily a visual medium, one that uses a language perhaps more international than any other. But that fact has often been overlooked in efforts to bring local products abroad. By examining the subtitled versions of *Millennium Actress* through the lens of some of the innovative translation strategies employed by fan subbers, this paper will propose a cinematic definition of translation that more fully incorporates non-verbal methods of exchange and communication.