SCHOOLGIRLS WITH KATANAS: APPROPRIATING JAPANESENESS AND THE
POSTMODERN COOL IN SUCKER PUNCH

Nathan S. Winters

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green
State University in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

August 2012

Committee:

Dr. Kristen Rudisill, Advisor

Dr. Jeremy Wallach

Dr. Satomi Saito

ABSTRACT

Dr. Kristen Rudisill, Advisor

Cool has become the central tenet of postmodern consumption, defining the ways consumers interact with popular culture. Yet, the drive to produce cool media is not without its issues. Producers continue to push the envelope relying on spectacle and violence in order to capture the increasingly divided attention of an oversaturated market. These producers have started to return to an outdated worldview that stresses essentialism and otherness in an attempt to capitalize on global trends. In this thesis, I intend to explore how the recent film *Sucker Punch* utilizes images from Japanese popular culture in an attempt to be viewed as a cool film. In doing so, the film engages in a larger cultural discourse surrounding this idea of cool. The use of cool as a means of obscuring yet reinforcing ideology, orientalism in particular, and the ways in which postmodernism assists in this process are key issues that I explore. In particular, I examine how Japanese imagery is contextualized within American media, the ways in which postmodernism function as a cultural model that is still applicable today, and how cool has become the central issue within popular culture. By exploring these issues, this thesis addresses the dangers of the ideology of cool and the means by which it distracts audiences from underlying biases.

To Kit Kat, sleep well

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

I first heard about the movie *Sucker Punch* (2011) during my first semester of graduate school, several months before the movie would be released. I was sitting in my office when one of the other graduate assistants walked in and logged on to my computer. Pulling up the YouTube website, he urged me and everyone else in the vicinity to come over so he could show us something. What he showed us that day was the first trailer for *Sucker Punch*. Until that moment, I had never heard of the film or the director, though I had seen several of his other works. That trailer sparked my imagination; it titillated with the promise of an exciting new film that seemed to ooze coolness. Everything was there: the intense action sequences, jaw-dropping special effects, and music that fit perfectly with the action. It was the kind of surreal action flick that always caught my attention and demanded to be seen. However, when the movie was finally released, and I eagerly went to see it, I found myself rather disappointed. From my standpoint, as interesting as the movie had appeared in that initial trailer, the theatrical release did not live up to my expectations. It was a bland movie with a weak narrative and poor character development. The ideas and social criticisms raised by the film were lost in a maze of narrative layers and pandering to an adolescent audience. It was a disappointment, but while the movie failed to win me over as a consumer. it lit the flame of my scholarly interest. I could not ignore the images within the film, the references to Japanese popular culture and the clearly postmodern nature of the narrative. It served as an excellent example of how American cinema was using Japanese culture, a trend I had been following.

In particular, I was struck by the use of Japanese iconography in the film. There were numerous images and ideas that I recognized from my experiences with Japanese popular culture. Seeing those images in a film like *Sucker Punch*, I couldn't help but wonder what the director was attempting to do or what reaction he was attempting to elicit from the audience.

Clearly, there was some aspect of Japanese culture that the film was using in order to appeal to the audience. The more I considered it, the more I realized that *Sucker Punch* was engaging in a long-standing cultural discourse based on the nature of "cool." I read the film's use of Japanese iconography and overall style as part of the director's attempt to create a cool film in the specific sense of the aforementioned cultural discourse. In doing so, he reveals that cool is not merely a way of appealing to consumers but an ideology that obscures and distracts, in this case allowing for the rhetoric of orientalism to take up a new space within our current world.

 Sucker Punch is hardly the first film to use cool as a means of obscuring troubling rhetoric, but it does reveal the continued use of Japanese iconography within American cinema, particularly within a certain genre of film, which I refer to as the postmodern action genre. This appeal to a specific construction of the idea of cool is where I locate the issues of postmodernism and American cultural beliefs about Japan. By attempting to create a movie that appeals to the American audience by utilizing Japanese iconography as a means of creating a sense of cool, *Sucker Punch* is participating in a larger cultural project to essentialize and exoticize Japan, while at the same time erasing any cultural meaning attached to the iconography. All of this occurs under the banner of cool, which serves as a new label to hide the essentializing acts taking place. It is only by hiding the rhetoric of orientalism beneath the guise of cool that popular culture producers can repackage it and sell it to American audiences, avoiding any of the negative implications involved with such essentialism.

 This thesis is divided into four chapters, each touching on a different part of my overall argument about using the rhetoric of cool to obscure orientalism. This first chapter introduces the key text, *Sucker Punch*, and examines postmodern theory and how it applies to this topic. Since postmodernism plays a key role in how I define the idea of cool, it is vital to establish

some of the important ideas and terminology I use. The second chapter delves into the intersection of late capitalism and orientalism, specifically focusing on how Japan is positioned within American popular culture and how Japanese iconography is coded as cool. The third and fourth chapters will focus on a close reading of *Sucker Punch* and an analysis of several scenes as they relate to the ideas established in the preceding chapters. The third chapter will focus primarily on iconography seen throughout the film while the fourth chapter will touch on the characters and the use of violence.

Zack Snyder served as a major creative force behind the film *Sucker Punch* having both directed and co-written the film with Steve Shibuya. Snyder's influence on the film cannot be understated. His body of work includes the popular *300* (2007) and *Watchmen* (2009) films, as well as the upcoming *Superman* film. *Sucker Punch* was Snyder's first film based on an original script. Having had a hand in every aspect of the film's creation, Snyder's role as an auteur is significant when one considers *Sucker Punch's* use of Japanese iconography to create cool images. These elements, which I argue reinforce the rhetoric of orientalism, are part of Snyder's style and reflect his particular brand of cool.

The narrative of *Sucker Punch* unfolds through the eyes of Baby Doll, played by Emily Browning. After being incarcerated and sentenced to a lobotomy for rebelling against an abusive stepfather, Baby Doll enters a dream world where she takes on the role of a dancer in an imaginary brothel. The film's primary narrative level unfolds within the brothel dream where Baby Doll relives the events leading up to her eventual lobotomy. Seeking to escape the brothel, Baby Doll joins together with several other women to recover four objects that will allow her to make an escape. The recovery of each of the four objects occurs within yet another level of the dream, a shift marked by Baby Doll performing an erotic dance to distract the men at the brothel.

The film builds toward the failed escape attempt, revealing that Baby Doll's fate had been sealed from the beginning and the escape was being engineered to allow one of the other women incarcerated in the facility to return home. The narrative levels eventually collapse as Baby Doll is lobotomized, an act that unravels a web of corruption within the asylum. The end of the film is ambiguous, leaving the audience to question how much of the dream was real.

The complicated narrative of *Sucker Punch* is used for more than just linking together the action sequences. While my focus in this thesis is on the use of Japanese iconography and the obscuring ideology of cool, Snyder himself intended to use *Sucker Punch* in order to challenge sexual fantasies related to voyeurism. The point is made explicit in the opening scenes of the film where one character, performing in a play within the primary dream level, addresses the audience and chastises it for fantasizing about helpless women. In an interview with Cole Haddon, Snyder mentions the metaphoric symbolism of certain images within the film, including the connection between receiving a lobotomy and losing one's virginity. He connects this image with his overall message, which forces the audience to recognize that they are "leering" and fantasizing about the women on the screen. While Snyder's attempt to offer some social critique may be laudable, like the rest of the film its success is questionable. However, like many other elements within the film, the social critique and hidden meaning contribute to the overall sense of coolness being created.

To say that *Sucker Punch* was a success would be a stretch by any measure. The domestic box office grossed around $36 million with a worldwide total just shy of the $90 million mark. In particular, the Japanese box office grossed just over $2.5 million (compare that to another Snyder film *300*, which grossed $13 million in Japan). With a production budget of some $82 million, this performance by a supposedly blockbuster film from a well-known

director was quite underwhelming (Box Office Mojo). While the film failed to garner the profits expected from its release, equally troubling was the critical reaction. The online review aggregate website Metacritic lists a score of 33 out of 100 possible points, citing 29 critics' reviews of the film. One such review by Peter Debruge compares director Zack Snyder with *Kill Bill* director Quentin Tarantino, saying "Like Quentin Tarantino, Snyder is unapologetic about his influences – the trashier the better though he's far less skilled in the art of pastiche" (Debruge). The overall message is clear, *Sucker Punch* was not the commercial or critical success expected of a high-profile director like Zack Snyder. Given his previous successes with *300* and *Watchmen*, the expectations for *Sucker Punch* were no doubt high and the abysmal performance of the film surprising.

Given the box office failure and negative critical reaction to the film, it is obvious that *Sucker Punch* did not succeed as a commercial product. In other words, it was not a cool movie. Cool is in many ways synonymous with popular, or at least a desire to be popular. Yet, it is a complicated relationship for whatever becomes popular begins to lose that edgy coolness consumers desire. The reason I chose *Sucker Punch* for this project was not because it was an incredibly influential or lauded example of cinema but rather because it attempted to be cool and failed. In that failure, one can see how the director, Zack Snyder, conceived of cool and attempted to present it within the film. Hiding beneath this label of cool is the issue that is at the heart of this thesis: orientalism. Using images borrowed from Japan, *Sucker Punch* is reinforcing the orientalist rhetoric of America by presenting an essentialized and overly simplified view of Japan. All of this is rendered acceptable by casually applying the label of cool and hiding the rhetoric behind skimpily clad, katana wielding schoolgirls, violence, and the postmodern narrative.

CHAPTER 1: THE POSTMODERN STATE

Cool is the disease of the new millennium, and it is infecting the global youth with a burning desire for the unreal, uncanny, and wholly absurd. It is form over function, style over substance, and whim over reason. Born from the collision of technological prowess and a rapidly expanding global paradigm, cool is at the forefront of modern thought. It is symptomatic of a world caught up in the struggle for meaning, torn between decaying paradigms of truth and reason and new orders of pluralism and displaced meaning. Cool is money, the hip capital of the internet age where appeals to a disenfranchised youth are met with cynicism and downright apathy. In this era of cool, locating the site of attraction is paramount. What makes something cool? How do we define it, contextualize it, and defend it against the rising tide of half-baked imitations? Most importantly for the present study, how does this obsession with cool obscure political and cultural ideologies, allowing old paradigms of essentialism, namely orientalism, to exert their force under new guises?

It is important first to establish that the concept of cool used within this study is not to be confused with the way the term is used in everyday speech. In many ways, cool can be used to refer to any number of things that have little relation to my interests here. My use of the term "cool" is based on a specific construction of the idea as I will develop it throughout this chapter. Key to this construction of cool is the idea that cool as I describe it exists primarily within the postmodern moment, is antagonistic to the cultural norms of American society, and as a label obscures much of the underlying orientalist rhetoric of the images often described as cool. In this way, cool is an amoral descriptor, connoting positivity without acknowledging any of the broader context.

One of the key elements of the discourse surrounding cool is contextual. That cool has come to occupy such a significant place within American culture no doubt stems from the shift in

the economic system of the country after World War II, marked by participation in increasingly global networks of distribution and production. This shift is what Frederic Jameson refers to as late capitalism, focusing on the global shift in capitalism with an increasing number of multinational or transnational businesses (xvii - xix). This clearly plays a role in the conception of cool, especially in regards to the increasing popularity of Japanese popular culture in America, which I will explore in greater detail in the second chapter of this thesis. Late capitalism is not just the rise of the global market but also a cultural marker signaling a shift in ideology. This shift is often referred to as postmodernism.

Perhaps Jameson defines it best in his seminal text *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. In the introduction to this work, he refers to the postmodern as a search for "breaks, for events rather than new worlds, for the telltale instant after which it is no longer the same" (ix). Postmodernism is the cultural context of cool, the defining cultural logic of a world where nothing can ever be the same. In order to understand how *Sucker Punch* attempted to appeal to this idea of cool and the ramifications of that attempt, one must first understand the role of the postmodern and the influence of postmodern thought on our conception of cool.

Postmodernism is itself a complicated idea referencing any number of cultural, artistic, and theoretical discourses. It is as contradictory and conflicted a term as the idea of cool. For our purposes here, there are two specific uses of the postmodern that are applicable. First, there is the conception of the postmodern in reference to a cultural moment, or cultural logic, referring to a shift in the way information is perceived. This is the postmodernism discussed by Jameson in reference to late capitalism. The second use of the postmodern is in reference to postmodern cinema, in this case defining *Sucker Punch* as a postmodern film. While this evokes some of the

ideas of postmodernism viewed as a cultural moment, it also refers to an aesthetic quality. It is a style of film that breaks from conventional narrative and cinematic expectations. Most importantly it appropriates and reproduces images and styles from a variety of sources while simultaneously obscuring or erasing context. Both constructions of the postmodern play an important part in how I define *Sucker Punch* as a film that attempts to be cool.

The postmodern viewed as a cultural moment is often positioned as emerging from the decline of the modern movement. The postmodern is thus after the modern, a sequential, temporally aligned shift from one paradigm to the next. Jameson notes however that it is also possible that postmodernism as a cultural moment may instead be "little more than one more stage of modernism proper" (4). Rather than a break then, it is possible to view postmodernism as yet another step in the progression of the old modernism. Rather than a sudden break with the previous paradigm, it seems more likely that the postmodern moment grew out of modernism in response to changing economic and cultural climates. Capitalism, and the shift to late capitalism, no doubt constituted a major part of this change, though as Jameson suggests it is also possible that the canonization of the modernist movement rendered its oppositional tone ineffective (4). With the modernist movement rendered normative through canonization, the emergence of postmodernism as a new cultural logic that rebels against canonization no doubt appeals to the increasingly consumer driven and cynical society. Where modernists were spurred on by the imperatives of early writers such as Ezra Pound who famously declared "make it new," the postmodernists found that nothing could be new for everything had already been done before.

While I am inclined to agree with Jameson in tracing postmodernism as an extension of modernism and a reaction to changing cultural conditions, it is also quite apparent that postmodernism as a cultural logic is concerned with perceived breaks and ruptures in history.

Jameson positions the rise of postmodernism during the late fifties or early sixties, shortly after the end of World War II (1). That the postmodern obsession with ruptures started to become the dominant cultural paradigm in America during this time is significant in its own way. While much of the rhetoric surrounding postmodernism is centered on its breaking away from earlier modernist expectations, the focus on rupture in the wake of the massive destruction of World War II is in itself a connection I would like to take a moment to explore.

Given that this paper is focused on the coding of cool within American cinema and its obscuring of old paradigms of orientalism, and based on the centrality of Japan within this process, a discussion of the relationship between the rise of postmodernism in America and the post-war state of Japan should prove useful. The most significant event signaling the shift from modernism to postmodernism may in fact be the dropping of atomic bombs on Nagasaki and Hiroshima. It is in this act of mass destruction that the doctrine of "new" took a sinister turn. This unparalleled destruction changed the nature of warfare; no matter what war was being fought, there was now a little red button that could bring it all crashing down. Proliferation of nuclear arms led to the new defensive strategy known as mutually assured destruction (MAD). As Colonel Alan Parrington explains, "MAD, of course, is an evolutionary defense strategy based on the concept that neither the United States nor its enemies will ever start a nuclear war because the other side will retaliate massively and unacceptably" (Parrington). In other words, the creation and use of the atomic bomb was itself an act that heralded the so-called end of the world. It is the very rupture from previous paradigms with which postmodernism is so obsessed.

The birth of mass destruction also suggests newfound cynicism on the part of those involved. It is science run amok and as Dominic Strinati points out, one of the main features of postmodernism is a "decline of the 'meta-narratives'" (363). This decline signals increasing

cynicism within society as the accepted "absolute" beliefs of science and religion are brought into question. Ideas of science as an instrument for good and rationality that will lead man forward are rendered grotesque in the aftermath of the bomb. Science is now a tool abused by warmongers, creating increasingly deadly weapons to wipe mankind off the face of the earth. That postmodernism began to replace modernism as the cultural logic of America shortly after the end of the war is suggestive of this very evolution in thought. Yet clearly, as much as the atomic bomb signals a rupture from previous modes of life, it is a rupture well in line with previous experiences. War itself is perhaps the act of rupturing most clearly visible throughout history. While the development and deployment of the atomic bomb may have played some role in the rise of postmodernism in the late fifties, it is hardly the defining feature of the moment. Rather, postmodernism as a cultural paradigm centers itself quite clearly on the rise of consumerism and mass media within America. Indeed, much of what we understand to be postmodern comes from increasing American demand for consumer goods, a demand that plays a major role in Japan's relationship with America and the rise of cool.

The rise of postmodernism in America is most easily traced through the increase in consumer activity since World War II combined with the development of mass media and popular culture. Dominic Strinati charts this development by tracing five key features that postmodern theorists often emphasize in their writing. In many ways, Strinati is building on the discourse established by Jameson but applying it directly to popular culture. Whereas Jameson focuses on postmodernism as it relates to late capitalism, Strinati examines how the postmodern is expressed within our media. His examination of these elements and their relation to changes in popular culture offers the clearest picture of the emergence of postmodernism. He sums it up best by positioning the "emergence of postmodernism in terms of the argument that during the

twentieth century the economic needs of capitalism have shifted from production to consumption" (367-8). What is clear from this is that the increase in consumerism, related in no small way to Jameson's late capitalism and the shift to global sites of production, heralds a rise in postmodern thought. In other words, postmodernism is defined by its capitalist focus on consumption.

Increased focus on consumption means that advertising and marketing take on even greater roles within society as the push to consume more and more overrides previous cultural paradigms. The age of production goes the way of modernism as the postmodern obsession with commodification pushes new waves of mass-produced goods on a populace now inundated with media. It is here, in the newly commodified world, that cool is born.

That cool is born out of the rise of consumerism is a deceptive statement. In fact, the relationship between postmodernism and cool is in itself deceptive for though the postmodern in all its antagonistic, anti-canonical origins may seem inherently cool, to say that would be a gross overstatement. Rather, this particular idea of cool exists specifically within the postmodern context, and in some ways in spite of it. Thomas Frank examines the rise of cool in the 1960s, focusing on ideas of counterculture, advertising, and marketing. As he defines it, using the analogous word "hip" to discuss the issue, "hip constitutes some kind of fundamental adversary to a joyless, conformist consumer capitalism" (17). With the rise of "'consumer capitalism" the emergence of cool offers a way of rebelling against the system. It is thus to spite consumerism's drive to sell that causes cool to emerge.

Yet in the sixties, rebellion was commonplace if not vital to the fabric of the country. What was conceived as the ideology of the few became the mantra of the many and that rebellion began to be consumed by the system. Capitalism is a system that learns to thrive from such

countercultural movements. The appropriation of cool and the spread of consumerism coupled with ever increasing media saturation leads to the postmodern as it exists now. The cool counterculture of the sixties became part of the very system it opposed and now is central to how cool is conceived. Frank eloquently sums up the appropriation by pointing out the role of rebellion in popular culture today:

> In contemporary American public culture the legacy of the consumer revolution of the 1960s is unmistakable. Today there are few things more beloved by our mass media than the figure of the cultural rebel, the defiant individualist resisting the mandates of the machine civilization. Whether he is an athlete decked out in mohawk and multiple-pierced ears [...] he has become the paramount cliché of our popular entertainment, the preeminent symbol of the system he is supposed to be subverting. In advertising, especially, he rules supreme. (227-8)

Cool then is both part of the consumer culture and antagonistic to it, the commodified rebel who now sells the products we most desperately want. It is here where cool becomes the rhetoric of consumerism, the thing we all want to be and what popular culture strives to give us.

The entanglement of postmodernism, consumerism and cool extends beyond just advertising new products or attempting to appeal to the rebel in all of us. As cool is in many ways a condition of postmodernism, the overlap between the key features of postmodernism and what is considered cool is highly relevant to this topic. The second chapter of this thesis continues to address this question by examining how Japan is positioned as a cool place and thus how popular culture from Japan, which influences American popular culture today, is coded as cool. Yet part of that stems from the way postmodernism has influenced expectations, creating new visions of cool based on nostalgic fantasies and the ever increasing role of media. Norman

Denzin argues in his book *Images of Postmodern Society* that the postmodern is wrapped up in cinematic expectations, defined by the rise of television and film within postmodern society (vii-x). Furthermore, it is precisely because of technology and the creation of new media that the postmodern continues to exist. As Denzin defines it, through technology "postmodern culture, in all its forms -- joyful, narcissistic, nostalgic, erotic, playful, ambiguous, harsh, repressive, and liberating -- reproduces itself" (16). Cool itself cannot shy away from the allure of technology, a point to be addressed in more detail when discussing Japan. Clearly though, the postmodern moment is defined by technology and the omnipresence of mass media.

That Denzin and Strinati both place mass media, and cinema in particular, at the core of the postmodern leads to the second way I will use the term "postmodern" within this paper. Thus far, the focus has remained on the cultural paradigm, tracing the shift from modernism to postmodernism and its intersection with capitalism, consumerism, and the rise of cool. With context firmly established, it is now time to examine how these cultural changes influence popular culture. In particular, I examine the rise of postmodern cinema, its reflection of the cultural paradigm of postmodernism, and what I term the "postmodern action genre" as sites for cool. The purpose of this is of course to show how *Sucker Punch* operates as a postmodern film, which both appeals to the already established notion of cool as well as leads to the inevitable failure of the film to be cool.

The postmodern film is perhaps uniquely positioned within the discourse for its invocation of so many of the key features of postmodernism as a cultural logic. In many ways, our understanding of the postmodern comes from a cinematic perspective. Denzin addresses this issue explicitly, arguing that "postmodern society, as suggested above, is a cinematic, dramaturgical production. Film and television have transformed American, and perhaps all

other, societies touched by the camera, into video, visual cultures" (ix). Cinema and the role of

the visual within postmodern society can be taken one step farther as Strinati illustrates by

characterizing the postmodern as a phenomenon where a "breakdown of the distinction between

high culture (Art) and popular culture" takes place (360). Rather than the old modernist regimes

that have since become canonized, postmodern society focuses on popular culture, dissolving old

barriers of high and low culture. Cinema then takes the stage as both popular and artistic, the

everyday experience of entertainment rendered art through the decline of the old paradigm.

Jameson further refines this idea by arguing that postmodern video is a text "which resists

meaning, whose fundamental inner logic is the exclusion of the emergence of themes as such in

that sense, and which therefore systematically sets out to short-circuit traditional interpretive

temptations" (91-2). While Jameson focuses on "experimental video" and the decline of the sign,

my interest here is on the development of postmodern film within popular cinema and defining

postmodern within the context of genre.

The postmodern film embodies all of this and more, reflecting cultural changes and

anxieties while at the same time serving as consumer driven entertainment created to appeal to a

mass audience. The elements that contribute to a film being defined as postmodern stem from

the aforementioned changes in society, namely the rise in consumerism heralding an increased

interest in the visual. Strinati once again offers the most concise definition of this concept.

> [Postmodern films] emphasize style, spectacle, special effects, images and icons,
>
> and do so at the expense of content, character, substance, narrative, and social
>
> comment [...] it is likewise argued that these films appear to stress spectacle,
>
> through their use of technical sophistication and wizardy, and the helter-skelter

pursuit of action, rather than the complexities and nuances of clever plotting and

character development. (365)

Strinati's definition of postmodern film would fit right in with many of the reviews for *Sucker Punch*. Weak plot and character development plague the film while the only positive reviews highlight the special effects and action sequences (Metacritic). The weakness of the plot and the character, while hallmarks of the postmodern film, are observed here because the film fails, suggesting that the spectacle did not go far enough to distract from the lack of substance. It is obvious from this that postmodern film is by and large defined by style.

Yet style is not the only important quality that defines a postmodern film. In his article "Postmodernism the Movie," Carl Boggs pinpoints some key themes that emerged in postmodern films as the cultural shift began to influence production in Hollywood. Building on the notion of "rupturing" in postmodernism, Boggs suggests that "themes of alienation, conflict, rebellion, and mayhem now surfaced in movies of all genres [...] reflect[ing] a society in the throes of social crisis and political decay, trends that in great measure flow from the contradictions of post-Fordist capitalism" (354). The themes expressed by Boggs are also reflected in *Sucker Punch*, namely in the protagonist's alienation from her family and rebellion against a corrupt system of imprisonment. The narrative of *Sucker Punch* builds on ideas of resistance, insurgence, and violence in order to combat an exploitive system. Furthermore, as Boggs elaborates, the invocation of chaotic imagery and fragmented narration are also clear signs of postmodernism in film (356). *Sucker Punch*'s multilayered and ambiguous narrative combined with imagery drawn from numerous sources firmly places the film in postmodern territory.

While clearly the case has been made that *Sucker Punch* is a postmodern film, it is a rather broad distinction that lacks any concrete elements for analysis. What does it mean that

Sucker Punch can be considered a postmodern film and how can I use this to address the question of cool and its role in obscuring old paradigms of orientalism? To address this question, I turn again to Carl Boggs and his article "Postmodern Cinema and Hollywood Culture," co-written with Tom Pollard. Boggs and Pollard, in exploring postmodern cinema, identify five "trends" within postmodern film. Of the five, most relevant to this topic is the "blockbuster-spectacle" defined as the "most hyper-real, super-commodified of media productions" (166). *Sucker Punch* clearly desires to fit into this category though its success is debatable.

A well-known director with an original story combined with a PG-13 rating suggests a search for wide appeal, no doubt building on Snyder's popularity in the action genre. That it fails at this is a key issue to be discussed in later chapters but clearly there is some evidence to suggest that *Sucker Punch* can be located in this particular trend in postmodern film. It is a significant distinction in part because the invocation of postmodernism in this context suggests a desire to appeal to as large an audience as possible. This connects not only with the previous discussion of cool as a consumption-based ideology but also serves as the foundation for the use of Japanese iconography, which is the topic of a later chapter.

Building on the definition of postmodern film forwarded by Boggs and others, I conceive of the postmodern action film genre as relying on the cinematic techniques often found in postmodern film while also engaging with elements of violence so common in action films. Another important feature of the genre is the inversion of traditional expectations of the action genre, namely the focus on traditional masculinity as central to the action. Thus, within the postmodern action genre, the old paradigm is contested with the rise of new action heroines. This rise, while an important part of the postmodern action genre, has also become a major

component of action films in general. Jeffrey Brown explores the issue in depth in his book *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture*. Brown's focus is primarily on issues of gender related to the increasing prominence of action heroines, specifically concerns of whether such portrayals serve to challenge ideas regarding acceptable gender performance or reaffirm the sexualization of women in film (9). While his book serves as a useful exploration of action heroines, my focus is less on the portrayal of gender and more on how the action heroines in postmodern films are an amalgamation of various postmodern ideas. In particular, this is an important aspect of *Sucker Punch* and its appropriation of character types from Japanese popular culture. Other key elements of the genre include the use of Japanese iconography, reliance on special effects, action sequences that utilize martial arts rather than gunplay, and narrative fragmentation over time. All of these elements occur in both *Kill Bill* and *Sucker Punch*, along with other films such as *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* and *300*, which possess many of the same conventions minus the female protagonist. What all of these films have in common is the presentation of a surreal world where traditional expectations are subverted. It is a central point of this thesis for it is through this subversion and presence of postmodern expectations of ruptures that the obscuring and reemergence of the rhetoric of orientalism is allowed to occur.

To say such issues are inherent to this particular genre of cinema is not an overstatement. Considering the use of violence and iconography within films of this genre, it is the proverbial wolf in sheep's clothing hiding old rhetoric under new guises. It is under the very guise of cool so central to my argument that much of this occurs. Snyder's attempt to make a cool movie evokes all of the aforementioned elements of postmodern cinema while at the same time appeals to consumer expectations of a commercial film. It is seduction at its worst, a drive to present and

conform to the already-established expectations of the genre developed with the rise of postmodernism and its influence in Hollywood. Jean Baudrillard explains it best in his essay "On Seduction," calling seduction the "manifest discourse, the most 'superficial' aspect of discourse, which acts upon the underlying prohibition (conscious or unconscious) in order to nullify it and to substitute for it the charms and traps of appearances" (152). It obscures, beguiling the audience into ignoring the underlying rhetoric through the flash of empty images and fast-paced action. As much as the postmodern film criticizes the old regime, it equally hides the dangers of consumption-driven fascination with all things cool.

Yet, as I have explained, postmodernism is critical to how cool functions and defining *Sucker Punch* as a postmodern film is a necessary distinction in order to discuss exactly how postmodernism and cool obscure racist paradigms such as orientalism. An underlying assumption of this thesis is the importance of postmodern thought not only in understanding how cool functions as a tool to obscure but also in understanding change. It is an assumption that is postmodern in its nature for it presumes that everything has changed. It presumes a rupture from previous narratives rather than an extension or shift in them. In some ways, it suggests a nostalgic time before the spectacle of postmodern film where perhaps the cultural rhetoric was not so obscured by explosions, titillation, and cool. It is an assumption that is not without criticism and I would be remiss to not acknowledge and address that issue.

Dominic Strinati clearly encapsulates the major criticisms regarding the discourse surrounding postmodern film. He touches on issues of spectacle, referencing and appropriation, and even the role of nostalgia, an issue relevant to this topic but not part of my overall argument. Strinati clearly states that postmodernism, especially in regards to cinema, has limitations.

Popular cinema has always been about spectacle and about presenting spectacle to large audiences. From its very early days cinema sold itself on the basis of spectacle presented on screen. So to say that postmodernism is fundamentally about spectacle is to forget this history and to misconstrue the nature of cinema. [...] Furthermore, stories remain an important aspect of the appeal of cinema today. The *Back to the Future* films may exemplify postmodernist claims about confusions over time and space, but they are equally held together by strong and complex narratives, while a spectacular film like *Bladerunner* has a story about the misguided attempts by science to replicate human life, and how these 'replicants' may suffer tragic fates, which goes back to Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. [...] From the postmodern point of view, contemporary cinema is seen as living off its past, ransacking it for ideas, recycling its images and plots, indulging it in pure nostalgia, and cleverly citing it in self-conscious postmodern parodies, which also suggests that postmodernism is reflexively aware of its status as a cultural product. Yet again this exaggerates the novelty of these kinds of developments and misconstrues their character and their history. (369).

Clearly, from Strinati's perspective, the idea that postmodern cinema has ruptured from previous paradigms is an exaggeration. Many of the claims made by theorists of postmodern film, including the ones discussed in this paper, suggest that there is some fundamental difference between the postmodern films of today and earlier cinema. In response, I refer back to Frederic Jameson's thoughts regarding the emergence of postmodernism as part of the earlier modernist paradigm (4). What is clear to me is that there seem to be two views regarding the emergence of postmodernism and its role as a cultural logic, as well as the influence of postmodern thought in

the realm of popular culture such as cinema. On one hand, you have the views of Jameson and Strinati that suggest postmodernism is not so much a rupture but an evolutionary progression of thought. The canonization of modernism required a new mode of thought for rebellion leading to postmodernism's emergence within America. This view of postmodernism seems contradictory to how postmodern theory, as summarized by Strinati and Jameson, conceives of the phenomenon. Rather than a progression, it is viewed as a rupture from previous paradigms and obsesses with that rupturing.

While one could potentially argue either perspective, what is most important for my argument is the idea of rupturing and its stated connection with postmodernism. As Strinati points out, postmodernism is "reflexively aware of its status" suggesting that postmodern film and all the aspects of it related to my argument are part of an intentional effort to appeal to the expectations and style of not only the genre but the culture at large. In other words, the spectacle is there because it is expected, not just because it is a film but because spectacle is part of how the postmodern moment functions. It is rupturing for the sake of rupturing because it is what we have come to expect. It is not new but it is more, a matter of degree rather than kind, and it plays into that ever burning desire for cool.

There remains yet one last discussion regarding the postmodern as it applies to my argument. Having established the context of postmodernism in America along with positioning *Sucker Punch* as a postmodern film, the last issue to be is the role of Japan. Due to the importance of cool and its relationship with postmodernism, along with the coding of Japan as cool, there is clearly something to be said about Japan as a postmodern nation.

To be clear, postmodernism as it has been defined and discussed thus far and by many theorists in their respective works, is a cultural logic of America. I would not go so far as to call

it uniquely American, but given the historical context it is clear that postmodernism as I understand it arose in America in response to cultural forces at the time. Taking that culturally specific phenomenon and attempting to apply it wholesale across the globe is presumptive, to say the least. It is not, however, an entirely useless endeavor especially given the current topic. That Americans who have experienced postmodernism may also draw parallels to other countries, which in turn would be reflected in the media suggests that applying the American framework of postmodernism to Japan would be a useful way of framing the discussion of how Japan is coded as cool by Americans. While Japanese authors have themselves referred to Japan as being postmodern, in this study I am primarily interested in how American audiences construct Japan in relation to America. It is a perspective that positions America as postmodern and then applies the label outward. It is a notion of postmodernity that is inherently troubling as it privileges an American experience.

I must ground this discussion with an acknowledgment that postmodernity, or the experience of being postmodern, differs across cultural boundaries. I draw parallels with the discussion of modernity across the world, an obvious parallel to postmodernity. In her book *Other Modernities*, Lisa Rofel argues that modernity, typically conceived as Western, is a problematic label when applied to other countries. Her thesis states "modernity persists as an imaginary and continuously shifting site of global/local claims, commitments, and knowledge, forged within uneven dialogues about the place of those who move in and out of categories of otherness" (3). Her argument suggests that modernity is experienced differently in other cultures rather than the common assumption that modernity originated in a Euro-American context and is merely adopted by other countries. As it is commonly perceived, to be modern is to attempt to become more Western; or, the only appropriate kind of modernity is perceived as Western. It is

the doctrine of progress so damaging to culture, wiping out anything that doesn't fit into the expectations of the so-called First World. Rofel's argument counters this commonly held belief by examining modernity as it exists within non-Western countries. It is these "other modernities" that Rofel argues "are forced cross-cultural translations of various projects of science and management called modernity" (xii). It is not Western modernity assumed and forced upon other countries but a local modernity that springs from the cultural rhetoric of any given society. While it exists within the global discourse, it is not simply industrialization or the adoption of Western practices but rather based on the local context, from the unique history and experiences of a people. In tackling the perceived uniformity of modernity, Rofel offers a way of examining the issue that decenters it from the Eurocentric context. Applied to postmodernity, this suggests that as a mode of thought originating in America postmodernity likewise privileges Western expectations, and so "other postmodernities" are often ignored.

How Japan has experienced postmodernity is far beyond the scope of this thesis, but it is an important question to ask. There is a distinctly Japanese postmodernity, an experience that is built on the cultural context of Japan. If we consider the notion of modernity, which is caught up in cultural tensions with Western-dominated capitalism, then perhaps we can see some hint of how postmodernity functions in Japan. Marilyn Ivy addresses the question of Japanese modernity in her book *Discourses of the Vanishing*, stating "there is widespread recognition in Japan today that the destabilizations of capitalist modernity have decreed the loss of much of the past" (9-10). It obvious, then, that Japan's experience with modernity is centered on the cultural and historical experiences of that country, along with its complicated relationship with the West. This is a problematic relationship and highlights the issue with attempting to universalize any cultural phenomenon. If we extend this analysis and consider the implications, then clearly what

we see now in Japan is a Japanese postmodernity that rivals the American experience in both complexity and, some may argue, negativity. Yet as much as the two postmodernities are linked through cultural interactions and global exchange, Japan's experience of the postmodern moment, and the ways in which Americans perceive Japan's postmodernity, are unique.

Conceiving of Japan as a postmodern nation is important from an American perspective. It feeds into how Americans code Japan as cool and is central to the use of Japanese iconography in films like *Sucker Punch*. In many ways, this conception of Japan is an appeal to a shared sense of postmodernity. Japan, like America, is a nation inundated by advertising–the drive to consume is as omnipresent there as it is here. An extensive system of mass media and globally popular cultural products such as anime (Japanese cartoons) and manga (Japanese comics) offer even more parallels with American experiences. As Ivy explains it, Japan is positioned as perhaps even more postmodern than America, embodying all of the qualities of the postmodern moment.

> Japan confounds the simplicities of world order, whether new or old. Crossing boundaries of race and region, of temporalities and territories established at the foundation of the modern world system, installed everywhere with its enormous reserves of capital, 'Japan' appears ubiquitous, nomadic, transnational. (1)

Furthermore, Japan occupies a space within the postmodern imagination of America. Not only does Japan possess many of the same economic and technological traits found in America, it also embodies the postmodern concern regarding the intersection of time and space. Japan is a "modern" nation possessing technological sophistication while at the same time it is the site of a great deal of history. Japanese temples dating back hundreds of years coexist with towering skyscrapers in the modern cityscape. The postmodern Japan evokes futuristic images while still

embodying traditional beliefs. It is this very confusion that plays such an important part in the appropriation of Japanese iconography by American media.

While Japan might not experience postmodernity in the same way as America, the perception of Japan as *the* postmodern nation means that Americans are projecting their own experience of postmodernity onto Japan. The ideas expressed through Japanese popular culture and consumed by American audiences feed into the perception of Japan as a postmodern nation. The rhetoric of postmodernism allows for empty labels and decontextualization, which is used by American popular culture producers, such as Zack Snyder, to appropriate elements of Japanese culture. These elements, which are recognized by the audience as being Japanese, become symbols used to convey a specific idea of cool related to Americans' preconceived notion of Japan. The original context, lost in the transition, is replaced by the idea of "Japaneseness," which contributes to the underlying rhetoric I am examining in this thesis. By coding the resultant images as cool, the entire process is obscured leaving only the image, the new cool commodity for American audiences to consume.

CHAPTER 2: WHY IS JAPAN COOL?

Cool is the new guise of old paradigms. It is the amoral label applied to any and every artifact of the postmodern moment. It obscures and deludes, hiding old rhetoric in a new, attractive form. Cool is the new exotic, attracting attention from an increasingly global generation fascinated with new fantasies born from cultures half a world away. It erases meaning, creating empty symbols that function as easily consumed images, appealing to the expectations and shared cultural histories of a multitude of different countries, cultures, and people. Understanding the influence of essentializing and racist rhetoric in our world today requires an analysis and appreciation of the influence of cool in our world today.

For many Americans, Japan has come to represent this idea of cool. Japanese cultural products have gained increasing traction over the years, becoming a fixture of America media and influencing many of the expectations of young consumers. The popularity of Japanese popular culture is hard to ignore and much has already been written about the effect of the influx of those cultural products in America. As Douglas McGray writes, "best-selling Sony Playstation and Nintendo home video games draw heavily on Japanese *anime* and *manga* for inspiration. So have recent Hollywood films, such as *The Matrix*, and television series, including director James Cameron's *Dark Angel*" (46). The influence of Japanese popular culture in America is clear with media creators appropriating content and style, as well as an increasing cultural awareness of Japanese cultural products. It isn't just popular culture that has heralded Japan's increasing status within the American mindset. As Theodore Bestor explains in his article "How Sushi Went Global" Japanese food has come to embody the same coveted coolness of other Japanese exports. It is that taste of difference, a chic newness that appeals to the conscious consumer. Bestor tracks sushi's rise to power, starting in the 1970s with "a rejection of hearty, red-meat American fare in favor of healthy cuisine like rice, fish, and vegetables, and

the appeal of the high-concept aesthetics of Japanese design" (56-7). That this occurs at the same time as Japan's technological rise to power and the flow of Japanese culture into America is obviously key to how Americans have come to define Japan over the years.

The influx of Japanese cultural goods into America caught the attention of academics who have begun to study the phenomenon. While much of the focus of this discourse has been on globalization, I intend to investigate the intersection of capitalism, transnationalism, and most importantly issues of identity. Perhaps most relevant to the overarching argument of this thesis is why Americans code Japanese culture as cool. Obviously this question is a difficult one to address, in part because there is no one answer to it. Yet, it is an important question to consider for it is invariably linked with the aforementioned issues. I therefore posit that the popularity and perceived coolness of Japanese popular culture in America are linked with the cultural discourse of orientalism and the shift to late capitalism.

Realistically speaking, the argument I am forwarding here is ambitious, given the scope of this paper. I focus my attention in this chapter on the examination of the intersection between late capitalism and orientalism because it is my contention that the orientalist rhetoric relating to Japanese popular culture is in direct response to the concerns of those living under capitalism, especially as it relates to cultural production and influence. This is perhaps most important in America, though present in other Western cultures, for reasons I will explain shortly. The shift to late capitalism is also linked with ideas of postmodernity, which I suggest plays a role in constructing Japanese popular culture as cool. It should be noted that I use the phrase "late capitalism" here in reference to the work of Frederic Jameson, who posits it as the current state of the economic system, primarily defined by "an emphasis on the emergence of new forms of business organization (multinationals, transnationals) beyond the monopoly stage but, above all,

the vision of a world capitalist system fundamentally distinct from the older imperialism" (xvii -

xix). The most salient point of Jameson's definition is the shift to a "world capitalist system,"

which devolves power from the imperialistic center of Europe, and more relevantly America. It

is through this shift to late capitalism that countries like Japan gained a foothold and began to

take part in what was traditionally a Western dominated system of globalization.

Of course, the influence of Japanese popular culture discussed in this paper is built on a

history of globalized products that helped set the stage for the eventual popularity of products

such as anime and manga. It is no coincidence that the popularity of Japanese cultural products

such as anime, manga, and videogames began to boom in the nineties. As Koichi Iwabuchi

explains in his book *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese*

Transnationalism, Japan began producing consumer technologies after the end of World War II,

leading to the dominance of products such as VCRs and Sony Walkmans in the eighties. These

technologies entered the American market and began to profoundly affect how people consumed

media. Iwabuchi refers to these products as lacking "cultural odor," by which he means a "focus

on the way in which cultural features of a country of origin and images or ideas of its national, in

most cases stereotyped, way of life are associated *positively* with a particular product in the

consumption process" (27). Yet while these new technologies may have lacked such a "cultural

odor," they nonetheless helped pave the way for future cultural goods that did have odor. As

Iwabuchi explains, "any product has the cultural imprint of the producing country, even if it is

not recognized as such" (27). Thus, the new technology created in Japan and sold in America

helped create new channels through which Japanese popular culture could travel. One of the

most widely known Japanese companies is the electronics producing Sony, creator of the

Walkman and other influential products. Changing how people used technology by

personalizing it and making it widely accessible, Sony helped set the stage for the second wave of Japanese cultural products.

Anne Allison's *Millennial Monsters* examines this second wave of products, particularly focusing on the release of the *Pokémon* game in 1989. That Pokémon is an established franchise now and often a case study of globalization reveals the importance of Japanese popular culture within the larger discourse of globalization. As Allison remarks, "even as it conforms to a preexisting market economy, *Pokémon* also pushes this economy in new directions–what I call here (only half facetiously) *Pokémon* capitalism" (197). While Allison centers this *Pokémon* capitalism on "virtual relationships" and "enchanting goods" it is undeniably linked with the idea of late capitalism and the shift to transnational companies. Nintendo, which created the original Gameboy system on which *Pokémon* was released, is in many ways a transnational electronics company similar to Sony. Both companies produce game systems (currently the Nintendo Wii and Sony Playstation 3) as well as software for those systems. It is not surprising perhaps that videogames are often linked with Japan as the creation of new hardware, the culturally odorless technology, is accompanied by new software, which reflects Japanese interests and cultural expectations.[1] The success of cultural products like *Pokémon*, which as Allison points out "features a borrowing and reinvention of Japanese cultural past," are based not only in Iwabuchi's "cultural odor" of the product but also the odorless technology (197). In this way, *Pokémon* is the quintessential product of Japanese cool. It relies on new technologies, appealing to a sense of progress, while at the same time rupturing from the previously established systems. Each *Pokémon* game, starting with the original, relies on the most recently released Nintendo

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[1] To say that videogames are the most important thing to come out of Japan in terms of coolness is perhaps not an exaggeration. It is difficult to think of it now but the videogame industry today is based on the first 3-system console war between Nintendo, Sony and Sega. American consoles were unable to compete in this system until Microsoft released the Xbox in 2001.

hardware system. The first set of games, referred to as the first generation, was released for the original Game Boy system. As new technologies were developed, new hardware systems such as the Game Boy Color, Game Boy Advance, and Nintendo DS were released, each with a new generation of games from the *Pokémon* franchise. This process of new technology coupled with new content is quite essential to how Japanese cool functions.

Clearly the boom in Japanese popular culture in America in the 1990s was tied to the creation of new technology such as the wide availability of video-cassette recorders, new home video game platforms, and perhaps most importantly, the advent of the internet. Increasing communication between Japan and America spurred the growth of interest in Japanese popular culture, creating a strong fan base that played a major role in bringing anime and manga to the United States. Yet the technology is only part of what makes Japanese popular culture cool. In many ways technology has an inherent coolness about it. There is a reason people line up outside the Apple store to buy the newest iPhone or iPad, just as they line up to purchase new videogame consoles. Perhaps there is not a single reason and it may be different for every consumer, but there is undoubtedly something about technology that elicits such a response. While that topic is outside of my discussion here, it is important to note for it plays a major role in how Japan is conceived of in America. The technologically sophisticated Japan is cool because technology is cool, yet this is clearly a simplification of much larger cultural issues. Japan and Japanese popular culture products are perceived as cool because of a historical paradigm that stresses the otherness and exotic nature of the culture. This rhetoric is commodified into an overly simplified image that is easily consumed.

The paradigm I refer to above is the discourse of orientalism. While much has been already said about this, I intend to address it in two particular ways as it relates to the idea of

Japanese popular culture being seen as cool in America. The first is in the vein of Edward Said's work on orientalism, specifically the idea of orientalism as a discourse constructed by Western institutions in order to control and dominate perceptions of the nonexistent Orient (25). In slightly broader terms, this refers to questions of otherness that often arise when considering other cultures, specifically along the constructed East-West divide. As Asia, including Japan, is seen as part of the Orient, the stereotypes and ideas of orientalism play an important role in how Americans situate Japan within their collective consciousness. In her book *From Impressionism to Anime*, Susan Napier positions Japan as a site of "fantasy" for Americans, engaging in the orientalist rhetoric by appealing to an imagined Japan that is easily consumed by a globally conscious audience. It is both positive and negative, a place where dreams are made yet terrifyingly unexpected, filled with strangers whose culture is so different from American culture (3). The complex interplay between the historical ideas of orientalism and more recent stereotypes of Japan are central to the way in which Japanese cool is created. In particular, the role of technology cannot be underestimated. It is in many ways essential to how orientalism has adapted to changing cultural paradigms. The phrase "techno-orientalism," as defined by David Morley and Kevin Robins, refers to this very shift, highlighting increasing anxiety within previously dominant Western nations and playing directly into how Americans are consuming Japanese cool. It is a new kind of orientalism based on the fear of Japanese technology and Japan's rise to become a world power (149).

The orientalist rhetoric surrounding Japan has changed over the years, adapting to the changing relationship between Japan and America. As Ruth Benedict points out in her seminal text *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, the American perception of Japan during World War II was one of intense anxiety as conflict with this new enemy challenged the previously established

expectations of the West (1). If Americans prior to World War II thought of Japan as part of the Orient, mysterious but largely subordinate to Western power (Said), then it is through war that Japan challenged that view. That a non-Western power could possibly pose a challenge to the dominance of the United States was entirely contrary to the rhetoric of Orientalism, which positioned the Orient as an exploitable, non-threatening Other to be used as Western nations saw fit. In breaking from that mold, Japan forced Americans to reinterpret the relationship between the two countries. Finding the old model ineffective, new essentialisms were developed. As Benedict points out, the war revealed a host of seemingly illogical contradictions within Japanese culture, which challenged previously held views while at the same time presenting a new wave of overly simplified and easily consumed stereotypes.

> Both the sword and the chrysanthemum are a part of the picture. The Japanese are, to the highest degree, both aggressive and unaggressive, both militaristic and aesthetic, both insolent and polite, rigid and adaptable, submissive and resentful of being pushed around, loyal and treacherous, brave and timid, conservative and hospitable to new ways. (2)

These contradictions serve as the basis for how the perception of Japan changed. It is both the source of American fascination with Japan, mysterious and unpredictable, and American fears regarding Japan, adaptive yet resistant to change. It is exactly because of this that new stereotypes about Japan were created–the same stereotypes that are so often found in popular culture today.

The connection between Japan and the Orient, as discussed by Said, might not seem so obvious given that Said's interest lay primarily with the Middle East. In popular usage, the term "oriental" has commonly been used in reference to Asia, including Japan, but Said's formulation

of the term is based on a history of colonizing the Middle East that does not translate perfectly when discussing the Far East. David Morley and Kevin Robins make this clear in their book *Spaces of Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes, and Cultural Boundaries*, arguing that Said's analysis of Orientalism constructs the Orient as "not only of knowledge, but also of power, inscribed in both the discourses and institutions of imperialism and colonialism" (161). For Morley and Robins, Orientalism is caught up in the exploitation of the so-called Orient through the use of force. Applying this idea wholesale to a country like Japan, which was arguably never colonized, is clearly ignoring the specific context under which Said was operating. Instead of relying on Said's version of Orientalism, Morley and Robins claim that a discourse of Far Orientalism exists, positioning Japan as a core topic and arguing that "this Orientalism has been one in which Japan functions as a locus of self-estrangement and cultural transcendence" (161). In this context, Japan once again embodies seemingly contrary positions, occupying a space within the Orient yet estranged from it.

While Morley and Robins make a fair case for separating this kind of Far Orientalism from the Orientalism of Said, I find that in both cases the most important aspect as it relates to my argument is their agreement on how Orientalism functions as a cultural rhetoric. Saying that Orientalism relies on the use of force ignores the reality of the stereotypes and expectations that arose from the discourse. It is a systematic approach to difference, one that employs science and education in order to create a unified concept of the Orient. It is not just a matter of giving people a reason to accept exploitation by the military forces - it is about solidifying a worldview. That Orientalism relied on stereotypes and the process of Othering non-Western nations is not just about exploiting and controlling those parts of the world; it is an inherent rhetoric that establishes difference in order to reaffirm the social hierarchy. Regardless of which view of

Orientalism best applies to this specific case, the most important element remains how the rhetoric is established and reproduced. In other words, how do we see Orientalism still functioning within our society and how does our popular culture reflect that?

The answer to that question is inevitably wrapped up in the notion of "techno-orientalism." Playing on the same anxieties seen during World War II, yet updating them to operate within the postmodern moment, techno-orientalism is also an integral part of how Japan is coded as cool. As previously explained, the notion of Japanese cool is wrapped up in the shift in the world economic system and the rise of Japanese technological goods. Technology itself is an important part of modernity as well as postmodernity. It marks the modern moment and is essential to how we define the postmodern. As Morley and Robins explain, "technology has been central to the potency of [Western] modernity" (167). The superiority of Western nations, including the construction of modernity discussed in the previous chapter, are dependent on the technological advances that occurred during industrialization. It is part of American identity, part of the American worldview, positioning the country at the forefront of progress and technological advances. Yet, it is exactly because of this that techno-orientalism has become a major part of American cultural rhetoric. Technology has been rebranded, much like capitalism, decentered, and repositioned as an integral part of Japan rather than America. Morley and Robins argue that technology is now synonymous with Japan.

> High-technology has become associated with Japaneseness. Out of this a new techno-mythology is being spun. [...] Japan has become synonymous with the technologies of the future - with screens, networks, cybernetics, robotics, artificial intelligence, simulation. What are these Japanese technologies doing to us? The

techno-mythology is centred around the idea of some kind of postmodern

mutation of human experience. (168)

From this it is clear that technology has become central to our understanding of Japan. Whereas Said's orientalism was about the exploitation of the Orient through imperialistic control and Othering, the shifting relationship between Japan and America has changed that rhetoric and adapted it to deal with new cultural experiences. In many ways, the ideology of cool I am discussing in this paper is the means by which the older paradigm of orientalism, which views others as inferior, and the more recent techno-orientalism, which arises from anxiety regarding others, are allowed to coexist. As a label, cool allows American popular culture producers to utilize both kinds of stereotypes but by positioning those stereotypes as cool avoid any explicit racial issues.

Rather than honor-bound, feudalistic Japan the image now is of a technological powerhouse developing new realities that challenge our expectations. Yet it is not an entirely positive label for it engages in the same process of Othering found in the traditional discourse of Orientalism. Japan is now too advanced, creating machines that evoke images of science run amok, robots that are uncannily human. Japan is a place of strange fetishes where the push toward postmodernity has left the people lost and confused, clinging to whatever small piece of humanity they have left. As much as it appears that the orientalist rhetoric has changed over the years with Japan's increasing economic power, it is very much still the same process of Othering. It is the appropriation of these images: of Japan gone too far, of school girls wielding swords and guns, of robots overcoming man and violence overcoming reality that are now so central to how Japan is constructed by Americans. While America remains moralistic, clinging to images of apple pie and simple, hardworking folk, in the American imagination Japan is transgressing,

relying on robots and technology in place of religiously defined morality.   Morley and Robins

make it absolutely clear that the West's loss of the technology war has led to anxiety and

renewed tension.

> The West resents what it sees as the inscrutable, the remote and the ambiguous
> nature of Japanese culture. What disturbs it most of all is that this alien culture
> has now become 'Number One', the model of economic and technological
> progress. In the United States and in Europe there is a powerful sense of Japanese
> *otherness* and a growing fear of the might and power of that 'Other'. (171)

The response to this renewed fear is central to the core argument of this thesis. The means by

which American cinema has appropriated iconography from Japanese popular culture plays into

how Japan is being represented within America. By painting Japan as a strange place, and

utilizing images from Japan that suggest this, it helps to disarm Japan, rendering the country's

technological and economic power as secondary to the peculiarity and perceived immorality. In

turn, these images get coded as cool, obscuring any potential claims of racism. The coolness

however is entirely dependent on the cultural difference. It is because Japan is seen as strange

that it is cool; it is different from the everyday experiences of Americans and appeals to the

desire to rebel against conformity. After all, the reason these images are used in American

popular culture is not because they engage in an orientalist Othering but because they are

popular, hip, and cool.

The second part of this discussion of orientalism is slightly more complicated and based

in the actual production of Japanese cultural goods. To understand this, I refer to Koichi

Iwabuchi's article "Postcolonial Desire for 'Asia'" where he discusses the process of "self-

Orientalism" within Japan. In this article, he examines how Japan positions itself as part of Asia

while at the same time adopts orientalist ideas regarding Asia. This leads to what he refers to as "self-Orientalism," where Japan incorporates orientalist rhetoric into its cultural representation. This kind of representation falls under the discourse of *nihonjinron*, a cultural rhetoric that attempts to examine what makes Japanese culture unique. Harumi Befu discusses the matter at length in his book *Hegemony of Homogeneity: An Anthropological Analysis of Nihonjinron*. As Befu explains, *nihonjinron* operates under an essentializing perspective, very similar to the essentialism that occurs within orientalist rhetoric.

> What defines the genre of *Nihonjinron* is that its assertions and generalizations have to do with the nature of Japanese culture in general, society in general, or national character in general. As such, little or no attention is given in writings of this genre to internal variation, whether along the line of region, class, gender, rural or urban settings, or any other criterion. Consequently, broad generalizations of an essentialized Japan abound in this genre. (4).

That the rhetoric of Orientalism should be appropriated by writers of *nihonjinron* should come as no surprise as in both cases the main purpose is to establish a sense of difference.

As a discourse centered on difference, *nihonjinron* embraces orientalist rhetoric and positions Japan against the West (and in a dominant relation to the rest of Asia), thus reflecting orientalism within its own cultural rhetoric (Iwabuchi, "Postcolonial" 19). This is particularly relevant when looking at Japanese popular culture. Popular culture reflects cultural rhetoric and ideals. When looking at popular culture, one is examining the expectations and values of the culture in question. That producers and consumers of Japanese popular culture are applying the ideas of self-Orientalism as a part of Japanese culture, specifically as it embraces the idea of difference in comparison to the West, renders it unsurprising that orientalist representations are

already a part of Japanese popular culture. While these representations may lean towards

embracing the exceptionalism of Japanese culture, they still reaffirm some of the core ideas of

orientalism; namely, the conformity of Japanese culture versus the individuality of American

culture, feudalistic traditions versus progressive ideologies, and amoral technology versus

moralistic humanity.

What we have then is a feedback loop where Americans consuming Japanese popular

culture are fed images based on orientalist interpretations. First, there is the cultural rhetoric of

America, which positions Japan as a subordinate culture both because it is Eastern and because it

was occupied by American forces after World War II. That Japan has since achieved a degree of

technological superiority over America is rendered ineffective thanks to these previously

discussed stereotypes. In other words, it is Said's version of orientalism based on institutions

controlling images of "the Orient" and positioning them against the western "Occident." This

creates several easily consumed stereotypes of Japan based on traditional images of mysticism

and otherness, as well as more modern images of technology. It is the very postmodern nature of

Japan that allows this with both images existing simultaneously from an American perspective.

The feudal samurai, for example, is a stereotype of the Japanese obsession with honor and the

possession of somewhat magical qualities. Likewise, the giant robot, piloted by a reluctant

youth, serves as an analogous image of Japan's technological obsession. With these stereotypes

already in mind, the consumption of Japanese popular culture in America reaffirms those

expectations by presenting Japan as a different, in this case "oriental" place. One can look at the

popularity of ninja and samurai within Japanese popular culture, as well as animism and martial

arts, as reinforcing the orientalist rhetoric. What consumers get from Japanese popular culture is

the same message they have already been taught by stereotypes created from outside of Japan because of the self-Orientalism that occurs within Japan.

So what does this have to do with why Americans think Japanese popular culture is cool? Orientalism as a discourse is used to dominate and control non-Western culture through the manipulation of stereotypes in order to create a fictional Orient. Many of the orientalist stereotypes, while embracing racist rhetoric, also rely on the idea of exotic otherness and mysticism. The consumption of Others, which has a traditionally sexual connotation but can be more broadly applied as cultural otherness, has taken on a "cool" quality. This is not necessarily new, but within the late capitalist system, or world capitalist system in this case, it has a much more positive connotation than it used to. It is about experiencing difference, a rebellion against the mundane everydayness of American life. It is suburban youth dressing in gangster style in order to taste the otherness of a subculture far removed from their peaceful lives. Consuming cultural others becomes another way to escape the banality of consumerism, a way of expressing individuality through experience. The shift from imperialistic orientalism to cultural consumption follows the same orientalist ideas of exoticness, and no doubt treads in the domain of racism to some extent. Yet, global consciousness is now cool. Tourism and an increasing desire to interact with people across the world have led to more interest in consuming different cultures. The collapse of singular authority and the rise of pluralism have led to increased appreciation of other cultures. Late capitalism goes hand-in-hand with postmodernism, which in turn takes orientalism and re-brands it. Make no mistake, orientalism as a discourse is still caught up in the trappings of power and racism as Said describes, but the consumptive desires that come out of it have taken off in new directions. While consumption is a part of control, the cool factor is where I now focus my attention.

As I have already explained, cool is an amoral label primarily used within the realm of popular culture to signify a variety of things, ranging from rebellion to popularity. It is a positive label regardless of whether or not it is attached to something that may be culturally acceptable. In fact, more often than not, cool is used to describe things that challenge cultural expectations of conformity and appropriate behavior. It is for this very reason that Japan is so often coded as cool. That Japan challenges American dominance, conflicts with traditional orientalist rhetoric, and offers a cultural experience so vastly different from American experiences are all factors that contribute to its status as cool. In his book *Japanamerica: How Japanese Pop Culture has Invaded the U.S.*, Roland Kelts argues that "Japan is now [Asia's] most visible arbiter of cool, via video and computer games, postmodern pop music trends, cuisine, clothing, mix-'n'-match light-speed fashion scenes and, especially, its iconic animations and graphic novels" (16). That Kelts centers Japanese cool in the production of popular culture products is highly suggestive. In fact, it is integral to how cool works, especially in the case of Japan. The feedback loop of "self-Orientalism" in Japan and orientalist rhetoric in America relies on the production of Japanese pop culture products that can be bought and consumed. The images and iconography appropriated by American cinema come from these products, primarily anime and manga as I will explain in the next chapter. Furthermore, the consumption of these products influences the expectations of consumers, thereby influencing demand and changing the idea of what is cool. If Japan is cool, then it becomes necessary for American producers of popular culture to adopt the style, iconography, and narrative elements of Japanese popular culture products in order to get access to that coveted coolness. That the elements appropriated reinforce the orientalist construction of Japan reveal just how integrated this entire system has become. It is nigh absolute with consumers constantly being fed a steady diet of overly simplified images depicting

not only Japan but numerous other countries through the lens of stereotypes which are coded as cool and made part of the industry. Should this sound a somewhat familiar tirade, it is hardly surprising. What I describe here is in many ways similar to the idea of the "culture industry" forwarded by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer over seventy years ago. For them, the culture industry was a tool of standardization and mass production, churning out products to appeal to the constructed desires of the consumer. They defined it as a "circle of manipulation and retroactive need in which the unity of the system grows ever stronger" (407). While I tend to disagree with the finer points of their argument, I would agree that it is this very vicious circle of a culture industry system that thrives on the idea of cool.

Where Adorno and Horkheimer place the impetus on the production side of the equation, assuming the audience would "retroactively need" whatever the producers created, I think it is more likely that in the postmodern moment at least the focus has shifted. The consumer is where the industry begins, especially with the creation of cool. The culture industry, at least in terms of one country's culture industry, cannot produce cool. It is in some ways a vacuum where everything created is related to something that already exists, exactly the kind of cycle cool rebels against. In the postmodern moment though, the consumer's rebellion creates new commodities, new fashions and cultural movements that are seen as cool. When these new creations, born outside the industry, are appropriated by it then we see the proliferation of images and ideas that retain that element of coolness. This is especially evident when products from other countries enter the American culture industry. Those products were produced for consumers in those countries, appealing to their cultural experiences. In turn, those products appeal to the rebellious American consumer who desires to consume difference. This leads to

the exact process I have already described with Japanese products entering the American culture industry and then being cycled through any number of new American products.

Whether it originates from the hands of those who produce popular culture or those who consume it, cool is central to how the culture industry operates in the postmodern moment. Cool is what the consumer needs and what the producer wants regardless of the ideological manipulation that might occur in the process. Clearly, Japan has been appropriated into the American culture industry and is now being used as a means of accessing that idea of cool while at the same time reinforcing all the elements of orientalism previously stated. It is in this moment that a film like *Sucker Punch* is made, serving as a useful example of how this system operates.

While I have made the argument for the consumption of difference within the orientalist rhetoric of America, as well as the shift to a world capitalist system, there remains a point of tension between these ideas. Namely, if Japanese popular culture is so cool, how does one maintain consumer interest in American popular culture? Clearly this is a question often raised in the discussion of globalization, though often regarding the influence of American culture abroad. In this case, it is a question of capitalist exploitation, or how American companies make money from Japanese cultural products. More broadly, how does the American hegemonic process adapt itself to competing capitalist nations? While this question no doubt must be answered contextually depending on the product and country in question, in regards to the influx of Japanese popular culture in America the answer seems quite clear: localization.

The localization (or perhaps assimilation would be the better term) of Japanese cultural products into the American mediascape, to borrow Arjun Appadurai's term, has been occurring since the very beginning of Japan's entry into the world capitalist system. Iwabuchi's concept of

"culturally odorless" products can be inferred as the disconnect between the Japanese product and Japanese culture. Japanese popular culture, while consumed based on the previous discussion of difference, is also disconnected from Japan and localized in order to appear American. What is left is then a "different" American product, consumed for the same cool factor but lacking the embedded cultural context. This is primarily the case with products such as *Pokémon* or many anime series aimed at a younger audience. As Roland Kelts explains in his book *Japanamerica*, "no doubt many American kids believe Pokémon, Yu-Gi-Oh, and Naruto are homespun as well–just as an entire classroom of Japanese kids I encountered were certain that McDonald's originated in Japan" (69). In this case, cultural difference is obscured to the point where the omnipresence of the product makes it seem as if it is American (or Japanese in the case of McDonalds). To refer back to the culture industry, it is through the appropriation and standardization of the product that it is able to enter into the system. A uniformity of localization, combined with changes in American cultural products, allows for a seemingly united style of popular culture, effacing difference in favor of easily consumed sameness. While this works for young children, past a certain age the realization that a cultural product comes from Japan sets in and the previous discussion of orientalism returns.

With this in mind, recent American cultural products have attempted to emulate the style of Japanese products. This can be seen in television shows like *Teen Titans*, which uses similar animation and conventions, and the recent *Thundercats* remake, which is actually animated in Japan. While both these shows are produced and developed by American companies, the reliance on a Japanese style of animation, or actual Japan animators, has clearly become an important part of how American companies compete with the inherent coolness of Japanese popular culture. This takes us full circle back to the idea of late capitalism, which is decentered

from the West where it originated and has become part of a larger world system. "Japan is cool" is an increasingly empty statement built on a history of stereotypes and succumbing to the alienating experience of late capitalism. Jameson puts it best by referring to "the cultural logic of late capitalism" as postmodernism, and suggesting that "it only clocks the variations [of change] themselves, and knows only too well that the contents are just more images" (ix). When there is no central truth, the question of cool becomes a matter of transient philosophy. In many ways it is a question that can only be asked within the late capitalist system because it is a question of image rather than substance. Cool cannot be permanent; it must change because the world in which it exists is constantly shifting, and the relationships between the different points in that system are constantly being redefined. How much longer will Japan be cool, or has it already lost that indefinable quality?

That Japan manages to remain cool depends on the previously discussed issues of Orientalism. In other words, there is a reason Japan is still coded as cool. It is not just that Japan has technology, which signifies progress, or that Japan is culturally different from the United States, or that it appeals to globally conscious consumers, but it is also based in part on how Orientalism, and techno-orientalism in this case, functions within America. Coolness is in this way analogous with strangeness, mystery, or even otherness. Cool is how we are able to continue othering Japan even as we decry such practices. In some ways this suggests that the "cool" of Japan is different from how cool normally operates within the postmodern moment. It is almost a permanent cool rather than the transient coolness of the constantly shifting sands of postmodernism. Yet even that permanence is dependent on the cultural rhetoric of America and its relationship with Japan. If techno-orientalism is based on the anxiety of Japan's rise to

become the dominant technological and economic force, then how will Japan's coolness change when the proverbial bubble bursts? I suspect that question has already been answered.

Japan is on the decline in terms of coolness. Whereas the localization of Japanese popular culture was once a major enterprise in the United States, declining popularity and overzealous distribution has led to a notable decrease in the number of American companies producing localized Japanese products. Even within the videogame medium, a place where Japanese cool has always reigned, a recent wave of American games have managed to challenge the traditional dominance of Japanese games. Looking at the 2011 list of top selling games in America, one finds that major American franchises such as *Call of Duty* and *The Elder Scrolls* series have managed to top the list (Gilbert). Yet, the anxiety sprouting out of the techno-orientalist rhetoric hasn't disappeared so easily. The disaster at the Fukushima nuclear plant in March 2011 highlights how American anxieties regarding Japan are still a major part of the cultural rhetoric. At the instant when Japanese technology fails in some way, such as in the Fukushima case, American media seizes the opportunity to attack Japan. That Japan possesses such technology yet is supposedly unable to handle it reinforces American rhetoric that Japan, for all its progress, is still less capable than America. In this case, the media blamed Japan for not being properly prepared, often exaggerating the dangers and suggesting that Americans were somehow going to be hurt by the disaster. While that topic is no doubt worthy of its own analysis, it serves as a useful example of how American fears about Japan's power are still very much alive. So long as that anxiety exists, Japan must remain cool in order to obscure the negative rhetoric being reinforced through popular culture.

While the question of how long Japan will remain cool is difficult to answer, I have argued that the most important elements of what once defined Japan as cool within America are

the technological sophistication of Japan, the perceived cultural differences between Japan and America, and the feedback loop of "self-Orientalism" and orientalist rhetoric in America. The historical rhetoric of orientalism combined with new stereotypes of techno-orientalism has no doubt played an important role in American perceptions of Japan. The obscuring of this rhetoric by labeling it as cool has further displaced and commodified it, creating easily consumed images that are appropriated into American popular culture. At the same time, the shift to late capitalism has decentered power from the West and opened the door for Japanese cultural products to be spread across the globe. The success of these products has created new expectations amongst consumers while at the same time reinforcing the cultural rhetoric that was already a part of their lives. It is within the framework of late capitalism, where old paradigms have fallen by the wayside, that the question of Japanese cool truly exists. In this era of the unreal, where technology has replaced reality and our perceptions are forever altered by the synthetic, the importance of cool cannot be underestimated. When only images of the once real remain, then what is cool will become what is real.

CHAPTER 3 - SWORDS, TEMPLES AND SAMURAI

Sucker Punch is hardly the first American film to utilize Japanese iconography as a key element of the film's style. It has been evident, both explicitly and implicitly, in several American films over the past few decades. Other recent examples are the popular *Kill Bill* films directed by Quentin Tarantino, which contain numerous references to Japanese popular culture as well as employing several stylistic and cinematic techniques from Japanese films. Likewise, the 2010 adaption of the *Scott Pilgrim* series in the film *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* relies on similar imagery. The use of Japanese iconography in both cases relies on a complex process of signification where the images being used undergo a transformation as they are brought into the American cultural context. This process simplifies the images, removes or alters the meaning attached, and then imposes a culturally accepted in America narrative on the images. The entirety of this process relies both on the postmodern nature of the films and the complex cultural rhetoric described in the previous two chapters of this thesis. The iconography in this case serves as a concrete example of how the orientalist rhetoric operates within the context of contemporary American cinema. The use of these images reinforces the rhetoric by giving consumers simplified ideas, which are easily consumed. In this chapter, I focus on the types of images appropriated and how they function. My goal is to explicitly show how Japanese popular culture is appropriated by the film *Sucker Punch*, the role of these pseudo-Japanese images in reinforcing the rhetoric of orientalism, and the effects of postmodern thought related to the appropriation.

Of course, the overarching concern of this argument is how cool functions as a tool to obscure the process of orientalism. By labeling something as cool, any negative or racist connotations are hidden beneath the idea of cool. Thus, the first issue to be addressed here is how these images within the film serve as part of the director's attempt to create a sense of cool.

In this case, the intent of the director is analogous to the intent of the film, reflecting an attempt to create a specific brand of cool for the audience. Zack Snyder's decisions regarding the iconography used, as well as narrative and character developments are highly suggestive of his intent. In an interview with director Zack Snyder, Cole Haddon asks about the use of Japanese culture on the film, citing the use of samurai and manga as key influences. In response, Snyder takes credit for the use of the images, stating:

> Yeah, I would probably say I put more of that in the movie than Steve [Shibuya] did (laughs). Even though Steve's really Japanese. It's probably because I'm not Japanese that the influence of that stuff is stronger on me. Being American and just having an interest in that direction, whereas, for Steve, he's like, "Whatever. That's just how it is."

From this statement several ideas are clearly being stated. First, Snyder acknowledges the use of Japanese iconography and the influence of Japanese culture on the film. Second, he admits that much of the imagery comes from his perspective, rather than from Steve Shibuya who is actually Japanese. This is an important distinction as it places the images being used within the American cultural context. Rather than Shibuya bringing in Japanese images as part of his cultural heritage, Snyder is appropriating the images based on his American experiences of Japan. In a similar interview, co-writer Steve Shibuya comments on Snyder's interest in Japanese culture and how that influenced the film.

> What's interesting is that Zack was already playing with these ideas of dreams, and he has a deep connection with the Japanese culture. He has this painting in his house of this samurai with wild eyes, running through the forest with a sword.

He's got this deep connection with the culture and I think a lot of that is reflected

in the film. He brought a lot of that with him.

Here again it is made clear that Snyder's interest in Japanese culture had a major impact on *Sucker Punch*. The focus on the samurai is an important element of this influence as it is one of the overly simplified, yet easily consumed images often associated with Japan. Snyder's interest in samurai is not all that surprising; it has long been one of the key images used within popular culture to signal Japaneseness. Whether in reference to historical samurai films such as Akira Kurosawa's *Shichinin no Samurai (Seven Samurai)* or more recent popular culture examples such as the Power Rangers, samurai characters are inherently marked as Japanese and have influenced the expectations of generations of Americans, including Zack Snyder. By serving as a symbol that can be used to easily represent Japan as a whole, samurai characters function as an expression of the American obsession with Japanese cool. It is a symbol that appeal to many of the key aspects of cool as it is so often conceived within American popular culture, specifically otherness and violence.

It is clear from this that Japanese culture, more specifically popular culture, was a major influence on Zack Snyder. The use of Japanese iconography in the film is thus an intentional element designed to appeal to Snyder's cultural tastes, which in turn reflect the larger cultural expectations of America. The images Snyder chooses to use reflect his own understanding of Japan as it is viewed through the lens of American popular culture. His use of these images is based on the artificial and overly simplified construction of Japan presented through American popular culture. It engages in a fantasy of Japan analogous to the orientalist rhetoric already discussed; however, as the images Snyder uses reflect a disconnect from whatever original iconography may have existed, and as whatever cultural values being associated with those

images are potentially lost in the translation, what we are left with is a host of empty symbols being filled with new meanings created by the audience.

This process is accurately articulated in the work of Jean Baudrillard, whose article "Simulacra and Simulations" attempts to address the idea of representation within the postmodern moment. His argument serves as a useful foundation for discussing how the Japanese iconography used within *Sucker Punch* is being appropriated. As previously explained, the appropriation of these images engages in a transformative shift where the image is separated from whatever "original" meaning may have been attached to it and is altered through several degrees of representation to appeal to a new set of cultural expectations. It is a process reliant on the mass media of the postmodern moment and the shifting modes of thought that came with it. For Baudrillard, the question becomes a matter of simulation, the decline of the "real" and the rise of the hyperreal marked by the dissolution of the old bonds of the sign. As he claims, "it is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even or parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself" (170). Baudrillard suggests in this way that the images within mass media are becoming increasing divorced from any real referent and instead operate within a system of self-referentiality. In other words, rather than representing real objects, the signs (images) are reduced to a series of cultural beliefs or intertextual references to other images. It is exactly because of this that images can be appropriated by popular culture and used to essentialize and embody any set of cultural beliefs, such as orientalism. The cultural narrative being displaced arises out of the postmodern moment, in response to the anxieties born out of the loss of the real. As Baudrillard makes clear, "when the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity" (174). In this case, nostalgia becomes

wrapped up in the rhetoric of orientalism, a desire to simplify and commodify difference through the creation of these new empty symbols. They are consumed because they appear authentic, or at least as authentic as the consumer desires. It appeals to our shared knowledge and experiences, creating signs that reinforce the illusion we have already accepted.

In the context of the Japanese iconography in *Sucker Punch*, the images presented are not in reference to any real objects but are empty symbols appropriated from popular culture. The original context, whether historically or culturally defined, is lost in that transition as the images are taken to represent the expectations of a new cultural narrative. The only element that remains is that sense of Japaneseness, an abstract concept that can be read onto anything that fits into the American conception of Japan. It is the quintessential samurai coded as Japanese but removed from that context and placed within the essentializing orientalist rhetoric of American popular culture. Yet it is not just the appropriation of cultural symbols like samurai but the fact that the images being appropriated originate in popular culture. It is exactly as Baudrillard says; signs cease to reference real things and instead reference more signs.

If we look at the samurai image as an example of this process, we see that it is constantly being referenced with increasing distance from any original source. The original source in this case would be the actual samurai that existed in Japan, a real entity that is never referenced directly. It is a truth that does not exist, or is at least not acknowledged by the larger cultural narrative. In other words, the "true" samurai is already a construction, one that privileges an unknown existence over the narrative samurai we have come to accept. What instead happens is that this "true" samurai is re-imagined through historical retrospect. It is what we might call an anachronism, taking samurai as they existed within the popular imagination and then reading them backward through history. Regardless, the samurai that are referenced in Japanese popular

culture are not the "true" samurai but a historical reconstruction that presumes samurai are warriors bound by a code of honor, wielding katana, and serving their respective lords. Popular culture, as it often does, takes these elements to the extreme to create a simplified image of the samurai that is easily consumed. This samurai is seen frequently in Japanese films and in manga, and it is this image that is appropriated by American popular culture producers. The samurai as it is used in American popular culture is not in reference to any original samurai but rather in reference to the samurai image taken from Japanese popular culture. As I have already explained, the samurai represented in Japanese popular culture is already at least one degree removed from any real referent, and when that image is in turn appropriated by American popular culture it is further removed from any cultural context. It becomes an abstraction, an unreal symbol that holds no meaning anymore. The samurai we see in American popular culture has been so far removed that whatever meaning is attached to it is purely based on the cultural beliefs of America.

To put it in terms relevant to this argument, it is an image that only functions as an expression of the abstract ideas of cool and Japaneseness. Samurai are cool because they are disconnected from the alienating historical context where they originally existed and thrust into an anachronistic setting where the only element that matters is the appeal to the audience's shared expectations. Samurai are cool because they are read as Japanese, and nothing else. It is something different that challenges our cultural experiences, but it is not so different as to be threatening or completely alien. That is the key to how these images are appropriated into American popular culture.

While Zack Snyder clearly intended to use Japanese-inspired images as a key stylistic element within the film, it is necessary at this point to analyze what images are being used, how

they are being used, and the context in which they are being used. This chapter is primarily focused on the iconography: specific images, objects, or characters taken from Japanese popular culture and used within the film. While there are several other important elements to be discussed regarding the appropriation of Japanese popular culture within *Sucker Punch*, those elements will be discussed in the final chapter. My focus here then is not on narrative elements or action sequences but rather the core images used within these scenes to establish that sense of coolness.

The first scene in the movie that clearly uses elements of Japanese popular culture to establish the setting is within the first dream sequence. As previously explained, the narrative of *Sucker Punch* occurs within multiple dream layers, each corresponding to the events taking place in the film. The primary dream layer is a brothel where Baby Doll, the protagonist, is attempting to escape with the help of several of the other girls imprisoned there. For their attempt to succeed, the girls must steal four objects from around the brothel. Baby Doll, employing a hypnotic dance, distracts whoever possesses the object they need while the other girls steal it. Baby Doll's dance engages a new secondary dream level where the action takes place. These secondary dream levels are completely separate from the brothel, taking place in several different fantasy settings and containing their own narratives related to the task of stealing the objects. For example, in the primary level the girls must steal a lighter in order to start a fire to help with their escape. Baby Doll's dance creates a secondary dream level where the girls are on a mission to invade a castle and kill a dragon in order to steal two stones in the dragon's throat that can create fire. The goal in the secondary level is thus analogous to the goal of the primary level but taking place in a fantasy setting that allows for copious amounts of action. There are a total of four secondary dream sequences, each taking place in a different setting but involving the same

core group of women. The first secondary dream sequence is notable as it involves only the

protagonist Baby Doll and is the one most clearly influenced by Japanese popular culture.

This first dream sequence occurs roughly twenty-two minutes into the film. Unlike the

other three sequences, the purpose of this dream is not to distract an enemy in order to obtain an

object but rather to establish the escape plan and motivate Baby Doll. There are some

overarching narrative reasons as to why this sequence in particular is important but they are

irrelevant to this argument. What is important is that this scene is about Baby Doll and the

dream serves as a type of metaphoric mirror that reflects her internal struggles. It is thus Baby

Doll's world, reflecting many of the important aspects of her character. Notably, it is a Japanese

world built on Japanese images.

The dream occurs within a temple covered in snow on what appears to be a large

mountain. The temple itself is distinctly Asian with Pagoda-style architecture. The sloping,

multi-tiered roof and large open courtyard surrounded by a wall create the image of a mysterious

temple nestled in the mountains somewhere in Asia. There is nothing distinctly Japanese about

the setting but it becomes coded as Japanese as more elements are introduced. As the camera

focuses on Baby Doll, the first thing the audience notices is her new outfit. Rather than the drab

skirts and top she wears in the primary dream level, in the secondary dream sequences she

always wears a navy schoolgirl uniform, an image often seen in Japanese popular culture. This

change in outfit is a significant part of Baby Doll's transformation and will be discussed in detail

in the following chapter. Baby Doll's initial entrance is followed by several quick camera

changes that reveal the temple in its entirety. As the camera moves back to follow Baby Doll up

the stairs leading to the main door of the temple, the audience catches a glimpse of the opposite

wall. The entrance to the courtyard, from some long winding mountain stairway no doubt, is

framed by a large wooden Torii gate. The Torii gate is a structure often found at the entrance of Japanese temples, composed of several wooden beams in a gate-like design. The Torii in this scene is quite similar in style to the well-known gate at Itsukushima Shrine, sharing a similarly curved roof and beam structure. This similarity is highly suggestive as it is an image that would be known to the audience and would immediately signal the relationship between the temple and Japan. Of course, much of the meaning of the gate is obscured and it instead serves as a simple identifier of origin and a clever visual device, allowing a murder of crows to perch upon it signaling the upcoming danger to the audience.

The exterior of the temple helps position the audience by presenting several images that connect with popular representations of Japan. Building on the old orientalist paradigm, where Japan is conceived of as a mysterious and spiritual place, we see the temple as increasingly Japanese as we move into the interior. Baby Doll's entrance into the main temple hall allows the audience to see several more images that reinforce the Japaneseness of the temple. While the main focus of this scene is Baby Doll, the initial camera offers a wide view of the inside of the temple. Along with the rows of candles lining the walls, one clear image is the three statues in the back of the temple. The statues are of large, muscled men in menacing poses, an image that seems to be based on the Kongorikishi statues found in some Japanese temples, notably the Todai-ji temple in Nara, Japan. While the statues in *Sucker Punch* are not an exact match to the real life statues, the general form is the same and given the fast paced nature of the scene it would be quite likely that the audience would assume the origin of the statues based on the already established Japaneseness of the temple. What is being presented here is an archetypal Japanese temple, using various images that signal Japaneseness, but remaining vague enough to be easily consumed by American audiences. It is an artificial construct based on simplified

images found in popular culture and coded as Japanese through the use of the specific elements. The temple in the film is merely generic Asian, a clear signal of otherness, but by coding it as Japanese it takes on a cool quality. It engages with our cultural understanding of Japan, building on the rhetoric the audience has already come to expect when something is coded as Japanese. It is mysterious, even magical, and as the scene continues these feelings are affirmed and reinforced.

The temple setting clearly positions the audience to anticipate some kind of mystical revelation. This idea is reinforced as Baby Doll walks toward the center dais where a man in white robes is sitting, seemingly praying over a Japanese katana (the moderately curved longsword used by samurai). The dais is the central focus of the scene, drawing the audience's attention to the new character and his interaction with Baby Doll. Surrounding the dais are several large banners adorned with random kanji (Chinese characters used in Japanese writing), framing the supposed monk character. The meaning of the kanji is irrelevant - few in the audience would be able to read the signs. What matters is that it reinforces the Japaneseness of the setting. Even though kanji are in fact Chinese characters, the presence of the katana and previously mentioned elements have already established that this temple is meant to be Japanese. The kanji then are anticipated to be Japanese, but more importantly serve as a useful example of how meaning is removed from the symbols. Regardless of what the symbols actually mean, the context in which they are presented suggests that there is some esoteric quality to them. Possibly meant to represent a mantra or prayer, the kanji fit with the overall feel of the temple. Perhaps more than any other element, the audience recognizes that the kanji have some kind of inherent meaning but it is one that is so different from their own language that it becomes abstract. The language itself becomes cool in part because it is a system seemingly alien to how Americans

understand language. This may be part of the reason why kanji tattoos have become so popular in America over the past few years.

That aside, the presence of the kanji draws the viewer's attention to the dais where the new character is sitting, positioning him as a key part of the setting. The Wiseman, played by Scott Glenn, serves as a mentor figure throughout the film. He appears in each of the dream sequences and offers advice to Baby Doll and the other girls, often providing a useful clue on how to retrieve the object they are after. He is also the character who creates the escape plan and explains it to Baby Doll. Appearing first in the temple, he may be a manifestation of Baby Doll's will to fight, often pushing her toward the final goal. Within the first dream sequence, he takes on the role of a monk or perhaps *sensei* (teacher) character. In this scene, he is positioned as the master of the temple and challenges Baby Doll's convictions, forcing her to acknowledge her desire to be free. The role of the sensei is often seen in martial arts films and the Wiseman is yet another example of this archetype. He speaks in riddles and forces his pupil, Baby Doll, to deal with dangerous situations as a teaching exercise. Even the name, Wiseman, suggests that the character is supposed to be viewed as mentor-like character. As if to reinforce this idea, the Wiseman's first interaction with Baby Doll involves him giving her the weapons that she will use throughout the film.

One of the defining elements of the postmodern action genre established in the first chapter of this thesis is the focus on martial arts rather than strict gunplay as an important part of the action sequences that occur within the films. Often, such as in the case of films like *Kill Bill*, *Sucker Punch*, and *Scott Pilgrim* this translates to the use of a weapon such as a katana. For Baby Doll, the use of the katana is central to her action sequences. In the temple scene, she receives the katana, and a handgun, from the Wiseman. The katana itself is perhaps one of the

images most well recognized in America from Japanese popular culture. Not only is it often seen in the hands of samurai, but it plays a major role in many pop culture products. Manga and anime series such as *Bleach* and *One Piece*, popular in both America and Japan, use katana as the main weapon for some of their most important characters. It is almost ubiquitous within Japanese popular culture, appearing in everything from anime and manga to television, movies, and videogames. The image of the katana in Japanese popular culture is in turn appropriated by American popular culture producers. The use of the katana in recent American films like *Kill Bill* and *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* have helped cement the image within the cultural narrative of America, coding it as Japanese and cool in one fell stroke. Baby Doll's katana is much in line with this narrative. It is engraved with several images along the length of its blade, including cherries, a bunny and flowers, all of which relate to significant events that occur throughout the narrative. Along with the engraving, the blade is shown to be sharp enough to cut through stone; it is a weapon possessing almost mystical qualities. Unlike European straight blades, the curve of the katana gives it a graceful flowing motion when used in combat, as Baby Doll demonstrates during the fight scene that takes place shortly after she receives the blade. That Baby Doll should wield the katana is suggestive of how the film positions her. The temple is her interior world, reflecting important Japanese elements, which are in turn made part of her character. Each of the women that help Baby Doll throughout the story is armed with a different set of weapons. For the quick-witted Rocket, it's a knife while her sister, the secondary protagonist Sweat Pea, has a European long sword; Blondie, the inevitable traitor, uses a tomahawk while Amber serves as the all-purpose pilot. Each of girl's weapons reflects elements of their character and Baby Doll's katana is central to the Japaneseness that is thrust upon her character. She is the character most obviously influenced by Snyder's interests in Japanese culture.

While the katana itself is an important part of Baby Doll's characterization, it is hardly the last element of Japanese iconography within this scene. Shortly after receiving her weapons, Baby Doll undergoes Wiseman's test and faces off against an invading group of giant samurai statues. The invading samurai are themselves examples of Japanese iconography within the film, evoking the stereotypical samurai. Each is dressed in typical samurai armor composed of bulky plates linked together, a representation seen in numerous films and often used in Japanese popular culture. The three warriors each wield a different weapon: one wields a naginata (a polearm type weapon with a long pole and short curved blade at one end), another a minigun, and the last has a katana. Aside from the minigun, each of the samurai's weapons is clearly in line with the samurai characterization. Furthering this image, the katana wielding samurai wears a bamboo hat while the naginata wielding one has the face of a Tengu. The Tengu, a creature from Japanese mythology, is easily recognized by its long nose. That this image should be chosen for one of the samurai reveals how Snyder mixes and matches different cultural elements to create an anachronistic sense of cool. The samurai are not set in one period of time, or even within the narrative context of the world they are in. One is using a minigun, a weapon that seems quite out of place in the otherwise traditional temple. The use of the Tengu face for one of the samurai reflects the blurring of boundaries that occurs when these images are appropriated. The connection between the Tengu and the samurai is purely superficial, an aesthetic choice unrelated to any potential culture connection between the two. The overlap is based merely on the idea of Japaneseness, coded simply as otherness in this case where the audience recognizes all of the elements of the scene as "Japanese" without making distinctions based on what the disparate elements actually represent. It is a perfect example of Baudrillard's system of self-referencing signs where the symbols lose whatever original meaning may have been attached and

are instead used to represent new abstract ideas. The Tengu signify Japaneseness just as the samurai character does, and so the two ideas become synonymous, referencing the same abstract idea. The supernatural qualities and beliefs associated with the Tengu are erased when appropriated within American popular culture; the native context is lost and instead our own cultural narrative is taken up and the Tengu serve as just another example of esoteric Japan.

While the temple scene is the one most obviously influenced by Japanese popular culture and contains the most examples of Japanese iconography, it is hardly the only example. Much of the influence of Japanese popular culture on the film that occurs outside of this scene involves action sequences and narrative elements, but there are several other examples of Japanese iconography, or the coding of elements as Japanese, that occur in other dream sequences. For example, in the second dream sequence, roughly around the thirty-eight minute mark, the narrative shifts into a wartime fantasy. Taking place mostly in the trenches of the battlefield, this dream sequence involves clockwork German zombies and the girls searching for a map. During the sequence, Amber, the all-around pilot of the group who is charge of any vehicles that appear during the secondary dream sequences, is put in charge of a mechanical suit adorned with an anime-esque pink rabbit head. The suit, and the rabbit symbol, both engage in the previously discussed concept of techno-orientalism.

To begin with, the suit used by Amber is similar to the kind of piloted robots that are the hallmark of Japanese anime. From series such as the famous *Mobile Suit Gundam(*1979*)* and *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995) to more recent examples such as *Eureka 7* (2005) or even popular kids programming such as *Power Rangers* (1993), the use of piloted mechs is a concept often seen in Japanese popular culture. Feeding into the conception of Japan as a technically superior country, robots serve as an immediate connection with that discourse, engaging in the

kind of dehumanization so important to the neo-orientalist rhetoric that has emerged within America. The piloted mech is the first step of dehumanization that culminates in the final dream sequence of *Sucker Punch*, which occurs in a far-flung future where people have all but been replaced by mechanized humans. While the mech itself might not suggest Japaneseness, save from the orientalist perspective of the audience, the fact that it is adorned with a pink rabbit is an important part of how the connection is made.

The rabbit, a seemingly innocent image, is part of a larger cultural movement within Japan, one that has caught the attention of Americans and serves as yet another example of Japanese iconography within *Sucker Punch*. The design of the rabbit evokes the idea of *kawaii* (cuteness), a distinction quite important within Japanese popular culture. As Anne Allison explains in her book *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination* the use of such cute characters is part of a larger cultural shift, the so-called "cute craze." The idea of cute is similar to cool in how it simplifies and obscures larger cultural issues. In this case the cute designs become coded as cool once placed within the already established style of the film. In other words, cute become contextually cool based on the surrounding images. As Allison explains in detail, cuteness is part of Japan's market strategy.

> Starting in the 1970s and peaking again in the late 1990s - a "cute" (*kawaii*) craze (also called a "character" craze) grafted around lines of merchandise such as those of the company Sanrio, known for their bright colors, miniaturization, and hordes of small articles as well as other pop cultural forms generally associated with girliness, fun, and childhood [...] These commercialized creations - including Doraemon (a blue robotic cat), Kitty-chan (Sanrio's femmy white cat, also called Hello Kitty), Tarepanda (a droopy, cuddly panda), and Pikachu - sell, and are sold

by, a number of commercial interests by projecting an aura of fancy and make-believe. (16)

The pink rabbit painted on the front of Amber's mech is very much in line with this kind of cute character styling. The image stresses simplicity rather than a realistic depiction of the rabbit and the bright color and mischievous expression give a distinctly girly feel to the otherwise industrial mech. It wouldn't be surprising to hear one of the girls refer to the image as Bunny-chan for it is in many ways similar to cute icons like Hello Kitty. The connection with cute and the widespread popularity of said cuteness suggests that the audience would be quite familiar with such character images. Seeing the bunny painted on Amber's mech would thus create the necessary bridge for connecting the mech with ideas of Japaneseness. The cute bunny painted on the side of a robot is exactly the kind of image one might see in Japanese popular culture, which is being appropriated by the film as an example of cool.

While *Sucker Punch* clearly uses Japanese iconography and imitations of it in order to create a sense of cool, establishing both setting and character based on elements appropriated from Japanese popular culture, it is hardly the first film to do so. Another clear example of this trend can be seen in the work of Quentin Tarantino, most notably his two *Kill Bill* films. Although originally intended to be one complete film, *Kill Bill* was divided into two parts, the first released in 2003 and the second several months later in 2004. Both *Sucker Punch* and the *Kill Bill* films employ Japanese iconography to establish key stylistic elements. In the case of *Kill Bill*, Tarantino's style is drawn not only from Japanese popular culture but also from the intertextual references to classic Japanese films. In his article "Asiaphilia, Asianisation and the Gatekeeper Auteur: Quentin Tarantino and Luc Besson," Leon Hunt explores Tarantino's influences and intentions in regards to the *Kill Bill* films. Through this exploration, he argues

that there are two types of filmmakers who employ Asian iconography in their films. The first type is referred to as a "connoisseur" who takes iconography and elements from Asian films and incorporates them wholesale in the film being produced. Quentin Tarantino fits into that category while the second type of auteur uses Asian iconography in a way that doesn't so much take the elements but rather employs the techniques and actors to enhance what would otherwise be a typical film. Luc Besson is an example of this second type, responsible for films such as *The Transporter* and several Jet Li films. (220-1). *Kill Bill* then completely appropriates the iconography, leaving the references more or less intact so that the audience can recognize what they see and can place it within a larger cultural context, taking pleasure in their superior knowledge of Japanese or other foreign films. The use of the katana in that film, along with any number of other images, suggests an approach that is fully intent on making the connection between the Japanese iconography and the sense of cool that the director is clearly attempting to create. It is in many ways a "cult classic," a type of movie that while commercially produced manages to avoid the negative perception of commercial production. This is the inherent paradox of cool: if it is created by the system to be sold to consumers it cannot truly be cool. Coolness is locked into the idea of rebellion, an almost anti-consumption rhetoric, and finding a way to create a film that is cool while still making money is clearly a difficult task. That Tarantino attempted to do just that, and arguably succeeded, reveals the winning formula he may have touched on. It is just different enough to appeal to that sense of cool that springs up from the cultural difference between Japan and America, yet it is not so different as to be impossible for American audiences to understand and thus enjoy.

I find that the parallels between the popular *Kill Bill* series and *Sucker Punch* are quite useful in thinking about why *Sucker Punch* failed as a film. Both fit into what I have described

as the postmodern action genre. Each film employs similar imagery and stylistic elements, and there is clear evidence of some kind of auteurship. Like Tarantino, Snyder seems to represent a "connoisseur" type of filmmaker, using Japanese iconography while leaving some reference to the original culture intact. The images are meant to be seen as Japanese, rather than merely taking the style or techniques of Japanese films. The elements that exist in this case help reinforce that same sense of cool. The question, then, is will *Sucker Punch* become a "cult" film in the same way that *Kill Bill* arguably has, and if so does that suggest that while a commercial failure *Sucker Punch* may yet become cool? It is a question that is difficult to answer, but one I will attempt to address in the conclusion to this thesis. What is clear is that the use of Japanese iconography is a major part of this coolness and that *Sucker Punch* employs such iconography in order to establish that sense of cool.

Yet, from what I have described, it seems obvious that Snyder's desire to create a cool film is causing him to rely on orientalist rhetoric by appropriating specific images that the audience will understand as representing Japan. The use of katana, samurai, and temples are all drawn from images seen in Japanese popular culture. There is little context given for these images, which are mashed together and presented as one coherent whole. The cultural complexity of the images is lost as they are made to represent one thing: Japaneseness. It is an evocation of cultural difference, an Othering tactic that simplifies Japanese culture and reduces it to a handful of easily consumed images. There is no context given and no acknowledgement of the Japanese influence. The images are merely thrown at an audience who are expected take pleasure in it, fulfilling that desire to consume the Japanese Other. It is quite telling that Snyder's use of the iconography is not matched with the inclusion of a strong Asian cast. Of the five girls, only Amber, played by Jamie Chung, is of Asian descent, and even that is completely ignored

within the context of the film. That Amber pilots the mech and is in charge of piloting all the technology used within the secondary dream level reeks of techno-orientalist bias. Still, it is Baby Doll who the audience identifies as the most "Japanese" character for it is her interior world that is a Japanese temple and it is she who wields the katana. In his article "Themes of Whiteness in *Bulletproof Monk, Kill Bill*, and *The Last Samurai*," Sean Tierney makes an important point regarding the appropriation of Asian martial arts in American cinematic narratives. As he points out, the question of race is clearly an issue in these films.

> American martial arts films provide examples of cultural appropriation undergirded by whiteness ideology rationalized through strategic rhetoric of whiteness. Acquisition of martial arts mastery by White protagonists may be seen as innocuous, entertaining, and enriching, but it constitutes a significant filmic form of cultural colonialism and appropriation that reinforce hegemonic ideas of racial and cultural superiority and inferiority, with consequences that reach far beyond the movie theater. (622)

Extending Tierney's argument to *Sucker Punch*, I argue that every element of Baby Doll's character is designed to suggest her apparent Japaneseness. She is appropriating Japanese identity, cloaking herself in the imagery taken from Japanese popular culture but neutralizing any potential cultural conflict by being white. That a petite white girl can wield a katana with ease, take down three giant samurai and fight off hordes of enemies is exactly the same kind of concept used in films like *Kill Bill*. In both *Sucker Punch* and *Kill Bill*, the protagonist is taking all of these foreign cultural elements that the audience finds appealing, erasing the complicated cultural connections, and making them something that any American can master. It is this kind of orientalism that *Sucker Punch* reinforces, taking the images and ideas and making them safe to

consume, but never revealing that intention directly. Instead, it is hidden under Snyder and Tarantino's appeal to the cinematic connoisseur, the call of the "cult" film, and the all powerful label of cool.

The Japanese iconography within *Sucker Punch* says a great deal about the cultural expectations of America. It is an appeal to our fascination with the mysterious "East," a desire to consume the mystical and the different. It is a reminder of the orientalist rhetoric that still plagues this country and how it has adapted to changing cultural climates. While the appropriation of Japanese iconography is a large part of Snyder's attempt to create a cool film, it is not the end of his appropriation of elements from Japanese popular culture. The easily consumed images are only part of how *Sucker Punch* engages with the discourse of cool. There are also important narrative and stylistic elements that play a key role in tying these images together to create one coherent style of film. Just as the iconography helps to define the postmodern action genre, the narrative elements and use of violence are an equally important part of the question of how cool operates within the postmodern context to obscure the rhetoric of orientalism. It is only through employing both narrative and iconographic elements that the process can be completed and the consumption of cool can begin.

CHAPTER 4 - GIRLS WITH SWORDS

Is there something cool about violence? It is a question that has become increasingly important within the postmodern moment. The increased focus on spectacle combined with the decline of old systems of morality such as religion opens up a space for depictions of violence within popular culture. It is the fear of the masses that violent scenes in television and movies will turn our children violent. They will mimic what they see on television and the entire world will go to hell. The same fear is used to discuss issues such as sex, drugs, and rebellion in general, all depicted in the media with growing popularity. In his book *Popular Culture and High Culture*, Herbert Gans reveals that this fear is largely unfounded but is part of the general critique of popular culture. As he explains, this critique assumes that popular culture is "emotionally destructive because it provides spurious gratification and is brutalizing in its emphasis on violence and sex" (41). Furthermore, he makes clear that these assumptions are based on nothing more than fear, pointing out that "there is no evidence that the vast number of Americans exposed to popular culture can be described as atomized, narcotized, brutalized, escapist, or unable to cope with reality" (42). The fears surrounding the consumption of popular culture are the same old moralistic, pre-postmodern beliefs of true and absolute authority that exist only in the nostalgic minds of those who have lost their authority. It is the black and white morality that only ever existed for those with power.

Rather than a question of morality or influence, perhaps the question should be: why are these things considered cool? This fact is the very heart of the issue being discussed in this thesis. Cool is a label used to hide, to obscure the negative associations of certain images by whitewashing them with a positive feeling of cultural chic. It is not a matter of turning the consumer into a violent, rebellious monster but rather appealing to what the audience wants, teasing them with that taste of cool and drawing in the revenue. The commodified cool is all

about appealing to those titillating ideas that exist just under the skin of society. By presenting those images to the audience, a dialogue of rebellion occurs wherein the stuffy conventions of day to day life are overthrown by the spectacle of violence and sex. That is very foundation of cool within contemporary popular culture: it constantly pushes the envelope, challenging the expectations of the everyday and teasing out the hidden desires of the audience.

Zack Snyder's *Sucker Punch* engages in this very ideology of coolness through the use of Japanese iconography. By using images taken from Japanese popular culture, Snyder is appealing to that sense of difference which is so central to cool. The overly simplified images stress the otherness of Japanese culture, a country apparently composed of katana-wielding samurai and high-tech robots. Yet, the images Snyder chooses are only part of his appropriation of Japanese popular culture. In *Sucker Punch*, Snyder employs several narrative devices and stylistic elements to help cement the sense of coolness he is attempting to present through the film. Those elements, combined with Snyder's use of violence and sex, demonstrate how cool is being used to further mask important cultural issues. The use of cool to obscure issues of orientalism relevant to the appropriation of Japanese iconography is central to this idea. While that still occurs, it also important to acknowledge how cool is being used in this film within the context of violence and the sexualization of the protagonist. That Snyder is employing a style of violence and characterization seemingly drawn from Japanese popular culture reaffirms the issues of orientalism already discussed in the previous chapters. The focus of this chapter then is to examine what narrative and stylistic elements are being appropriated, how they reinforce the orientalist rhetoric already discussed, and how cool is linked with the depictions of violence and characterization within the film.

Perhaps one of the most iconic images from *Sucker Punch* is Baby Doll's costume. As the protagonist, Baby Doll plays a central part in the narrative up until the very end and as the main actor she is often the focus of the slow motion camera shots that define many of the action sequences. Her costuming throughout the film is one of the ways Snyder appropriates a certain characterization from Japanese popular culture. To say that Baby Doll is an "anime-esque" character would not be too far a stretch. There are several elements of her design that suggest this, most notably her hair and outfit. Baby Doll, played by Emily Browning, has longish, almost white hair worn in a twin tail fashion. Compared to the other characters, her hair is the brightest color, a sharp contrast to the brown, black, and dirty blonde hair of the other female characters. While the whiteness of Baby Doll's hair reflects her overall color design, accentuated by the extreme paleness of her skin and dark color of her outfit, it is also an element that is often seen in Japanese popular culture. The striking color of anime hair, which tend to favor color extremes such as bright red, blue, purple, black, or white, are similar to Baby Doll's. This anime image is only reinforced by Baby Doll's outfit, a dark navy sailor uniform, the kind often worn by Japanese schoolgirls. It is an image repeated ad nauseum throughout Japanese popular culture to the point where it is nearly as iconographic as the katana. Baby Doll's outfit is in the same vein of many anime sailor uniforms, most notably the costumes of the Sailor Scouts from the *Sailor Moon* (1991) series. Her exposed midriff and miniskirt, combined with black stockings, all suggest an overly sexualized image, an idea that is reinforced through the numerous action sequence where her acrobatics reveal her underwear. It is a characterization that is in many ways uniquely Japanese, a combination of elements taken from Japanese popular culture and recognized by the audience as such. Just as the katana is used as a simple,

consumable image that represents Japanese culture, Baby Doll's outfit evokes the fetishized

Japanese schoolgirl.

The schoolgirl image goes a long way to reconciling the issues of orientalism, gender,

and coolness that are central to this chapter. It is an image often used in films like *Sucker Punch*

because it encapsulates several important elements of coolness. First, as an image, it is culturally

distinct enough to be recognized as different by American audiences. In this case, due to the

ubiquity of the characterization within Japanese popular culture, it is immediately recognized by

the audience as Japanese. The sailor uniform in particular is distinct from similar school

uniforms in America making it easily recognizable. Secondly, the sexualization that occurs with

this characterization, both in terms of the fetishization of the schoolgirl image in general, and in

the specific case of Baby Doll's revealing outfit, appeals to the cultural tension surrounding sex.

It is in many ways in line with Laura Mulvey's idea of the male gaze as discussed in her well-

known piece "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." In that article, she discusses cinema as

engaging in a voyeuristic fantasy wherein the male audience are able to watch the female

characters on the screen, taking pleasure from the gazing and experiencing a form of power

related to looking (344-7). While Mulvey focuses primarily on the editing of films, extending

her argument to examine iconography is useful. Her perspective is highly suggestive of the kind

of misogynistic fantasy that is obviously central to *Sucker Punch's* narrative, though whether the

film is unwittingly supporting or critiquing that fantasy is debatable. Baby Doll's design seems

to support Mulvey's psychoanalytic approach. Her outfit is clearly being used as a kind of fetish,

drawing the audience's attention and titillating them with the exposed flesh and nymphet design.

Yet, as the central character, she is not merely a passive image that is occasionally a digression

from the narrative as Mulvey suggests. Rather, it would seem that Baby Doll's design engages

with the larger cultural rhetoric surrounding sex. It teases the viewers, drawing them in just as Mulvey argues, but rather than an erotic show the audience is treated to a violent action sequence. The pleasure may be the same in this case. The presumed male audience is treated to the voyeuristic fantasy coupled with violence. While the female character is the actor in this case, the action sequence allows the audience an even more elaborate type of voyeurism. The female character's movements during the fight are often quite revealing, especially in the case of Baby Doll whose short skirt is often flipped up as she fights. While the voyeurism is in line with Mulvey's view of the male gaze, the fact that the female characters are the primary actors engaged in the action sequences is in contrast to what Mulvey argues. There is no male character with whom the male audience can connect instead they must see themselves in the female characters in order to participate in the action sequences. Still, the voyeuristic fantasy remains and when it fails, as is the case when the audience must relate to the female characters, then violence occurs within the film to distract from this. In this way the male gaze is torn between sexual voyeurism and violence. The connection between the various iconographic elements and the teasing sexualization of the characters all move toward a central focus on coolness. Rather than appealing to the male gaze, it would seem that the images in this case are appealing to the cultural tension, pushing that boundary and rebelling against the moralistic tones of American society.

What this leaves us with is an image of coolness that stresses cultural difference and appeals to the supposedly immoral desires of the audience. It is about sex and violence, just as it is about the otherness of Japan. Thomas Frank, in his book *The Conquest of Cool* makes it clear that the central idea of coolness within America is rebellion. As he explains, "there are few things more beloved by our mass media than the figure of the cultural rebel, the defiant

individualist resisting the mandates of the machine civilization" (227). To what mandates is he referring? It could be nothing more than social conformity, the banal morality and simplicity of a nostalgic society, pining for good old fashioned apple pie. It is against these ordinary and safe ideals that cool functions. It is why schoolgirls wielding katana are cool. They are not safe, not moralistic, touching on the hidden fetishes of the masses and their secret desire to see the world burn. Baby Doll is designed to appeal to this desire for difference, connecting elements of Japanese popular culture with sexual titillation. We recognize her character for what it is, an amalgamation of coolness strutting about in a world specifically designed to engage in the spectacle.

The key to that spectacle comes from the over-the-top design of Baby Doll's character, which doesn't just appropriate the sailor uniform from Japanese popular culture but takes it further. It is more revealing and more sexualized than one usually would see, which stresses Baby Doll's nymphet style. Her design contains all the stylistic flavor of Japanese popular culture yet Snyder doesn't end there, he also employs a narrative device that is commonly used in anime: the transformation. This is an important part of the spectacle, in American culture, but especially in Japanese culture. Anne Allison examines the transformation technique when discussing superhero programs such as *Power Rangers* and anime series such as *Sailor Moon*. In these cases, the protagonist and his or her group of friends transform from normal, everyday attire into a combat uniform, marking a shift in the action as well as a form of empowerment. The normal characters become heroes; it is a shift not just in costume but in identity. Allison refers to this change as the "money shot," and as she explains "movement is a central component here (from one state of being to another), as are power and performance upgrading to a higher level, that is, graphically and visually, marked by precise changes to the physical constitution"

(105). This perspective on transformation is quite different from the common transformations seen in American popular culture. An American hero like Superman is always Superman, his transformation doesn't increase his powers, whereas Sailor Moon is incapable when she is not transformed.

In *Sucker Punch*, Baby Doll's transformation is marked by the change in narrative layers from the primary brothel narrative to the secondary fantasy narratives. Each shift is marked by her performing an erotic dance and a change in the musical score, both signaling to the audience that a change is about to occur. The transformation itself involves a close-up on Baby Doll's face and then zooms out to reveal the new narrative level and her changed appearance. Just like the protagonist of *Sailor Moon*, the transformation is accompanied by a change in uniform from her normal clothes, a rather dull affair seemingly drawn from the primary asylum narrative level, to the sailor uniform. For Baby Doll, the sailor uniform is the source of her empowerment, signaling the increase in her power and the start of the action sequences. It is exactly the same as the "money shot" Allison argues occurs within Japanese popular culture, a transformation that marks a change in state and in this case, increased sexualization. In many ways, it is what the audience is waiting for, the payoff from the slower narrative development that occurs outside the fantasy worlds. Toward the end of the film, as Baby Doll's final performance approaches, her everyday outfit is changed to a sparkling sailor uniform, mimicking the empowering uniform she wore in the secondary dream narratives. Only when she wears that uniform is she able to act, as is revealed when she finally takes revenge on the main antagonist within the primary narrative level. The uniform is central to all of this and her transformation is a necessary part of the spectacle.

Baby Doll's uniform wouldn't fit into the category of "normal" clothing, but rather is clearly a costume, and distinct enough to serve as a key advertising image for the film. The distinctive clothing draws the viewer's eye, an important aspect of the design especially within the elaborate action sequences. The costume in this case add to the spectacle of the film through key visual cues and, especially with how the outfit is designed, titillation. Throw in some distinctive music and smart swordplay and you have the key components of a postmodern action film.

Of course, one of the most important components of the postmodern action film genre is the action. While much of the iconography and stylistic elements such as the transformation aspect are appropriated from Japanese popular culture and used to reinforce the otherness of Japanese culture, violence is something seemingly universal. It is an inherent part of the spectacle of the film, a spectacle that obscures cultural tensions. The focus on how the film is promoting whiteness and othering Japanese culture is hidden behind the guise of the spectacular action. It is part of the genre, part of coolness and is central to how old paradigms such as orientalism continue to thrive in the postmodern moment. Violence is in itself a deeply political issue with pundits on both sides decrying its depiction in the media for one reason or another. My goal here is not to make some grand proclamation about what violence does to an audience, nor am I interested in delving into the politics surrounding representations of violence. I address violence here because it is something that cannot be ignored, especially not in the context of postmodern action films like *Kill Bill* and *Sucker Punch*. Violence is part of the narrative as well as part of the style of these films, so while the core argument of this thesis examines the orientalist rhetoric that central to the appropriation of Japanese popular culture, I clearly must address the role of violence in *Sucker Punch*.

I have drawn many parallels between *Kill Bill* and *Sucker Punch*, touching on the similar use of Japanese iconography and narrative elements. One key difference between the films though is the use of violence. In his article "Racism and The Aesthetic of Hyper-Real Violence: *Pulp Fiction* and Other Visual Tragedies," Henry Giroux explores the use of violence in cinema. He establishes three different portrayals of violence in cinema: ritualistic, symbolic, and hyper-real. Ritualistic violence is the kind seen in many blockbuster films, it is "pure spectacle in form and superficial in content." Symbolic violence, in contrast, "serves to reference a broader logic and set of insights." Finally, hyper-real violence is violence that "appeal[s] to primal affections and has a generational quality that captures the bona fide violence that youth encounter in the streets." Giroux's three types of violence help to define the difference between the depictions of violence in *Kill Bill* and *Sucker Punch*. Of the three, *Kill Bill* seems to employ symbolic and hyper-real violence in equal amounts. Rather than the ritualistic violence seen in most action films, the sequences in *Kill Bill* are so over the top as to become hyper-real, a kind of violence that exceeds the banality of normative violence. With blood positively spewing from wounds, stylistic actions sequences that constantly reference Japanese films, and almost nauseating levels of violence against women by women, *Kill Bill*'s use of violence goes beyond the mere ritualistic depiction seen in most films. It is clearly something different from the kind of violence in *Sucker Punch*.

What then is the kind of violence portrayed in *Sucker Punch*? Following Giroux's breakdown, it seems that Snyder uses two types of violence in his film. The most common portrayal of violence within the film is ritualistic. The action sequences that occur within the secondary dream levels are certainly stylized, relying on slow motion cameras, computer generated images, and some impressive acrobatics. Yet, it is a far cry from the hyper-real

violence seen in *Kill Bill*. There is rarely any blood shown during the action sequences, mostly due to the non-human enemies being fought throughout the secondary narratives, and while the deaths of robots and giant stone samurai rely on violence, it is a violence of spectacle and visual pleasure rather than anything approaching the hyper-real. *Sucker Punch* then is very much in line with other blockbuster films, relying on the banality of violence that we have come to expect from cinema. Snyder's clever appropriation and unique style only enhance the coolness of the violence, making it more pleasurable to watch but keeping it firmly in the realm of spectacle. There are two scenes in the movie that challenge this ritualistic use of violence and instead use a more symbolic violence to prove a point. Toward the end of the film as Baby Doll's escape plan goes awry, the main antagonist of the story discovers the plot and confronts the girls. This scene occurs within the primary brothel level and is notable as the first scene where Baby Doll dons her sailor uniform outside of the secondary dream level. Unlike the intense action sequences throughout the film, this scene is quieter and slower. The violence is shocking rather than expected, lacking the stylistic qualities the audience has come to expect at this point in the film. The antagonist, Blue, simply pulls out a gun and shoots two of the girls, an act of violence quite different from the over-the-top martial arts style battles against monsters earlier in the film. It is an act of violence symbolically linked to the social critique the film is attempting to present, a critique about the depiction of women and the authority of man. Blue's use of violence in this scene is an expression of his desire to control the female characters who are rebelling against him, an act that is shocking because of the larger cultural rhetoric being engaged. Similarly, perhaps one of the more shocking scenes in the film comes right at the end with Baby Doll's lobotomy. Although inevitable given the way the narrative develops, the sudden shift back to "reality" occurs as the stainless steel chisel pierces Baby Doll's brain. It is a disconcerting

moment devoid of style or intensity but rather grounded in reality. The symbolic associations of this act are numerous, ranging from a loss of virginity to a questionable rhetoric of freedom. Regardless, the two moments of symbolic violence are a sharp contrast from the ritualistic violence throughout the film, serving as a way of jolting the audience from their normative expectations.

In the end, the violence in *Sucker Punch* serves its purpose, adding to the overall spectacle of the film while obscuring the otherwise troubling issues of orientalism beneath the veneer of cool. Snyder, though, is not satisfied with merely appropriating elements from Japanese popular culture and using violence and sex to appease the audience. These elements are part of his attempt to offer some social critique through the narrative of *Sucker Punch*. It is a critique that is either successful or a horrendous failure depending on the audience but it serves as a useful way to end this discussion of cool.

Sucker Punch, for all the complexity of its narrative levels and postmodern shifts in time and space, is really a film about how women are represented in the media. It is about the fantasy of media, the dream of woman as image and the exploitation of sex in order to appeal to the otherwise distracted masses. Snyder attempts to use *Sucker Punch* as a vehicle to criticize the portrayal of women in media by presenting stereotypical male fantasies to the audience and deconstructing them. That the fantasies are pulled from Japanese popular culture is part of that engagement, for as any consumer of anime or manga can tell you, the portrayal of women in Japanese popular culture is as potentially disturbing as the portrayal often seen in American popular culture. Throughout the film, Snyder attacks these fantasies, revealing the exploitive nature through various scenes of dialogue and most importantly through the antagonist, Blue, who serves as the locus of male power. His abuse of the system and possessive attitude indicate

a clear attempt by Snyder to comment on the men watching the film. It is like asking them directly why they enjoy watching girls clad in skimpy outfits prance about and get beat. The goal is to make the audience uncomfortable. Snyder states it directly in his interview with Cole Haddon when asked about the film's rating. As he explains, "no one wants to go to a movie rated R for leering and uncomfortableness, which is basically what we were faced with." The fact that Snyder's intent was to criticize the male audience for leering is problematic, especially as he may have failed. While the film clearly establishes the social critique it is attempting to present, it does so by engaging in spectacle. The spectacle of the film distracts from whatever social commentary Snyder was trying to make, giving the audience exactly what they wanted to see, separated by short moments of discomfort. The action sequences with Baby Doll dressed in her sailor uniform don't offer any criticism about the state of society, but merely feed into the fantasy of the male audience.

What then does this say about coolness? In some ways, Baby Doll's narrative, though it is a blockbuster film, is about the plight of women, about objectification and exploitation. Yet, that underlying message is exactly what we expect from cool. It is controversial, attacking our normative cultural expectations and attempting to challenge our worldview. Snyder's film isn't just about the action sequences or narrative, there is something more there, revealed through the fascination with intertextuality, hidden references, and multiple meanings. To draw from postmodernism, it is about pluralism, multiple perspectives existing all at once. In cinema today, it is an important element of cool, one that rewards the tuned in viewer and leaves the unhip mass consumer confused. We see it everywhere, in films like *Inception, The Matrix*, and *Kill Bill*. Henry Jenkins examines this very phenomenon in his book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. In describing the transmedia narrative of *The Matrix*, Jenkins

touches on the hidden messages and multiple perspectives that are so important for cool films today. As he explains, "layers upon layers of references catalyze and sustain our epistemophilia; these gaps and excesses provide openings for the many different knowledge communities that spring up around these cult movies" (100-1). It is a necessary element of these films, appealing to the audience's specialized knowledge and giving them a position of superiority over the uncool. Being able to dissect *The Matrix* and pick out every reference becomes part of how cool functions within the larger consumer culture. In many ways, it engages with the same consumptive desire that is seen when Americans consume Japanese popular culture. It is a desire to experience the foreign, the secretive, and to give the consumer a level of knowledge above and beyond what the "average" audience possesses. *Sucker Punch* attempts to do this very thing, though its success is debatable. Whether or not such "knowledge communities" spring up in years to come, whether *Sucker Punch* becomes a "cult" film is what will inevitably determine if it is a cool film.

CONCLUSION

Why does *Sucker Punch* fail as a cool film? Especially in the case of films that achieve the status of cult classic, it is often a matter of time and repeated viewing that create that sense of cool. To declare outright that *Sucker Punch* will not attain that level of coolness is perhaps an overstep, but at least as far as the original theatrical release is concerned there are some clear issues that prevent the film from achieving that status. It is a question not of intent but of execution, for clearly in creating *Sucker Punch* Zack Snyder attempted to utilize all of the vital elements that define a film as cool. In doing so, he established a rhetoric of coolness, which has been explored in depth throughout this thesis. Given this, the success of the film, whether commercially or in terms of coolness, is perhaps secondary to my discussion. Yet, it is an important element for it reveals how the film's execution fails to satisfy the audience. That failure speaks to the expectations of cool and its role in cinema.

As I have argued throughout this thesis, *Sucker Punch* is a useful way of examining the ways in which cool obscures the orientalist rhetoric of American cinema, especially in regards to the appropriation of Japanese iconography. Given the content of the film, I have previously drawn parallels with *Kill Bill*, and I now return to that comparison as a means of reexamining the issues I have discussed throughout this thesis. While coolness is clearly a difficult thing to measure, in this case the economic success or failure of both films serves as a useful metric for this analysis. To further simplify, I will focus only on the first of the two *Kill Bill* movies. As previously stated, *Sucker Punch* was a box office failure netting just under ninety million worldwide, barely covering its eighty-two million dollar budget. In comparison, *Kill Bill* netted a total of one hundred and eighty million worldwide with a budget of only thirty million (Box Office Mojo). There is absolutely no question that *Kill Bill* was far more successful in the box office, making over twice as much money as *Sucker Punch*. Likewise, critic reviews were far

more positive with *Kill Bill* managing a Metacritic score of sixty-nine compared to *Sucker Punch*'s thirty-three (Metacritic). What we have then are two films, similar in content and profile of their directors, yet vastly different in terms of success. Both fit into the same genre category and touch on many of the same social issues, but *Kill Bill* clearly succeeds while *Sucker Punch* flounders. If the question is which film is cooler, I am certain *Kill Bill* would win the prize, but why?

Here we come to the crux of the issue. I argue that for all its titillating sexualization and violence, all the mysterious and fantastical use of Japanese iconography *Sucker Punch* doesn't go far enough. It doesn't have the over the top violence of *Kill Bill* or the multitude of references for the savvy consumer. The cool with which *Sucker Punch* is attempting to connect has been done time and time again to the point where it has been cycled through the culture industry and lost that important difference that makes it cool. The images we see in *Sucker Punch* have been seen a thousand times before in television, videogames, and in other films.

Cool is the rhetoric of postmodernism; it is the only thing that matters in a world where image is everything. To attain coolness, you have to push the boundaries, violate the audience's expectations while being careful not to alienate the consumer. It is a precarious balance and Snyder errs on the side of caution. In making *Sucker Punch* a PG-13 movie, something he intended to do from the beginning, he limited how far he could push the boundaries. The violence is banal, the same ritualistic, non-graphic execution seen in any number of blockbuster films. It is trite to the point of being normative and hence fails to create the necessary break that is central to coolness. The sexualization is titillating but doesn't provoke or challenge our cultural expectations. Everything in the film is one step removed from being truly cool, truly rebellious, and because of that it fails. It lacks the surprise and the edginess of *Kill Bill*. Even a

film like *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, also rated PG-13, is more spectacular, abandoning traditional expectations of action films for surrealist fights more at home in videogames than on the big screen. *Sucker Punch* does not give us enough violence, enough sex, enough surreal action; instead, it fits neatly into the role of blockbuster, competing with any number of films trying to reach that coveted realm of coolness.

While *Sucker Punch* arguably fails to achieve coolness, in its attempt the underlying cultural beliefs and system of appropriation become clear. It is that very system that I have explored throughout this thesis, tracing it through the postmodern landscape and examining how it reinforces the rhetoric of orientalism, adapting it from an old imperialist system to the new domain of cultural imperialism. As much as things have changed, the old paradigms continue to find ways of adapting and exerting their influence through popular culture. Now, the days of explicit racism are fading away and the new, more nefarious doctrines are hiding themselves in plain sight.

America today exists within a world of images, a landscape composed of spectacle and style rather than meaning. It is what theorists call the postmodern and we are in the grip of a world inundated with media, consumption, and global awareness. The era of truth and authority has given way to a world with a thousand voices, each shouting to be heard. It is in this world where consumption is the only valid way of life that "cool" is born. Consumption is how we define ourselves, create our identities, and establish our worldview. What we desire to be, to consume, to create is wrapped up in this idea of antagonism toward the status quo. It is about rebellion and rupturing, both ideas central to postmodernism. Cool is how popular culture functions, even as it rejects that domain of consumptive illusion. It rebels, yet is packaged and sold to the masses until everyone has it, and then it dies, coming to life in some new form. Most

importantly, cool is where ideology hides. Behind that facade of desire lurks a rhetoric of otherness and exploitation, reducing complex cultural imagery to essentialized and easily consumed images. It is orientalism cast in a new form, appealing to the globally conscious youth who eat up Japanese popular culture because it embodies difference yet reinforces our cultural expectations. It is the perfect product of the era of cool, offering rebellion in a package of global chic with enough violence and sex to satisfy the hidden cravings of Americans burdened by an overly moralistic culture. The popularity of Japanese popular culture increases the appropriation of images and narrative elements from those cultural products, appealing to the audience already hooked on the coolness of Japan. In that appropriation, Japan is simplified, turned into a country of samurai and robots, of technology pushed so far that it challenges the historical domination of the West. It is the very rhetoric Americans have come to expect, fed back to them in an endless cycle of orientalism coated in the illusion of cool. Japan is cool. It is a meaningless label connoting positivity while obscuring the complex realities of the relationship between Japan and America. It is a rhetoric that occurs throughout popular culture, especially in postmodern action films such as *Sucker Punch*. The appropriation of Japanese popular culture in such films reinforces the orientalist rhetoric, reducing Japan to the images American consumers expect because it is cool.

By reinforcing this rhetoric, American popular culture contributes to the already existing racial tensions that exist within our society. Rather than open dialogue, the simplification and appropriation of Japanese iconography within American media continues the othering process while obscuring it, making it all the more difficult to challenge. It is the rhetoric of cool that is perhaps the most dangerous thing in popular culture today. It obscures racism, sexism, and violence beneath a veneer of rebellion and cultural difference. We want it because it is cool but

we never think about what is hidden behind that sense of coolness. Meaning is no longer important within the postmodern moment; it is a world of images and empty signs. It is a rhetoric that ignores consequence in favor of style, one that values appearance over usefulness. As much as it has given rise to a new wave of voices, it also obscures cultural tensions, leaving us caught up in the search for cool without realizing what is lost along the way. As long as it's cool, nothing else matters.

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