

Puppets, Gods, and Brands: Theorizing the Age of Animation from Taiwan. Silvio, Teri J.: University of Hawaii Press. 2019. 296 pp.

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Teri Silvio's new book, *Puppets, Gods, and Brands: Theorizing the Age of Animation from Taiwan*, is both an eminently readable ethnography of Taiwanese popular culture and an ambitious theoretical manifesto that makes a strong and convincing case for its own unique take on performance theory. Silvio's animation theory, laid out in the first chapter, successfully ties together what might otherwise seem like a rather disjointed set of ethnographic subjects: the "puppets, gods, and brands" of the book's title. As Silvio shows, each of these is "animated" by both their creators and their intended audiences, whether they are worshippers, fans, or consumers. Animation, in this sense, not only brings an object to life, but also incorporates it into our social world. Each culture defines its social world differently, including which objects are allowed to participate and the criteria for judging a successful animation, but the methods by which objects are animated have much in common across cultures. Accordingly, this review proceeds in two parts, the first focusing on Silvio's discussion of what makes Taiwanese animation unique, and the second looking at her general theory of animation and how it differs from performance theory.

The image that graces the cover of Silvio's new book is an example of the "digital knights-errant puppetry" (*shuwei wuxia budaxi*) (13) produced by the Pili International Multimedia Company. These shows are largely recorded in the Holo (Taiwanese) language, and Silvio uses the Holo term *ang-a* to refer to this style of entertainment. What is an *ang-a*? The closest thing that comes to mind from American popular culture is the film (and recent TV series) "Dark Crystal," or the character Yoda in the *Star Wars* films. While these could rightly be called forms of knights-errant puppetry, these puppets, developed by the talented Frank Oz, are quite different from the puppets used in Pili's films and TV shows. For one thing, Pili's *ang-a* blend traditional hand puppets, Chinese martial arts novels (*wuxia*), Taiwanese opera, along with elements from Japanese and American

popular culture. More importantly, whereas Oz's puppets have subtle, human-like emotional complexity and movement that makes them almost lifelike, Pili puppets—despite becoming more lifelike over time—continue to emphasize that they are puppets. Even the method of voicing characters, which is all done by a single narrator, establishes continuity with the style and techniques of traditional Taiwanese hand puppet theatre (*budaixi*). Pili's Taiwanese fans—the subjects at the heart of this ethnography—reject Western-style realism. Where cosplayers at a *Star Wars* convention might aim for a kind of psychological realism, going so far as to even employ Strasbergian-style Method acting to get into their roles, the Taiwanese cosplayers described in Silvio's book adopt a number of techniques to de-naturalize their movements, even if they don't go so far as to copy the jerky movements of the puppets. Silvio describes, for instance, how when these cosplayers perform short skits, they copy the show by using a single voice actor for all the parts.

But it is not just the “puppetness” of the puppets that sets Taiwanese *ang-a* apart. Silvio argues that producers and fans of Pili's shows emphasize different aesthetic values than those associated with American animation. Central to this argument is the concept of *xietiao*, which Silvio translates as coherence or harmony. Whereas Western traditions tend to place more emphasis on maintaining lifelike realism, as can be seen in the use of motion-capture technology for modern CGI animation or even the use of live action reference footage in early Disney movies, this concern is largely absent from *ang-a* puppetry. This is partly because of its roots in traditional puppetry, but it is also because a different aesthetic is at work. For the *ang-a* fans Silvio spoke with, “the relationship between elements, [and] how the elements of a character's appearance fit together” mattered most (81). This was not merely the fit among surface level elements such as the color of the hair, the shape of the face, or the clothing; it also related to the way these features mapped onto other existing taxonomies in Taiwanese culture, whether cosmological, terrestrial, or spiritual.

Hollywood is not the only, or even the main point of comparison Silvio uses for understanding Taiwanese animation. Taiwanese audiences are far more likely to have grown up watching more Japanese than American shows, and Japanese anime is ubiquitous in Taiwanese popular culture. But the comparison between Taiwanese and Japanese animation aesthetics is much more subtle than the one Silvio makes with American culture. To get there she makes a bold digression into anthropologist Philippe Descola's work on comparative ontology (2013). In particular, she focuses on his distinction between animist and analogical ontologies. Not surprisingly, she sees Japanese anime as associated with an animist worldview, in which “form” plays an important role. Drawing on the work of Shunsuke Nozawa (2013), she argues that,

when Japanese anime characters change form (such as when they go from three to two dimensions), they risk losing something essential about their character. This is less of a problem for *ang-a*, since the “coordination” that Descola argues is “necessary for the stabilization of that entity’s individual identity” (Descola 2013, 212) in an analogical system like Daoism is, unlike animism, easily translatable from one form to another (84). Replace Descola’s coordination with *xietiao*, and you have described the aesthetic view of Silvio’s *ang-a* fans.

Throughout the book, Silvio is keen to emphasize how animation embeds objects within a set of existing social relations; social relations that might include other animated objects as well as humans. Because of the importance of culturally specific human notions about sociality for what counts as animation, its definition will always be culturally specific. This is why, in Chapter Two, she turns to Taiwanese folk religion to better understand Taiwanese concepts of *ang-a* sociality. In Taiwanese temples, icons of the gods are animated through two separate rituals. In the first, “bringing in the god” (*ru shen*), objects are placed in a hole inside the carved icon, while in the second, “opening the light by dotting the eyes” (*kai guang dian yan*), involves painting eyes on the icon after it is installed on an altar at home or in a temple (65–66). One might use such rituals as an analogy for Silvio’s book itself, with the unique culture of Taiwanese *ang-a* animation as the texts buried in the book’s pages, and animation theory serving as the paint applied to open the book’s eyes to the world. For if analogical thinking can help explain what is uniquely Taiwanese about *ang-a*, animation theory provides Silvio with a general framework for understanding animation as a set of more universal human behaviors, as well as a framework for rethinking abstract concepts such as gender and national identity. Animation is thus both the empirical subject of Silvio’s research as well as the framework within which she conceptualizes that research. It is to this conceptual framework that I now turn.

Silvio constructs her theory of animation by placing it in dialog with performance theory, a tradition she traces back to the work of Erving Goffman. But if Goffman laid the groundwork for performance theory, it is Judith Butler who serves as Silvio’s real interlocutor, for it is with Butler that performance studies began to merge with the study of gender theory and identity, both of which are central concerns of this book. For one thing, many of Silvio’s research collaborators are Taiwanese women who collect and occasionally even dress up and perform as male *ang-a* puppets (the focus of Chapter Five). There is also an entire chapter (Chapter Six) devoted to the world of manga fan fiction in which characters representing various national identities and traits (mostly coded as male, although the character of Taiwan is a rare female exception) are made to act out an endless number of sexual

and non-sexual relationships. Silvio argues that the rise of “pink-collar labor” in which women do more “emotional work” (often mediated by technology) has made women especially interested in engaging in these fan subcultures (28). So, if the performance of gender and identity are central themes of the book, why not simply use Butler’s work and the performance theories it inspired? Silvio answers this in two ways. The first is that new technologies have made the difference between animation and performance more relevant. The second is that she sees animation theory as potentially more liberatory than performance theory. I will focus here on the second of these two arguments.

Where Goffman focused on the separation between actor and performance, Butler argued that “the actor’s ‘real’ (backstage) self is as much an effect of embodied, mimetic performance as is the onstage persona” (30). This view of identity can be rather stifling, since it seems to hold little opportunity to break out of these roles. To evade the iron cage of identity, Butler draws on Lacan’s theory of “misrecognition” to make it clear that the “real” performance is always an imperfect copy of the idealized role models around us (31). For Silvio, however, animation theory offers a more liberatory view of identity, one that is less about who we become through performance and more about the power of people to make the world in their own image (205). To understand why, we need to get into the details of how animation differs from performance.

Throughout her book Silvio highlights a number of unique features of animation, but I would like to focus on what I see as the four essential features that set it apart from performance: It is abstract, multiple, temporary, and portable. It is abstract in the ways that a cartoon is an abstraction of reality. For Silvio the lack of detail invites the audience to project their own meanings and emotions upon the object. (This is discussed in great detail in Chapter Three, which focuses on how Taiwanese gods are turned into cute collectable toys.) It is multiple because there is no one-to-one mapping between performer and performance. One person might animate many objects, as in a traditional puppet show, or many people might animate a single role, as in the huge number of credits for a movie that uses modern digital animation techniques. This collective aspect of animation is especially important to Silvio, who sees in it the liberatory potential to experience culture collectively, not simply as individual consumers. It is temporary because, unlike Butler’s theory of animation, it does not necessarily define us. We can stop animating something as quickly as we start, such as when we dress up for cosplay. And it is portable because the same character can appear in multiple media and realms—as a doll, a 2-D animation, a 3-D animation, or a character in a comic book, etc. Although, as we have already seen in the comparison with Japanese anime, some animations are more

portable than others.

It is perhaps in the limits to portability that we see some of the limits to the liberatory potential of animation. These exist in law, such as when companies use copyright law to restrict reproductions of their characters, but there are also cultural restrictions as well. Silvio spends a lot of time in Chapter Four looking at several failed attempts to market Pili's unique form of digital puppetry abroad, efforts that were unable to translate its work into a new idiom. (Though it achieved greater success in Japan than it did in Hollywood.) Silvio does not suggest that animation alone can get us out of the iron cage of identity, but she does suggest that it offers us a different way of thinking about our relationship to that cage and to each other. Collectively we have the power to call into being new social actors of our own imagination, and that is a powerful tool.

For animation theory to take off it needs, itself, to be animated. This can only happen by other scholars picking it up and making it their own. One particularly productive way of doing that, it seems to me, would be to put animation theory in dialog with earlier traditions of scholarship on language and semiotics that emphasized the materiality of the sign. Valentin Volosinov (1986), for instance, viewed language not as something that exists internally, in the subconscious mind, but as an external and social phenomenon. If this is true, then all language use is, to some degree, a matter of animation. Derrida emphasized the primacy of writing over the spoken word precisely to make this point. His theory of language's "iterability" (1988) as well as Bakhtin's theory of dialogism (Holquist 2002) each highlights, in their own way, the complex process by which we animate the language of others and make it our own. Methodologically, it would also be interesting to see a micro-level analysis of how animation is deployed in everyday interactions as might be investigated using the tools of conversational analysis. Perhaps through such studies it will be possible to further finesse the similarities and differences between performance and animation, giving both concepts new life.

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