

Giuseppe Gatti - Notes on Transnational Animation and the Pokémon Culture in South Park's "Chinpokomon"

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Introduction

Born in Japan as a Game Boy game, since 1997 the *Pokémon* franchise has mushroomed worldwide across animated series and movies, trading cards, character toys, and videogames, including a plenitude of tie-in "media-commodities." In the US market, where it rode an outstanding commercial wave, *Pokémon* became the "must-have toy" of 1999 as reviewed by the *Advertising Age Journal*. "*Pokémon* rage," the journal emphasizes, created a stir comparable to that caused by Godzilla, and *Pokémon* videogames "flew off store shelves faster than you can say 'Pikachu.'" Many American newspapers labeled the toy craze for *Pokémon* an "invasion," a "mania," if not a genuine "culture," with American kids "buying them, selling them, collecting them, trading them, bidding them up and down, and even leveraging them" with an unprecedented pace (Baylis).

If such a craze died down in 2002, as quickly as it flared up, the "*Pokémon* culture," sustained by its rapid commercial and cultural expansion, led to a massive distribution and reception of Japanese animation, play goods and other forms of Japanese popular culture (henceforth called "J-pop culture") which attracted the attention of the global market (Perper and Cornog; Daliot-Bul and Otmazgin), and eventually became a phenomenon of academic interest (Pellitteri 2002a; Tobin; Allison 2006b).

Since the rise of anime export, partially due to the success of the 1963 series *Tetsuwan Atomu*, and the initial Western anime boom of the 1970-80s (Pellitteri), an extensive literature has attested to the successful penetration of J-pop culture tropes in Western imagery during the 20th century, especially within the sci-fi domain (Levi; Bolton, Csicsery-Ronay and Tatsumi; Lamarre). At the end of the 1990s, *Pokémon* marshaled a second J-pop cultural wave, which identified this media franchise as a quintessential "anime system," namely a transmedia ecology organized around Japanese anime characters due to their iconographic appeal, non-narrative consumption, and inclination toward commodification (Steinberg). According to anthropologist Anne Allison (2003, 2008) *Pokémon*'s "enchanted capitalism" epitomized Japan's soft power towards the West, while pocket-monsters' "virtual intimacy" reflected the anxiety for the future to come, which, according to Tomiko and Harootunian, featured the Japanese great recession and cultural turmoil of the 1990s. From a European perspective, Marco Pellitteri identifies *Pokémon* as a quintessential Japanese "ludo-narrative cosmos" for its syncretic consumerist nature and its capacity of being successfully "glocalized" in the foreign market. Pellitteri locates anime systems such as that of *Pokémon* in a wider context concerning the "fusion of Western distributive apparatuses with the diffusion of Japanese content, resulting in a hybridization of structures and contents" (50). According to the author, this process of hybridization significantly hinges on Japanese comics and cartoons' intermedia development and "passionate reception" in the foreign market in the 1970s, which proliferated, with different intensities, across generations and countries

beyond the turn of the millennium (Pellitteri 50). Nonetheless, *Pokémon* was hardly the only transmedia system based on animation series which resonated on such a transnational axis.

Along with the Poké-boom, but in a kind of reverse push, the global market of the 1990s witnessed the consolidation of another paradigmatic animated universe: that of adult animation. Since the release of *The Simpsons* (1989-) TV series, these products have globally expanded the audience for TV animation, shifting from childhood entertainment to more complex styles and content for a mature audience (Holloway). At the turn of the millennium, and right after, over fourteen American animated series have emerged as a mainstream television genre characterized by satirical and cynical humour, metalanguage, and self-mocking tropes. Examples of such shows include adult sitcoms like *Beavis and Butt-head* (1998-2011), *Family Guy* (1999-), and *Futurama* (1999-2013), and cross-genre series like *Archer* (2009-), *Rick & Morty* (2013-) and *Bo Jack Horseman* (2014-2020). As with anime, according to transmedia author Tyler Weaver, the “removal from the ‘real world’, where we seek to explain and rationalize everything,” proper to fairy tales and animated storytelling, has allowed these series to grasp realistic themes and to spread across media (231-32).

In this context, *South Park* (1997-) occupies a strategic place. The long-running primetime series, currently in its 25th season, follows the adventures of four kids who live in the fictional suburb of South Park in Colorado. Created by Matt Stone and Trey Parker for Comedy Central distribution, *South Park* made its name by lampooning real-world issues with an unprecedented pace, crude humor, and philosophical complexity (Weinstock). In particular, at the base of its growing academic interest, Jeffrey Weinstock argues, is the program’s “hyperawareness” of participating in a “debate about the value and influence of pop culture” (2, 88). Daniel Frim analyses *South Park*’s “pseudo-satirical” style in detail, focusing on episodes where the references to the real world look incongruous. For Frim, “refraining from making ideological assertions by ambiguously subverting ideologically charged motifs” is what makes *South Park*’s style “pseudo-satirical” (and not simply satirical), offering an unconventional alternative to other adult series which, I would add, are often parodied by *South Park* itself (166). Over the decades, in fact, *South Park* has parodied many famous adult animation shows, including *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy*. Notably, without making explicit statements about *South Park*’s alleged superiority over their competitors, the *South Park* boys are often in cahoots with characters from other series. Episodes of this type include, among others, “The Simpson Already Did It” (s06e02, 2002), “Cartoon Wars” (s10e3-4, 2007), “Imaginationland” (s11e10-11-12, 2007-2008), and the special episode “The Pandemic Special” (2020).

In this sense, the 1999 episode “Chinpokomon” (s03e11) exemplifies this approach by imagining a deceitful military campaign against the USA orchestrated by a Japanese toy company called “Chinpokomon” (meaning “little-penis monsters”). Drawing the story from the context of the American *Pokémon* boom, Parker and Stone present a three-act narrative where *Pokémon*-like anime characters persuade American kids to destroy the “capitalist American government” by re-bombing Pearl Harbor, with very hilarious and pseudo-satirical outcomes.^[1] On the intertextual level, the episode skilfully narrativizes American amusement, fear and cultural bias over the Japanese entry into the US marketplace by blending together the post-war xenophobic American mindset towards Japanese culture (Tchen) with the “befuddled acceptance” of *Pokémon* by certain Western

adults (Allison 2006b 250). Moreover, due to the nature of the story, and the many analogies between the *Pokémon* and *South Park* transmedia systems, the episode itself epitomizes well the progressive hybridization and glocalization of comics and cartoons in the West which Pellitteri and others (Tobin; Denison and Agnoli) discuss in a transnational perspective. Notably, Allison (2006a 249-251) was the first, and perhaps the only one, to recognize the theoretical salience of “Chinpokomon” devoting a few pages to an analysis of the episode for the purpose of deciphering the Western reaction to *Pokémon* and J-pop culture booming.

This essay aims to propose a textual and intertextual discursive analysis of the “Chinpokomon” episode as a contribution to the debate on contemporary transnational animation, with a focus on the Japan-US axis. Introducing the aesthetics and transmedia traits of the two series, a situated comparison will be proposed of the *South Park* and *Pokémon* animation systems. Consequently, an analysis of the episode will be conducted with a particular focus on its three-act narrative. In doing so, American reactions to anime during the *Pokémon* boom in 1999, and its ambivalent relationship with J-pop culture, as expressed in the fictional figures of “Chinpokomons,” will be discussed.

***Pokémon* and *South Park*: Comparing Universes**

By combining theoretical strands and terminology from animation and television studies (Azuma; Lamarre; Mittell; Brembilla and De Pascalis), I will outline a set of similarities and differences between *South Park* and *Pokémon* which will orient my analysis.

Animation technique. Both series are part of a global 1990s media franchise whose success relies on limited animation techniques. *Pokémon* employs the low frame rate and freeze frames typical of anime standards (Lamarre 184-206; Steinberg 1-36), whereas *South Park* leans on a long tradition of limited animation in American TV. Limited animation was, in fact, pioneered in the US by the UPA studio during the 1940s and popularized in American television by Hanna-Barbera’s classic productions such as *The Yogi Bear Show* (1961-62), *The Jetsons* (1962-1987) and many others during the Cold War era (Lehman). While Steinberg (5-9) has discussed the influence of American limited animation series on Japanese animators such as Osamu Tezuka, Gary Cross traces a connection between American and Japanese animation and children’s toy consumption back to the 1930s, when the Marx & Co. toy company outsourced its production from the US to Japan (xv). Due to financial limitations, the *South Park* pilot in 1997 was made with a cutout animation technique that involved the use of construction paper. Even though every subsequent episode of the show has been made with digital technology, *South Park* continues to emulate the roughness of cardboard as an aesthetic trademark and to distance itself from the realistic style popularized by Disney (Halsall 27). While anime cels are often articulated diagonally and characters suddenly pop in and out, the dynamic use of still images (what Lamarre refers to as the “animetic interval”) is one of anime’s distinctive hallmarks, including in the *Pokémon* series (Lamarre 194-195). According to Steinberg, the “dynamic immobility of the image and the centrality of the character” are essential features for anime’s media connectivity and commercial survival (7). Similarly, since its very beginning, *South Park* shared - first as an animation style and then as an aesthetic trademark - this attitude toward limited animation, also due to Trey Parker’s

fascination with Japan's culture. Parker majored in Japanese at the University of Colorado, visited Japan tens of times, and in 2014 built a Japanese Riokan-style house outside of Los Angeles (Turrentine). *South Park* has devoted many episodes to Japan, in which Parker provided the voice of the Asian characters, such as Emperor Hirohito and Ash in the "Chinpokomon" episode. Notably, this episode was the first one of the series to focus on Japan, showing an image of a Japanese city in the South Park style (a branded Tokyo skyline with the backdrop of Mt. Fuji), while in the episode "Good Times with Weapons" (2004, s08e01), Parker and Stone hilariously "switch[ed] back and forth" between the boys' iconic cardboard style and the fast-paced, shonen manga style (Weinstock 12).

Storyworld. Both fictional universes are centered around a group of ten-year-old kids, who over time encounter countless characters in a well-structured imaginary geography. However, if *South Park* mainly relies on episodic narratives (with the infamous "death of Kenny" as a distinctive serial trope), *Pokémon* exemplifies a case of storytelling oriented toward seriality. Additionally, the character design of *South Park*'s four main characters (henceforth "the boys") and that of the Japanese "pocket-monsters" is very basic and easy-to-sketch, mostly counting on a "*kawaii*" style. *Kawaii* (meaning "adorable") generally identifies a culture of/cuteness-related aesthetic which has become a prominent aspect of J-pop culture since the 1970s. Adopting a transnational perspective, Marco Pellitteri highlights a reciprocal fascination and development of *kawaii*-related characters between America and Japan's animation traditions, from Disney's Mickey Mouse and Bambi (whose "big eyes" influenced Tetzuka Osamu's early characters design in the 1940s) up to anime/manga characters such as Doraemon, Hello Kitty, Arale-chan, and Pikachu whose roundness, compressed shape, and friendliness standardized the *kawaii* aesthetic and were echoed in Barbie and Furby toys (2002b, 192-199). If, following Pellitteri, Pokémon are quintessentially *kawaii* for their "exaggerated roundness, puppy look, large eyes, elementary features, soft and graceful shapes", it is not hard to assert that *South Park*'s boys share more than one of these graphic elements (197). In particular, their design resembles that of *Doraemon*, with a gigantic, rounded head, little ball hands and big ball eyes joined together. Moreover, they are often presented as innocent kids and dubbed with a "hyper-childlike" voice (especially Kenny, whose voice is muffled due to his hoodie). In contrast, *South Park*'s adult world is depicted in an uglier and more grotesque way, and the parents have more angular, long-limbed and well-proportioned features. We also find this graphical duality in the portrayal of the human characters in *Pokémon*, although they remain much closer to the *kawaii* aesthetic, whereas in *South Park*, characters (including the boys) take on behaviors and traits that are far from being "cute". This mix of *kawaii* and anti-*kawaii* elements, I argue, characterizes *South Park*'s storyworld and provides an additional link with the anime tradition.

Media system. In terms of transmedia strategy, the *South Park* franchise exemplifies an unbalanced extension of its storyworld towards what Jason Mittell would dub its "core narrative," namely the serial animated adventures of the boys. The *South Park* franchise, in fact, revolves around the animated series which, season by season, set the pace and the setting of its related merchandise and transmedia extensions. In contrast, *Pokémon* better balances its ludo-narrative galaxy across anime, videogames, and trading cards. By introducing the character of Pikachu (whose significance I will discuss later) in the anime series of 1997, the *Pokémon* franchise enlarged its storyworld and increased its complexity, compared to the basic plot sketched in the *Pokémon Red* (1996) videogame

(where a male hero takes a journey in the region of Kanto to become the champion of the *Pokémon* trainers). For many years now, *Pokémon* has remained one of the highest-grossing media franchises in the world, with a total company capital of \$2 billion (The Pokémon Company 2022). With blockbuster movies, multi-platform videogames, several tv seasons, an infinite number of toys, and many Wiki fandom pages, after almost thirty years in the business *Pokémon* and *South Park* can both be considered seminal franchises in the field of global animation. As Steinberg (viii) points out, if “media mix” is the Japanese version of Jenkin’s “convergence” (both theorized at the turn of the millennium), *Pokémon* certainly charts its iconic global manifestation, solidifying the presence of Japanese toys across the world (Allison 2006b, 237). Accordingly, it would also be responsible for “exposing” the cultural biases exercised by the US audience against the Japanese cultural penetration via media mix. For its part, *South Park* is nowadays considered a “titan” of adult TV animation, second only to *The Simpsons* for number of seasons and media exposure.

Historical context. The public fear of the *Pokémonization* of American values was fuelled by an anti-export demonization of Japanese media by the US press in the 1997-98 (Marschall 56-64). Pellitteri (2002a) and Allison (2006b) have discussed in depth some forms of cultural resistance to *Pokémon* that occurred in the Western market despite the franchise’s outstanding commercial success, connecting it to orientalist stereotypes about Asian toxic masculinity and moral values, along with an economic fear of Japan’s post-war technological and cultural rise in the global market, especially in the American context, where *Pokémon* trading cards were banned from many schools.

South Park, as well, has fuelled several controversies, leading to online cancellation petitions and the banning of *South Park* clothing in some American schools (Weinstock 3).^[ii] Both *Pokémon* and *South Park* were notably targeted by the advocacy group Action for Children’s Television co-founder Peggy Charren, who labeled the shows respectively as “the bottom line of the corporations” (Gellene), and “dangerous to democracy” (Marin 57). As discussed by Jenkins, while Charren and her allies feared that the conversion of cartoons into ads for tie-in toys would eventually “stifle youngsters’ imaginations”, franchised toys of the 1980s and 1990s have become part of the shared memories and “tokens of stories and entertainment experiences” which were deeply meaningful for two generations of kids.

Moreover, the *Pokémon* media dissemination and cultural translation could also be framed in a wider, and less evident politics of agreements between American and Japanese corporations. As the executive producer of the *Pokémon* anime, Kubo Masakazu (2002), pointed out, the first *Pokémon* movie, which smashed the American box office in 1999, had to undergo profound changes in terms of music, story, characters, and even animation in order to suit the American market. The aesthetic negotiation made by Masakazu and Warner Bros executive Norman Grossfield allowed *Pokémon The First Movie* (Yuyama, 1999) to gross nearly \$80 million, compared to the \$2 million earned by the competing American release of *Princess Mononoke* (*Mononoke Hime*, Miyazaki, 1997), just two weeks later. If, on the one hand, this adaptation could prove American “protectionism” over transpacific imports, on the other hand, it confirms the “localization” of anime as a key strategy for the proliferation of Japanese cultural imports into the foreign market and imagination over the decades (Marschall; Katsuno and Maret). Similarly, soon after *South Park*’s TV premiere, the show’s rounded aesthetics (which, as I’ve argued, share some

elements of *kawaii* style) facilitated the characters conversion into plush toys, foam stress balls and other merchandise products which sold over \$30 million in barely six months (Nixon), and \$100 million in the whole of 1998 (La Franco). In this commercial context, it is significant that the “Chinpokomon” episode aired on November 3, 1999, nine days before *Pokémon’s* American movie premiere.

As illustrated, *South Park* and *Pokémon* present several points of contrast and overlap in terms of animation, storyworld, media system and production history. Arguably, this prismatic plane of relationships, together with a certain Western resistance to the anime media mix, underpins the narrative universe of the “Chinpokomon” episode and its epistemological longstanding significance as a cultural artifact of the late 1990.

Stage One: Buy It All!

The show opens with Cartman scolding his cat while sitting on the sofa and watching a Japanese cartoon entitled *Chinpokomon*. The TV screen shows a blond Ash-like anime hero surrounded by three little monsters. “Someday, I will collect all the Chinpokomon”, he exclaims, “Then I will fight the Evil Power that will reveal itself once all the Chinpokomon are collected... *oh?*”. On the “oh,” the character tilts his head to one side, showing a typical *kawaii* expression of joy and cuteness. Suddenly, Cartman affects a similar anime look, now addressing his cat gently (Fig. 1). As the show ends, a commercial urges the young spectators to collect all the Chinpokomons to become the “Royal Crown Chinpoko Master”. While Cartman seems mesmerized by the TV screen, live-action footage of a Japanese woman in a black suit (Saki Miata) appears upon the animated background, and the character shouts with an exaggerated Japanese accent: “Chinpokomon is superior rubber toy, number one!”. As the ad ends with the song lyrics “I’ve got to buy it! Chin-poko-mon!”, Cartman instantly forces his mom to take him to the toy store to purchase the toys because, he complains, “people won’t think I’m cool”. Upon arriving there, Cartman is angered to see that everyone else has beaten him to it, and fights with Kenny over the last “Penguin” doll (which is referred to as the “coolest,” but appears to be just a simple penguin with purple feathers). While children are wreaking havoc at the store, at the checkout counter a group of concerned parents is wondering what their children find so amusing about these strange toys and where they came from. As the store manager explains, the toys are “some new big thing from Japan”, concluding that “those Japanese really know how to market to kids”. Then the scene shifts again to the store counter, where kids are watching the same *Chinpokomon* episode which is now interrupted by the Japanese woman from before, who urges the spectator to buy the toys to “have happy feelings”. As they disperse, all the kids in the store recite robotically: “Must-collect-Chinpokomon”.



Fig. 1.

Cartman on the couch watching *Chinpokomon*.

This first sequence parodies the national anxiety about the supposed “Nipponification” of America already at work during the launching of *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* in 1993 (Allison 2006b, 250). Japanese animation is shown as a primary cultural mediator for the penetration of Asian characters in the US juvenile market and imagination. By mimicking anime facial expressions, Cartman (and later all his classmates) embodies the traits of the so-called otaku culture which threatens the American marketplace: a fondness for alien-like characters, violent competition against peers and, as Azuma (2009) later theorized, an “animalistic” compulsion for collecting goods which, as in the case of Chinpokomons, appear visually alien. At the same time, when *kawaiiized* Cartman shows a sort of kindness towards his cat, he alludes to *Pokémon’s* ability to enhance empathy and friendliness. The inclusion of the live-action advertisement seems to parody anime’s supposed ability to leverage compelling visuals to convey subliminal commercial messages. In doing so, the scene also codifies live-action moving images as vectors of commercial persuasion and corporate interests, a trope that would recur during the episode.



Fig. 2. The

Chinpokomon characters.

The scene introduces the Chinpokomon characters as a parodic experiment of transpacific visual hybridization. In fact, the monsters featured on Cartman's tv look like a 2-D rough assemblage of anime aesthetics, canonical Pokémon features, and portmanteau names: "Furrycat", "Donkeytron", "Pengin" and... "Shoe", modest footwear that arguably mocks the very nature of the *Pokémon* toys as a pure commodity, ridiculing the idea of embedding consumer goods into a narrative universe just to be marketable across media (Fig. 2).

However, if the creatures depicted on the *Pokémon* playing cards are certainly items of value and monetary exchange, Pikachu, as the leading pocket-monster, owes its global success to its introduction in the anime series of 1997. According to Pellitteri (2002b, 237), Pikachu's character performs three functions: 1) *Narrative*, epitomizing the anime's leading Pokémon character and Ash's "best friend"; 2) *Symbolic*, embodying kids' desires for autonomy and individuality due to its refusal to be stored in the Pokéball and to evolve; and lastly 3) *Commercial*, as an attractive "cute monster" which, according to marketers, exerts a certain trust on parents, thus ensuring its saleability.



Fig. 3. Lambtron has a

giant cannon on its right limb.

Analogously, Chinpokomon's leading doll and company logo "Lambtron" seems designed to serve the same functions, except for... the giant cannon shown on its right limb (Fig. 3). The "softness" of its *kawaii* look (arguably a mash-up of Pikachu, Winnie the Pooh, and Lisa Simpson) combined with the "power" of its cyborg-like rifle-arm (reminiscent of *G.I. Joe* and *Masters of the Universe* action figures), visually synthesizes the ambiguous "soft power" of this dystopic J-pop cultural operation. On the story level, in fact, it introduces the militarist subplot of the show, anticipating its warfare escalation. From the intertextual point of view, it displays the fear of a supposed Japanese cultural and military "anime counterattack" on America, which I have mentioned before.

Stage Two: From Collection to Invasion

Indeed, Lambtron is soon revealed to be a trojan horse for the Japanese army. After we see the boys introducing Kyle to the “quest” for becoming the Chinpoko Master, convincing their mate to buy a J-toy despite him recognizing it as a consumerist fad, we return to the store where Kyle has just purchased a Lambtron. As the kid exits the shop, and the cashier turns off the lights, a voice from the store shelves draws his attention. When the man gets a Lambtron and squeezes it, the toy exclaims: “Hurry up and buy me”. But after a second and third squeeze, it exclaims “Down with America!”, and “I love you. Let’s be best friends and destroy the capitalistic American government!”.

This scene introduces the audience to the second stage of Chinpokomon’s invasion of South Park, by making explicit the very nature of the Chinpoko-monsters as a vehicle of Japanese propaganda. To make it more hilarious, the creators set the scene at night, giving it a horror twist recalling the classic black comedy *Gremlins* (Joe Dante, 1984), where a furry Chinese critter morphs into a murderous monster.^[iii] Moreover, we experience this transformation through a first-person shot of the cashier grabbing the toy, which resembles the graphical perspective of a first-person shooter video game.

This shot posits an initial link between the game world and that of warfare, which becomes explicit when, the day after, we see the boys on the sofa being engaged with a compelling gaming console. As Kyle enters with his new toy, Cartman laughs at him for not getting the special Chinpokomon controller they are playing with. While the kids are compulsively gaming, the shot goes to the tv screen where a roughly pixelated blonde Ash reminds them to buy all the toys, adding: “So first I’d better go to Hawaii and visit Pearl Harbor.” As the boys start attacking a digital version of The Oahu lagoon’s harbor, the Japanese woman pops up again on the screen, encouraging the kids to keep bombing. From “Got to buy it all”, the Chinpokomon tagline now mutates to “Try to bomb the Harbor!” As the blasting gets more intense, Kenny begins to convulse under the sofa, while Cartman and Stan continue playing.

This scene draws a connection between the very act of buying Japanese toys and that of “bombing” American territory, making clear to the audience the true nature of Chinpokomon: through the amusing language of Japan’s media mix, they are trying to persuade South Park kids to collect cute toys and engage in a sort of “war game” which hides deep anti-American propaganda. This understanding is reinforced afterward, when in a brief scene the toy cashier goes to the Chinpokomon headquarters in Japan, asking for an explanation about Lambtron’s speech. Here the company’s executives, President Hirohito and his partner Mr. Ose, show up for the first time, trying to reassure the man that the accident won’t happen again. Once the cashier says he is not satisfied with their answer, they divert the argument by saying (and gesturing) that the Americans “have very big penis” in comparison to Japanese people. After a group of Japanese women in traditional clothes enters the scene, cheering for the cashier’s “large penis,” the man exits happily satisfied. Then, Hirohito gets angry and slaps Mr. Ose for letting this detail come out, calling for a sit-down meeting. The “penis trick” becomes a hilarious leitmotif, which I will discuss in the next paragraph. The boys themselves also appear to be cognitively “assaulted” by such a media operation, which suddenly mutates its advertising claim from “I must buy ‘em all” (a parody of *Pokémon*’s famous slogan “gotta catch ‘em all”) into the way more aggressive gaming goal “try to bomb the Harbor,” shifting from a *kawaii* anime to militarist and WWII-reminiscent imagery.

If television's cognitive bombing of the kids could appear overstated, Kenny's epileptic attack (and his enduring hypnosis across the episode) explicitly references the so-called "Pokémon shock". This is the term the Japanese press used to label a case of massive seizures suffered by several hundred children while watching an episode of the *Pokémon* series on December 17, 1997. This incident led to medical research which compelled Television Tokyo, the Japanese *Pokémon* broadcaster, to compile a production guideline "in the interest of minimizing the risks of viewer exposure to harmful stimuli".^[iv] Notably, the P-shock news spread before the US *Pokémon* premiere in 1998, contributing to an explosion of academic and popular Western media fear of the upcoming Japanese TV show.

At this stage, one is tempted to say that "Chinpokomon" sketches a trivial picture of a "neo-feudal" Japanese corporation, a global brainwashing machine to recreate the Japanese imperialism through anime and popular media (Allison 2006b, 250). And indeed, the absurd story of re-bombing Pearl Harbour, and taking down America from within via anime propaganda may reinforce this understanding of the episode in connection with other US popular iconographies and narratives sustaining the idea of an impending war with the East since the late 1930s, including Arthur Leo Zagat's sci-fi story *Tomorrow* (1939), which recounts the future invasion of America by the "yellows" and the "Remember Pearl Harbor" manifest (1942) which placed the fight with Japan "into one long progression of conflicts between brave [American] individuals and treacherous hordes" (Tchen 287-388).

As anime and manga helped Japanese society mitigate the spectre of the nuclear bomb during the Reconstruction era (Allison 2006b, 35-65; Sthal and Williams), at the same time it nurtured a certain suspicion in Western public opinion, as many anime of the time (especially the super robot sagas of the 1970s which revolve around unique robots with super-natural powers) showed an explicit antagonism, if not a desire for revenge, towards the Allied nations (Nacci). The "Yellow Peril," a pervasive racist idea depicting East Asian people as dangerous to the Western world (Tchen and Yeats), certainly persists in the *Pokémon* era. In this particular case, it manifests in a way that Rick Marschall has summarised as follows: "I've noticed that some *salacious* observers in America have suggested that where the Japanese failed at Pearl Harbour, they instead managed to hit the mark thanks to *Pokémon*" (44, italics mine).

Is this really the case? Do *South Park's* directors depict Japanese anime in a such naïve or even "antiliberal" way, as Anderson (2005) would argue? Or do they, as Allison leaves open to discussion, parody the failure of the US adults to comprehend "what kids are up to these days, both at play and in 'real' life?" (2006b, 251).

Stage Three: Get the Power in Your Hands!

During the night, while Cartman is asleep, an antenna sprouts from his Chinpokomonster. It casts a light signal out of the window, which joins other signals and goes to a satellite, bouncing them to the headquarters of the Chinpokomon Toy Corporation. Here each toy appears on its own screen on the company's video wall while President Hirohito, speaking in Japanese, announces his plan to retake Pearl Harbor. In front of him, beyond

the executives, a line of soldiers load their rifles in unison.

After this revelatory scene, we see Stan's parents on the sofa watching Chinpokomon, trying to understand "if it's teaching him good moral values." After watching a seemingly nonsense dialogue between two Chinpoko Masters, the parents conclude that the anime is not vulgar nor violent, but simply "stupid," so basically harmless. This is a vision shared by many, as Allison reports after a roundtable with a group of parents, which led to a "befuddled acceptance" towards *Pokémon's* seemingly incongruous storytelling and game design during its American boom (2006b, 250).



Fig. 4. The concert stage.

From now on the main storyline shifts in a more surrealistic vein, following the hilarious "third stage" of Chinpokomon's operation, namely the recruitment and training of South Park's kids by the Japanese air force, and the consequent counteroffensive of their concerned parents. In fact, the toy company gathers the kids in the "Big Weekend Chinpokomon Camp" where, from a gigantic concert stage surrounded by video walls, the corporation's president reveals that the "Evil Power" is nothing but the American government, transforming the event into a massive Japanese language course and military training (Fig. 4).

Like the P-Shock sequence, this scene is drawn from a real media event: the *Pokémon* League Summer Training Tour, which took place in 1999 at the Mall of America in Minneapolis. Involving over 44, 000 participants, the event was the first national tournament of the *Pokémon* trading card game, attesting to its national popularity. Notably, the game was released on January 1999 by the American games manufacturer Wizards of the Coast which, after announcing the acquisition of *Pokémon* trading card rights from Nintendo, proudly stated: "We believe the *invasion* of the *Pokémon* trading card game into North America will be a tremendous success [...] We are excited to be working with Nintendo to *reproduce* the *Pokémon* trading card game craze in North America. Our advice to future *Pokémon* trainers is - *Get the power in your hands!* [italics mine]" (Wizards of the Coast, 1998). Seemingly, by joining the Chinpokomon Camp, the boys have the chance to put into practice the rules, goals, and routines of what has appeared to be just a simple child's play.

In this sense, *South Park's* directors seem to employ the same metaphor chosen by Michel Foucault, i.e. the military system, to parody the informal, yet effective, regime of

power exercised by a media system to entrap new clients and obtain consumerist obedience. As Foucault remarked on several occasions (1988, 2020), civil obedience could be obtained not only with violence but also through the production and exchange of signs that are enmeshed within specific apparatuses and “technologies”. Taking Foucault’s view even further, it’s not risky to glimpse in the Chinpokomon media mix the narrativization of a disciplinary “block,” namely a concerted assemblage of communication systems, goal-oriented activities, and relations of power (Foucault 337-339). As shown, the boys are first introduced to a system of communication (that of Japanese animation, *kawaii* expressions, gaming, and language). Afterward, they are induced to take action (getting the toys, and bombing the harbor) and therefore to recognize a power relation (the Japanese people are friends, America is the “Evil Power”) with the eminent goal of taking down America from inside. Here *South Park*’s satire is particularly striking, since Ronald Reagan, in his famous 1983 speech, termed the Soviet Union an “Evil Empire”, fostering a “civilization clash” and an “us vs them” discourse that would resonate in future American conflicts in the Middle East (Tchen 279).

The effect of this Foucauldian power regime becomes explicit in the eyes of adults as soon as the kids acquire an anime look by emulating the cute facial expression and the behaviors of anime characters. At the beginning of this scene, Cartman and all his friends appear with enlarged eyes and smile, now evoking Japanese *kawaii* aesthetics more explicitly. Their eye line curves and the mouth enlarges in a big “manga” smile with tongue and teeth visible. At the same time, they also make fun of their schoolteacher Mr. Garrison by speaking in Japanese.

Concerned by this abrupt “Japanification” of their children, the parents gather in the city hall, and with the endorsement of the mayor, try to fight the hegemonic anime fad by creating a new one. Following this scene, we see the boys on a sofa at the “South Park Market Research Laboratories,” looking at a big screen flanked by two lab technicians. The technicians’ screen advertising clips for two experimental toys made in the USA. Significantly, these ads are produced in live-action, presenting two bizarre products which the boys dismiss as “totally gay”: “Wild Wacky Action Bike,” a bicycle almost impossible to steer which ends up exploding under a truck, and “Alabama Man,” an adult male action figure shown with a beer can and a bowling ball under the confederated flag, with an action button for “knocking out his wife.” The fictional action figure of Alabama Man is seemingly a parody of the racist American toy “Alabama Coon Jiggers,” produced by Louis Marx & Co. in 1919. This connection seems to not be trivial since, as I pointed out earlier, Louis Marx was one of the first US manufacturers to outsource its production in Japan during the 1930s. Moreover, Cartman’s homophobic line (“totally gay”) should be intended as a critique to the normative image of masculinity and manhood promoted by Western children’s marketing (Foss). As a core feature of the *South Park* series, the sequence contrasts the perspective of the young Americans with that of the adults, wherein the latter are characterized by moral hypocrisy, class, race and gender prejudices, yellow perilism, and capitalist myopia.

From now on, in fact, the story progresses towards the radicalization of the Japanized boys against their American parents, shifting from a seemingly cultural war to a military one. In the next scene, we see the parents lined up at the roadside as a troop of South Park kids in Imperial Japanese military uniforms parade waving the Japanese state and red flags, while shouting “Ottawa Beikoku!” (“Down with the USA!”).

Sharon, Stan's mother, steps in and tries to take her son back home, but the troop pushes her back while Mr. Ose reassures the woman, saying that "everything is okay". After Sharon asserts that "it's not ok!", the Japanese man replies "Oh, but you have such a large penis, uh". As with the cashier and throughout the episode, whenever they are questioned, Japanese adults dispel the Americans' suspicions by assuring them that they have "such a large penis" compared to theirs. These lines seem built upon Edward Said's notion of "orientalism" (1978) as a Western-style for authorizing stereotyped knowledge of Asian people to reassess its imperial rule. In this case, by reorienting an orientalist sexual stereotype - that of Asian men having small penises and being submissive - towards the male westerners, the "penis trick" transforms a discourse of oppression into a weapon of subversion. In terms of script, the result is hilarious and allows *South Park's* directors to highlight the discourse on "manhood" underpinning the US-Japan conflict as a matter of virility, such as war itself, as feminist theory has put forth (Hutchings; Duriesmith). Moreover, it sheds light on the White male fetishization of Asian women and Asian goods, which has taken on a new significance since Japan assumed a hegemonic position in the field of technology, manufacturing, and finance (Morley and Robins 163-66). This "orientalism in reverse," Morley and Robins argue, is far from being a confrontation between "cultural narcissisms," hiding the Western fear of a "cultural emasculation" associated with the loss of its technological hegemony (167).

It is no accident that Sharon, a woman, notices the fallacy of the argument, coming out with an idea to get the kids to "stop liking Chinpokomon." Conversely, US president Bill Clinton (whose "virility" became a matter of public discussion during the Lewinsky scandal) seems not to understand what is at stake; during a special announcement from the Oval Office, he reassures the population about the growing Japanese military presence by proudly stating: "I spoke with Mr. Hirohito this morning, and he assured me that I have a very large penis. He said it was mammoth, dinosauric, and absolutely dwarfed his penis, which, he assured me, was nearly microscopic in size".

In the last scene, as dozens of child troops are getting ready to board jet planes, Sharon marshals a group of parents carrying Chinpokomon toys. As they pretend to support their children and to be crazy about the "Chinpoko stuff", the Japanese media mix suddenly loses its "coolness" in their boys' eyes. As a result, the kids toss away the Chinpokomon onto a pile and leave the airfield, while the parents cheer and President Hirohito despairs, leading the story to its conclusion.

With this conclusion, which leaves the South Park boys unsure if any lesson can be drawn from the whole story, *South Park* seems to point its satire toward global consumerist culture. Transnational media consumption, as the story exemplifies, can be put in the service of global warfare, which represents its ultimate outcome. As suggested by Paul Virilio's classic *War and Cinema* (1989), and later revised by Friedrich Kittler, television and information technologies owed their commercialization in the post-war era to their employment as a military "invisible weapon" for enemy surveillance and bomb piloting during the WWII. "It is no accident", Kittler remarks, "that the age of media technologies is at the same time the age of technical warfare" (41-42). In this sense, the image of a Japanese toy functioning as a military antenna provides an effective allegory. Furthermore, the episode echoes Tchen's argument that "Yellow Peril fears promote an American culture of war-making" (278) when showing both kids and parents holding the Chinpkomon as a weapon in order to – paraphrasing the slogan – "get the power in their

hands” (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Kids

and parents hold the Chinpokomon as a weapon.

Moreover, commenting on several acts of violence among young players and collectors in the US provoked by “bad trades” of *Pokémon* cards, Allison remarks: “Violence is always the underside of this [consumerist] dreamworld, given that desires are never sated (in an endless quest to “get” more where *accumulation* confers power[s], if only of a virtual/fantasy kind) and great disparity exists in the means available to consume in America today” (2006b, 205, italics mine). It is no coincidence that it is Kenny, the lowest-income member of the core characters, who remains “C-shocked” even beyond the fad and eventually dies after *accumulating* a series of rats that burst from his stomach in the very last shot.

Conclusion

Being a paradigmatic example of adult and anime series of the complex TV era, *South Park* and *Pokémon* have confronted their transmedia systems in the “Chinpokomon” crossover episode. Mixing limited and cutout animation, adult cartoons, and *kawaii* anime tropes with a cutting-edge historical timing and a pseudo-satirical stance, the episode offers a sophisticated discourse on transpacific animation, also charting topics at the core of contemporary transmedia and television studies.

As my textual analysis has revealed, the show exposes, and parodies, the complex power dynamics between the United States and Japanese popular media, their reciprocal biases, stereotypes, and will of power which echo Foucauldian and Orientalist theories and are based on a long-lasting discourse of “Yellow peril.” To do so, *South Park*’s directors set up a classic three-act narrative, which exemplifies the show’s unconventional satirical style at its best. In addition, the plot intersects with real-world hot themes such as the Poké-mania, the P-shock accident, and the media debate on masculinity over Clinton’s impeachment. It

coalesces references to US-Japan military history, dynamics of consumption resistance, children's aggressive marketing, and Western and Eastern animation tropes, resulting in bizarre character designs like that of Lambtron, and in narrative gimmicks such as that of the "penis-trick."

These pseudo-satirical elements, as Frim would label them, act like a semantic "gravity centre" which helps frame the episode on a wider intertextual level. As I've discussed, "Chinpokomon" takes a stance over the orientalist and warfare discourse underlining neoliberal market forces and masculinity, in a period, at the turn of the millennium, where anime media mix and Japanese technology solidified its global presence, and the Western audience oscillated between fear and fascination, demonization and passive acceptance towards Japan. With a visual and narrative connection between "buying" and "bombing," the episode highlights the seemingly hidden linkage between warfare and capitalist culture, by foreseeing topics in contemporary media theory regarding "gamification" and "weaponization." In this perspective, the analysis buttresses my hypothesis that, due to its media specificity, adult animation is particularly able to intercept audiences' media sensibility and to problematize the contemporary media condition (Gatti). Furthermore, reconstructing the *Pokémon* phenomenon almost a quarter-century after its global boom through *South Park* could inspire future studies on the American-European-Japanese animation axis. The show, in fact, could be seen as one of the frontrunners of the contemporary hybridization of American and Japanese animation narrative tropes (ex. *Rick & Morty*) and techniques (from *Animatrix* to *Marvel Future Avengers*) along with several cases of re-dubbing, broadcasting or remaking of Japanese cult anime series by Western companies due to a new global anime boom via streaming platforms during the 2010-20s (examples include the recent Netflix distribution of *Devilman Crybaby*, *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, and the 1990s *Pokémon* series itself). As *Pokémon* characters have witnessed a new global craze with the launch of one of the most advertised AR mobile games, *Pokémon Go* (Nintendo, 2016), *Pokémon* game design has established itself as a standard gameplay formula and is notably employed (and parodied) in games derived from adult cartoons such as *Rick & Morty's Pocket Morty* (2016) and *South Park: Phone Destroyer* (2017). Chinpokomons, for their part, are still "alive" in the *South Park* storyworld such as in the role-playing game *South Park: The Stick of Truth*, with an additional cameo of Lambtron in "The Pandemic Special" episode in 2020.

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[i] Japan and "Japanization" are a recurring topics in the *South Park* universe. Since the second Parker and Stone animated short film *The Spirit of Christmas. Jesus vs Santa* (1995), in which Jesus fights against Santa Claus, mocking the *Mortal Kombat* gaming style, several episodes of *South Park* have focused on Japan or Japanese phenomena including "Mr. Hankey's Christmas Classics" (s03e15,1999), "A Ladder to Heaven" (s06e12, 2002), "Good Times with Weapons" (s8e01), "Whale Whores" (s13e11), "City Sushi" (s15e6), "Ginger Cow" (s17e6, 2013), and "Tweek x Craig" (s19e6, 2015).

[ii] An updated list of *South Park's* ongoing controversies can be retrieved at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Park_controversies#Criticism_and_protests.

[iii] Together with Chinpokomons, the Gremlins seem to share several features with Pokémon creatures. In the film series, these furry critters are imported to the US from an

East Asian trinket store based in Chinatown, where they are called “mogwai” (in Cantonese, “devil”). Like Pokémon, they have *kawaii* features, get stored in little boxes, and can transform, fight, and reproduce themselves. Furthermore, similar to Pikachu, a popular media mix of collectible toys, videogames, novels, and spin-offs is based on Gizmo, the iconic leading *mogwai* of the saga.

[iv] The episode which provoked seizures was “Denn? senshi Porygon” (s01e38, 1997). The complete Tv Tokyo production and broadcasting animation guidelines can be accessed at <https://www.tv-tokyo.co.jp/kouhou/guideenglish.htm>. For an academic bibliographic coverage of the *Pokémon* Shock see <https://www.animemangastudies.com/2015/10/20/seizures-induced-by-pokemon-episode-a-bibliography/>. Notably, the P-shock incident was first parodied by *The Simpsons* in “Thirty Minutes Over Tokyo” (s10e23), aired on May 16, 1999.