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“Ghost in the Shell”, “Death Note”, “Gunm”...Why Hollywood is so interested in manga

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The film *Ghost in the Shell* comes out Wednesday in France, the first of a series of Hollywood blockbusters adapted from Japanese comic books and anime.

Hefty budget and generic superstar: Hollywood spared no expense to adapt *Ghost in the Shell*, a cult series of mangas and Japanese anime. The film, starring Scarlett Johansson, comes out Wednesday, March 29, on the big screen. And it represents a turning point in the relationship between Hollywood and manga culture: it is the first big American blockbuster adapted from this universe.

And it could well be the first of a long series. Netflix has already announced the summer release of the film adaptation of *Death Note*, one of the most popular mangas of the last fifteen years. The adaptation of *Gunm* (American title: *Battle Angel Alita*), a foundational work, directed by Robert Rodriguez and should come out next year. There is also talk of projects concerning *Akira*, *Attack on Titan*, or even *Monster*. Has Hollywood found itself a sudden taste for manga?

Not so fast. It rather seems that these different announcements constitute a movement that has been long in the making, one that started in the 1990s, the time when manga made its first tentative entrance in the United States. “These are film projects we’ve been discussing for years” stresses Victor Lopez, chief contributor of the webzine [EastAsia.fr](#), which is dedicated to Asian cinema. “*Gunm*, that’s James Cameron who bought the rights in 2000; they’ve spoken about it multiple times. *Ghost in the Shell*, that goes back to Steven Spielberg, who had bought the rights in 2008.” Other projects, like *Akira* or *Cowboy Bebop*, for which Keanu Reeves was considered in the principal role, are recurring subjects in Hollywood.

“Matrix opened a door”

The necessity was then to secure the rights to these works, in which Hollywood already saw commercial potential, notably after the release of *Matrix* and its enormous success at the box office. “Matrix opened a door. It was already strongly inspired by *Ghost in the Shell*, which the Wachowskis [the producers of the film] knew very well.” But in Hollywood, there are numerous projects that never see daylight, and these are no exception. Some of them stay shut up in

boxes, others make their way out, and then skid at the box office before disappearing, sometimes reborn a few years later, in a pilot series for *otakus* – the name for fans of manga culture.

“It’s because these films are extremely expensive. They are therefore very cautious”, parses Northrop Davis, author of the academic book [Manga and Anime Go to Hollywood](#) and associate professor specializing in manga and anime studies at the University of South Carolina. And there’s no way to allocate a small budget: these works, generally very visually stunning, often unfold in a world of science-fiction, necessitating a flood of the latest special effects. But that’s not all. “Preparing the screenplay is without doubt the most difficult part of the whole process. It is very hard to devise a script that works.” This is especially the case when adapting emblematic works that spring from a radically different culture, and at the same time, contending with the typical big-movie audience and the *otakus* – those enthusiasts of Japanese culture.

Nevertheless, if *Ghost in the Shell* is the first big Hollywood breakout adapted from manga culture, it is not the first American film to take that risk. *Fist of the North Star* had also been adapted in 1995. “It was very bad,” opines Victor Lopez. “In the 2000s, there were a few films made, but for the wrong reasons, like *Dragon Ball Evolution*. They had bought the title only to sell it and make a film that had nothing to do with the story. As a result, the target audience was not interested.” These commercial failures didn’t help the other projects materialize.

“The audience is ready”

So how do we explain that the way seems to be free and clear today? Multiple factors, cultural as well as economic, can be proposed. “There is a greater openness of the Asian market to Hollywood productions,” maintains Victor Lopez for the first time.

“Take the example of *Pacific Rim*, an American film that features elements of Japanese culture, like the mechas (giant robots piloted by humans) and the kaijus (giant monsters). It didn’t really work in the U.S. but it hit the jackpot in China. By adapting specific things to Japanese culture, one can make a hit in the Asian market.”

For Osamu Yoshida, representative of Kodansha, the editor and holder of the rights to the manga of *Ghost in the Shell*, the arrival on the market of new players like Netflix has also changed the offerings:

“With the arrival of new platforms of distribution, beyond the realm of movie theaters, there is a high demand of exciting titles. In this context, the interest in Japanese works rises; they bring something different to the traditional “good versus bad” stories of Hollywood.”

And, very simply, as explains Northrop Davis, “There is no doubt that Hollywood expects enormous takings from these films. When you see that the sales of *One Piece* are comparable to those of Harry Potter, you can’t just put that aside”. Evidently, between the arrival of manga

to the US in the 90s and today, audiences have adopted this culture en masse, notably the younger generation that grew up with it.

As far as those who have never been exposed to this universe, they have gotten used to it little by little, more or less consciously. A few influential pioneers like James Cameron, who have had an eye on this world from the beginning, have integrated elements of manga in their productions. "He was the first to have introduced mechas in a big American film, *Aliens*," as Victor Lopez clarifies.

He names other filmmakers as well, like Darren Aronofsky, who are inspired by the plot twists and turns of certain Japanese works: "His film *Requiem for a Dream* echoes the plot of *Perfect Blue*, by Satoshi Kon, which he had adapted."

Matrix represented an even stronger link between these two worlds, even more so with the release of *Animatrix*, a series of animated film shorts that take place in the universe of the original trilogy, directed principally by the Japanese.

"When the Wachowskis evoke Japanime elements, it's to completely upend the method of filming the action and presenting certain themes. It's about drawing from another imagination to find aesthetic concepts."

"The risk of denaturation"

From an artistic standpoint, Hollywood has also realized, according to Victor Lopez, "that stories which have been considered unadaptable for a long time, for example, *Lord of the Rings*, or certain comics, could actually be adapted. This has shown that everything was comprehensible."

But this time, the challenge of the adaptation contains an enormous cultural divide. "There is a strong inclination to modify the works in order to make them more popular," warns Northrop Davis. "But if they don't pay attention, they run the risk of losing what made the manga or the anime special. And at the same time, there are certain components that simply make no sense in American culture. There is truly a balance to find."

"But is that a loss?" nuances Victor Lopez. "This could also be an addition: another perspective that builds upon the original work, it is not only a subtraction." *Ghost in the Shell* and *Death Note* have already received vocal criticism when the internet discovered that the starring actors were white, denouncing a commercially-motivated racism.

And the otakus are not very forgiving when the adaptations lack quality. "But it is especially Western fans who are extremely meticulous about this type of thing," evaluates Victor Lopez. The controversy surrounding Scarlett Johansson's skin color would not exist, he assures, in the Asian market. According to Kodansha, the editor of *Ghost in the Shell*, they were ecstatic: "The fact that Scarlett Johansson was chosen exceeded all our expectations."

Now we wait to see what *Ghost in the Shell* will do in the theatres: if it is a success, it could potentially pave the way for a rush of adaptations, but if it fails, it would bury certain projects that are still at the embryonic stage. Overall, Kodansha believes it will succeed and they will all be overjoyed: “The manga culture offers an enormous range of titles, not merely limited to science fiction and action adventures, but also stories of love, sport, cuisine, animals, medicine, religion, politics, and comedies.”