San Francisco, Japan:

Urban Cultural Hybridizations in Big Hero 6 and The Man in the High Castle

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Introduction

San Francisco host the largest and oldest Japanese enclave in the United States, gathered around Nihonmachi or Japantown. Maybe it is this already existing Nippon flavor that led several artists at imagining and portraying an even more Japanese-like version of the city. Philip K. Dick’s (1928-1982) The Man in The High Castle\(^1\) described a Frisco occupied by Imperial Japan after its counterfactual victory in World War II. Its visual representation in the homonymous series by Frank Spotniz (2015-2018) is probably the most interesting part of the whole show. Similarly, the film adaptation of superhero comic Big Hero 6 (by Hall & Williams 2014) moves the setting from Tokyo to the imagined city of “San Fransokyo” and alternative version of Frisco rebuilt with the help of the Japanese after the 1906 earthquake.

In these cases, the Californian city becomes a sort of subtext upon which is applied a layer of “nipponicity.” The many elements of Japanese culture already imported into the Western semiosphere provide a deposit of semiotic elements available to be employed for any “Japanization.”

The most evident part of this urban hybridization takes place on the surfaces of the city: a canvas available to multiple signs such as Kanji writings and advertisements. The city, then, becomes a palimpsest where new layers of writing is superimposed to the previous one and ends up adding its own meaning to the preexisting sings. Cultural mash-ups, however, go deeper and involve notable buildings – the re-imagined Golden Gate Bridge in Big Hero 6 – and public spaces – San Francisco’s Zen gardens of The Man in the High Castle – along with transportation, shops, markets, interior design and so on.

In this chapter I aim to analyze how the film and the TV series exploit urban elements as meaningful examples of an overlapping of semiospheres, both investigating the semiotic properties of the urban landscape and the cultural tropes involved.

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The City as a Text

Cities are complex semiotic mechanisms: they are multi-layered meaning-making engines, composed and brought to life by countless objects – buildings, avenues, monuments, street-signs, billboards, graffiti, shop windows, vehicles, passers-by, clothes etc. – which, in turn, project their own meanings side by side, reinforcing each other or competing for attention. All these objects are woven into a fabric – the “urban fabric” – which immediately appears recognizable as a single entity, the city.

The city, therefore, is a text (from textus, Latin for fabric), as suggested by Michel de Certeau in *L’invention du quotidien*². De Certeau considers the city as a text constantly actualized (and transformed) by the practices of interaction and of movement of their inhabitants which, through their journey across the urban space *enunciate* the city by introducing in it their own subjectivity.

De Certeau’s idea of a textual city has been the source of a specific research direction in semiotics, that of urban semiotics. In a seminal work, Ugo Volli³ describes the city as a *discourse*: an expressive reality that is renewed and continually redefines itself which, however, at all times, projects behind itself a text: “The city is alive, it changes materially and in the meaning that it projects; but in every time it is stable and legible as a book.”⁴

According to urban semiotics the city, just like a text, is both an organic whole – that can be understood and labelled as a unique thing – and characterized by an irreducible structural heterogeneity. The city encompasses numerous texts of a smaller scale, interconnected by their simultaneous presence within the city, thus becoming a web of meaningful elements connected to each other.⁵

The cities’ twofold nature, of homogeneous text and of container of textualities of a smaller scale leads to a fundamental disappearance of the distinction between text and context.⁶ If, on the one hand, the elements of larger size can become the context for those, incorporated, smaller size (a neighborhood becomes the context of a building, a

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⁵ Volli, *Laboratorio di semiotica*.
square of a monument), the relationship between text context is not limited to a simple relationship of incorporation: it is possible that the smaller size objects, but with a greater symbolic efficacy, can become the context for larger-scale objects (“iconic” buildings and monuments are able to lessen the meaning of all that it is around them, creating a semiotic void that allows them to “shine”).

The Meaning of the City

Because of its heterogeneity, cities are inevitably polyphonic texts, eluding any attempt of standardization by political, economic or religious powers. The textual appearance of the city is the product of the work and will countless authors, across several eras and guided by different conceptions of urban spaces. The city is the result of the encounter – and sometimes of the clash – of a great number of different writing strategies whose products meet, collide, mingle and overwrite each other in the urban space. The kaleidoscopic web of meaningful elements within the urban space features also its own hierarchy: an ideological stratification that gives greater emphasis and meaning to the buildings of the political and religious power, to monuments and “landmarks” and, instead, relegating to a marginal role the communicative traces of most of the inhabitants: billboards, street-art, graffiti.

Urban areas, then, are places pervaded by an antagonistic tension: buildings, streets, neighborhoods compete to obtain dominant positions (centrality, verticality, connections), attention (traffic) and prestige. This tension, however, is petrified, frozen in a quasi-static spatial arrangement. This incessant internal tension of urban spaces, at the same time, entails a constant transformation: the city is a variable text, alive, never identical to itself, a text that retains elements of its past (text as testis, Latin for witness) and interweaves them with those of the present (text as textus, fabric) in a set often heavily layered and ontologically complex.\(^7\)

This polyphonic and evolving text is made of an unstable and uncertain mingling, whose metamorphoses follow different times and rhythms, from the slow construction of new neighborhoods to the quick work of street-writers and the ephemeral presence of advertising posters. Some elements of the city can last for thousands of years (the topography, the orientation of the street map), other for centuries (buildings, streets and monuments), other years (signs and elements of street furniture) or weeks (posters and

display cases), down until the ephemeral presence of the inhabitants themselves: every look at the city essentially captures its section.\textsuperscript{8}

**The City as Producer of Culture**

If every city is clearly the product of a specific culture (\textsuperscript{7}), on the other hand, cities themselves are also important *producers* of culture. The city can be enunciated, as claimed de Certeau, but it is also an enunciator: producing meaning and showcasing its society and inhabitants.

Lotman points out that the opposition between city space (transformed by man and made habitable for humans), and the space exterior to it (the “wilderness”) becomes the basis for *homeomorphisms* of global reach, such as opposition “nature/culture”.\textsuperscript{9} The city is not limited to be a part of the cultural universe but proposes itself to symbolically enclose the whole universe.\textsuperscript{10} The features that a culture gives to their creations reflect the overall structure of their interpretation of world.\textsuperscript{11}

The isomorphism between city and culture allows us to consider a fundamental aspect of urban space, namely that the city represents its culture, not only because it is a symptom of the latter, but also because it produces it. The city is made to communicate a range of ideologies, systems of belief, identity strategies, it can be considered a communication or recording device, that intervenes in social relations through symbolic efficacy, a feature which is typical of signs. The texts are relevant in social life not only for what they are materially, but for their ability to recall something else, according to Augustine's famous definition of the sign as *aliaquid pro aliquo*.\textsuperscript{12}

**Reading and Writing the City**

In the previous paragraph we saw that the city is a complex communicative machine, which works like a text. To live and move through the city, then, means having to read and to interpret it. As the city is ab overabundant, rich text, it is necessary, first, to choose some saliences – i.e. which items are significant, and which are trivial for us – and then to draw isotopies between them, in order to give a unique and organic meaning

\textsuperscript{8}Volli, “Il testo della città — problemi metodologici e teorici.”
\textsuperscript{10}See also Cervelli and Sedda “Zone, frontiere, confini: la città come spazio culturale.” 171-192.
\textsuperscript{11}Lotman, “Vmesto zakliuchenia. O roli sluchainyi faktorov v istorii kul’tury” 472-479.
\textsuperscript{12}Volli, “Il testo della città — problemi metodologici e teorici.”: 13, (my translation).
to the heterogeneous whole in which these diverse elements are immersed. In other words, a pedestrian will cross the city ignoring most of the vehicle related street signs as they will not be particularly meaningful for her. On the other hand, a disabled person will pay attention to parking spaces reserved to the handicapped, which will be relevant to her, and so on.

Selecting the saliences, however, is not enough to be able to move consciously within the city: the same objects may even be used in many ways. The selection of a specific use between many possibilities is guided by what Volli\(^\text{13}\) defines the “urban semiotic competence”: the ability to correctly interpret what the city tells. It is our urban semiotic competence that allow us to distinguish between the entrance of public and private spaces, even when no sign indicates it. It is this competence, based on our encyclopedia, our previous knowledge, that directs us through the city.

This becomes particularly evident when we move in a foreign city. A European citizen in a US city will be disoriented: much of his urban competence will prove useless because of the profound differences between the European way of organizing a “city center” and the American one.

Finally, the city itself can hinder or facilitate the use of the urban semiotic competence in virtue of its \textit{legibility},\(^\text{14}\) i.e. the features of a city that assist people in creating their mental maps and in their activities of wayfinding.

As for the ways of writing the city, they are strongly dependent on the power held by the perspective authors. In history the political and religious powers have often been charged with shaping urban spaces, erecting building, fortifications and temples, outlining ghettoes, tracing infrastructures etc. In modern times the economic powers have probably gained the most influence, with shopping centers attracting traffic and wealth, real estate determining gentrification effects and so on.

It would be incorrect, however, to assume that common citizens are not entitled to any authorship within the city-space. There are many ways the citizens themselves can design their city, from putting plants on a balcony to street-art, passing from their strategic choices about how to move through the city (including the choice to leave the predetermined track to climb a fence, cross the street where is forbidden, ignore a traffic light).

\(^{13}\) Volli, \textit{Laboratorio di semiotica}, 5-36.

Either case, due to the density of the urban text, most forms of writing the city assume a character of rewriting, of superimposing new writing to an existing text. Writing the city means adding layers of meaning, removing and filling gaps, rectifying what already exists in an environment that is then continuously modified. It is a sort of *bricolage* activity, that re-works elements and materials already existing.

The city, then, is formed by a material substrate produced by the superposition of multiple inscriptions which, in turn, become the substrate and support of new writings, whether they are strategic or simply the traces of the human activities that take place in the urban space.

We can distinguish two polarities of city-writing: one close to the idea of palimpsest (involving the removal, at least partial, of the pre-existing substrate and the construction of something new) and one characterized by a kind of *maquillage*, in the name of recovery, based on the transformation or resemantization of existing urban objects. This second form of rewriting is more common, as it requires a more limited kind of intervention on the city. It is exercised both by the power – for example transforming of a convent in a hospital or in an ancient palace in a town hall – and by peripheral social actors – who occupy buildings, become squatters, camp in parks, write on the walls, and in general re-appropriate and re-functionalize urban spaces according to their needs. Nevertheless, marginal actors can also claim the power of erasing something from the city: it is the case of several forms of vandalism and, more importantly, of terrorism: the attacks of 9/11 to the World Trade Center were so effective also for their ability of erasing an iconic landmark of New York City from its urban landscape.

These rewritings, even when with practical purposes, cannot be regarded as exclusively functional: instead, they always have a highly communicative character. On the one hand, they affect the general meaning of text resemantized, and, on the other hand, it is a way for individuals, social political or religious groups, to engrave themselves within the text, to leave a trace, to represent their existence within the universe that the city represents.

**Fictional Cities and Possible Worlds**

The semiotic wealth of the cities, their being complex meaning-making machines, at the same time symptoms and producers of cultures explains the frequency of their representations. Cities are the setting for innumerable narratives, the irreplaceable backgrounds of countless works of art, they are sung in songs, praised in poems, digitally recon-
structed in video games. They offer their streets to artist flaneurs and set apart their inhabitants according to how they use the metro,\textsuperscript{15} attracts tourists and become tracks for runners. Cities enter in the collective imagination with their own “personalities,” impossible to ascribe to specific characteristics, but still crystal clear in the minds of many, so that Paris and New York, Tokyo and Hanoi become archetypes of life-styles, tastes, philosophies.

From a semiotic perspective it is interesting to note that Umberto Eco’s (1932-2016) theory of possible worlds is explained using as a starting point the city of Paris. In \textit{Sei Passeggiate nei Boschi Narrativi}\textsuperscript{16} he tells of his attempt to reconstruct the toponymy of the Parisian neighborhood in which Dumas three musketeers lived and of the impossibility of doing so. The names of two roads that in the book are presented as distinct, in reality have been born by the same street in different times. Dumas’ Paris, then, must be different from the real Paris, not by the authors intentions, by due to an accident. In \textit{Lector in Fabula},\textsuperscript{17} then, Eco describes how the possible worlds of narrative, or $W_N$, are generally assumed as homologues of the real world, or $W_0$: if a novel is set in Paris, the readers will assume that the city is identical to the real Paris based on their encyclopedia (i.e. their previous knowledge about the city). Nonetheless, many elements of $W_N$, however, are not “anchored” to elements of $W_0$, but only to other elements of $W_N$, in a symmetrical relationship that Eco calls “structurally necessary properties”: it is the case of Raoul and Marguerite in \textit{Un drame bien parisien}, two characters who are defined by their reciprocal relation, and not by a relation with any meaningful portion of $W_0$.

Following Eco’s theory, therefore, every city represented in a narrative is fictional. It may be inspired by a real city such as Paris and anchored to the reader’s encyclopedia, but the author will be allowed to modify it and the reader will be ready to adjust her inferences and tone her suspension of disbelief according to what the text will tell her.

Furthermore, the city, we mentioned, becomes often the cultural representation of the whole cultural universe,\textsuperscript{18} so that Augustine of Hippo, in order to defend Christianity from the accusation of bringing about the decline of Rome, uses the image of the holy City of God, or \textit{Civitate Dei}, juxtaposed to the corrupt \textit{Civitate Terrena}. Before him, Plato, in the Republic also uses two cities to embody his idea State – the Ancient Athens

\begin{thebibliography}{99}

\bibitem{eco} Umberto Eco, \textit{Sei passeggiate nei boschi narrativi} (Milano: Bompiani, 1994).
\bibitem{eco2} Umberto Eco, \textit{Lector in fabula}. (Milano: Bompiani, 1979).
\bibitem{lot} Lotman, Vmesto zakliuchenii. O roli sluchainyi faktorov v istorii kul”tury.” 472-479.
\end{thebibliography}
– and its enemies – Atlantis. The modelling power of the representation of cities is strong throughout all history, and we could find many contemporary examples, from Gabriel García Márquez's Macondo to Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, where fictional cities become the framework to represent life, humanity and their contradictions.

Narrative representations of cities, then, will not only offer the propositions for inferring a possible world, but will also cast behind them a *possible cultural universe*. The organization of the city, its tensions, its structure, dynamics, hierarchies, all are isomorphic with a symbolic universe and with a cultural organization of society.

When an author represents a city, he or she enunciates it and will be entitled to invent new cities, or to change (slightly or profoundly) the nature and appearance of cities existing in $W_0$. In this case the author will have the power to write and rewrite anything she wishes, a power that is rarely granted to anyone in respect of real cities. However, the artificial city will lose its nature of choral text and it will be the duty and the challenge of the author to imitate effectively the tensions that make the city alive and to recreate them *in vitro*.

An analysis of the representation of the city – which is obviously strongly related to the medium used to portray it – then, is a possible way to investigate the possible cultural universe implemented by the author and the ideologies that it subsumes. Especially when the importance of the urban setting and its features coexists with a narrative oriented to cultural problematics. This is the case both of the series *The Man in the High Castle*, portraying both a Japanese San Francisco and a Nazi New York, and of the animated film *Big Hero 6*, set in the hybrid city of San Fransokyo.

The opportunity to approach two different versions of a Japanese San Francisco is rather interesting, as it will allow us to compare the two possible worlds and their cultural universes and to reconstruct, from them, the ideologies they subsume.

**San Francisco, Japanese Pacific States**

*The Man in the High Castle* is a 1962 novel by prolific sci-fi author Philip K. Dick. In the novel, the author presents an alternative history in which the Axis won the Second World War and the United States of America have been divided in three areas: the Germany-controlled United States of America in the East, the Japanese-controlled Pacific States of America in the West and a Neutral Zone in between.

In 2015, Amazon released in its Amazon Prime streaming platform a homonymous TV series based on Dick’s novel and created by Frank Spotniz. The series maintains the
same setting with some alterations – the occupied territories are now called Greater Nazi Reich and Japanese Pacific States – while changing deeply the plot and most of the characters. These changes, however, are not relevant to our analysis.

The TV series portrays two cities under occupation: New York and Frisco. The Nazi version of New York is the most frequently used in the promotional materials, probably due to the great impact that entails seeing the Statue of Liberty making the fascist salute or a menacing Nazi building in downtown Manhattan (Fig. 1).

Nevertheless, the city that is portrayed with more accuracy and that gets the most screen-time is San Francisco. Most of the main characters’ storylines take place there (especially in the first season), and the audience becomes familiar with many of its spaces and buildings. If the mixture between Japanese and American cultures appears less menacing than that of German occupation, still it is the one that its portrayed more in detail, especially with regard to the daily life of the inhabitants. If the encounter between these two cultures is also portrayed through practices, linguistic habits, media products and so on, the morphology of the city of San Francisco is certainly the most prominent symptom of their clash and mingling. Let’s see it in detail.

We have stated, in the second paragraph, that also the ephemeral presence of the inhabitants, their clothes and their activities, are part of the complex semiotic mechanism of the city. The inhabitants of the San Francisco in The Man in the High Castle are particularly interesting from this perspective. First of all, the portion of Asiatic looking people is rather high. We can assume that most of them are Japanese,
even if some of them are told to be Chinese in the series. Most of these people, but also a share of Westerners, do clothe according to Eastern fashion and several people wearing Japanese Kempeitai\textsuperscript{19} uniforms can be seen in the city (Fig. 2). The behavior of the inhabitants is also mirroring the adoption of Japanese etiquette, as many of the bow to each other with courtesy, especially if at least a native Japanese is involved.

Fig. 2: Screenshot from \textit{The Man in the High Castle}

The sounds that can be heard in the city are symptomatic of the adoption of several aspects of Japanese culture by the inhabitants of San Francisco. If Japanese people tend to speak to each other in Japanese in public (with the exception of several main characters, undoubtedly for extra-diegetic reasons), also many Americans adopted some Japanese lexicon. In addition, Japanese music can be heard in most public places, even those that do not show any other Eastern influence, as the Pub attended by some of the protagonists.

The most striking characteristic of this version of Frisco, however, is the massive work of overwriting the city went through (Fig. 3). Most of the buildings are literally covered by posters, billboards and signs mostly written in Japanese and in the Japanese alphabets. This, on the one hand, mirrors the baroque approach that Japan has to advertising, and on the other recalls continuously the fact that San Francisco is occupied and, in some measure, stranger (if not to the inhabitants, that may have learned to read

\textsuperscript{19} Japan’s military police.
Japanese, at least to most of the viewers).

Fig. 3: Screenshot from *The Man in the High Castle*

Side to side with writings, flags of the Japanese Pacific States can also be found on most surfaces (Fig. 4), being a constant reminder of the conquest of the city, of its ownership. Flags are not only placed on mast buildings but can also be found glued to the walls of side alleys, making it difficult to ignore them at any time. Less militaristic, but equally colonial, several oriental lamps can also be seen hanging on the streets and between windows, side-by-side with hanging clothes.

The city’s skyline, on the other hand, is mostly similar to that of the real San Francisco. There aren’t many new landmarks, we face more an appropriation of existing buildings. Nevertheless, there are several buildings with traditional Japanese interiors that are shown throughout the series. In the first episode of the first season, the first shot of San Francisco is inside a dojo, during a lesson of aikido. The dojo’s furniture and interior are typically Japanese and there are no hints to the fact that it is on American soil. Other Japanese interiors include that of a wealthy Japanese family’s house, the office of the Trade Minister, the Keampeitai Headquarters and a night club near the docks owned by the Yakuza.
Two buildings stand out as specific of the situation. The first one is the Nazi Embassy, a big palace with a large garden. The second, more interesting, is an Americana antique store. Owned by one of the main characters, it displays objects of an idealized pre-war America that will be purchased by wealthy Japanese. The latter mostly live in new, rich neighborhoods, built completely in Japanese style and set rather apart from the rest of the city. Besides those quarters, the largest intervention made upon the city by its conquerors is a large “Zen garden” in the city center.

It is interesting to notice that the second season of the series also includes a struggle around the power of writing the city. A resistance group places a bomb under the Kempeitai Headquarters in order to blow up one of the symbols of the Japanese occupation. In the second-last episode of the season the bomb detonates and destroys a large part of the building, killing many of its occupants. One shot from afar shows a San Francisco suddenly devoid of any sign of the occupation, while a column of smoke testifies the erasure of one of the symbols of the oppression (Fig. 5).

We have seen several ways in which the Japanese occupation has been represented, engraved in a city that, otherwise, maintains its typical looks. It is interesting to note that also the cinematography of the series is used to reaffirm and reinforce this duplicity.
Several shots are esthetically consistent with the traditional representations of the city. Long avenues going downhill with the ocean and the Golden Gate in the background, where all the buildings are covered in Japanese writings (Fig. 3) or dark shots typical of the *noir* genre, where the police are substituted with the Kempeitai (Fig. 6).

It is easy to see that the relation between cultures that is portrayed by the city is not a symmetric one. Japanese culture is depicted as a conquering culture, that tends to
overwrite the previous strata, to show its dominance. In order to do so, several aspects of Japanese culture (or, better, of its Western perception) are selected and magnified. First of all, the rigidness of the etiquette and behavior is made clear by the interactions between the inhabitants, by the general lack of evident fun, the seriousness and conformity of the buildings and the signs. Japanese culture is portrayed, throughout the city, as extremely controlled and repressive. Second, the militaristic aspects of the Japanese culture are continually underlined. The presence of soldiers and policemen from the Kempeitai is frequent and uninterrupted, the use of violence steady, the surveillance uninterrupted. The quantity of flags confirms the will of dominance and of possession of the occupants. This is also linked to the ravenousness of Imperial Japan, here engraved in the city with countless writings, that almost suffocate the buildings underneath, and exemplified to the nostalgic but colonialist approach to American culture, exemplified by the Americana antique shop. All these aspects are, of course, reinforced by the narrative told in the series, but what is relevant to us is that the representation of the city alone already makes them very clear.

Many other aspects of Japaneseness, generally appreciated in its Western perceptions, are completely disregarded and absent from the representation of San Francisco: those that have been chosen are functional to the creation of a possible cultural universe where the mixing of American and Japanese cultures is almost impossible, where Japaneseness is in itself dominant and colonialist and, despite the goodwill of several characters, the tensions deeply inscribed within the city can lead only to violence in the attempt to physically remove the presence of the other.

**San Fransokyo**

San Fransokyo (portmanteau of San Francisco and Tokyo) is a fictional city introduced in Disney’s 2014 animation film *Big Hero 6*, directed by Don Hall and Chris Williams. While the homonymous comics that inspired (rather loosely) the film was set in Tokyo, the new environment was developed for the animated film and the TV series that followed it (2004, Disney, directed by Stephen Heneveld, Ben Juwono and Kathleen Good). Although it is not explicated in the film, the city is an evolution of San Francisco. The official Facebook page of Walt Disney Animation Studios shared a quote by Big Hero 6 art director Scott Watanabe claiming that: “Don [Hall, one of the directors] wanted to figure out a logical explanation for how a mash-up city like this
could exist. I came up with the idea that, after the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco, Japanese immigrants rebuilt the place using techniques that allow movement and flexibility in a seismic event.”

The fact that the city is featured in a computer-generated animation film allowed its creators to proceed with this “mash-up” in a much deeper way a live-action film would have probably allowed. The hi-tech sci-fi setting of the film, in addition had a strong impact in the representation of the city, which is not only a mixing of Frisco and Tokyo – as the name suggests – but also a futuristic evolution of the two (Fig. 7).

Fig. 7: Screenshot from Big Hero 6

As in The Man in the High Castle, the percentage of inhabitants with Japanese looks and/or names in San Fransokyo is rather elevated, even if their clothing and behaviour are typical modern Western ones. The only important exception, although barely noticeable, is that of the police. A single policeman is shown in the film, but his uniform and floral symbols are those of the Keisatsu-chō, the Japanese National Police Agency (Fig. 8).

Sound is much less important than in The Man in the High Castle: there isn’t any Japanese music and Japanese words are very rare, limited to a character nickname “Wasabi,” and, some names and as well as a few other occurrences. Japanese writings are still an important part of the city-scape, and an obvious strategy for creating a certain mood, but their presence is certainly more discrete, and it is often accompanied by English writings (Fig. 9).

20 https://www.facebook.com/DisneyAnimation/photos/pb.23245476854.- 2207520000.1424332542./10152980421081855/?type=1&theater
The morphology of the buildings, on the other hand, is probably the most interesting feature of San Fransokyo. Dojos appear to be inevitable, as also in Big Hero 6, after a brief panoramic of the city, the opening scene is set in one, even if devoted to hi-tech robot fights. Most of San Fransokyo buildings are clearly a mash-up between American and Japanese cultures, both in the exterior and in the interior (Fig. 10 and 11). The mixing proceeds on many levels, from architecture to food preparation (where American donuts can be seen side by side with Japanese tea kettles), from different styles of family pictures hanged to the walls to ever present pop culture references based on American superhero comics and Japanese manga.
Fig. 10: Screenshot from *Big Hero 6*

Fig. 11: Screenshot from *Big Hero 6*

Fig. 12: Screenshot from *Big Hero 6*
The buildings of San Fransokyo also encompass several temples (Fig. 7) giving to the city a spiritual dimension (completely absent from the cityscape of the San Francisco of *The Man in the High Castle*), and a huge presence of vegetation, not limited to the University’s Zen garden (Fig. 12) but portrayed by a large presence of threes inside the city, mainly very culturally charged, cherry threes – which appear to blossom all year long (Fig. 7 and 10).

Several of these buildings work as landmarks and are the result of the hybridization of existing monuments. A small copy of the Tokyo Tower, for example, is positioned at the top of a skyscraper (Fig. 7), the Port of San Fransokyo (Fig. 13) is a clear revisiting of the actual Port of San Francisco, even the house of the main character is the Japanese-like version of a famous building from Frisco (Fig. 10).

Some of the buildings that are modified in order to look more Japanese are also taken from other Californian cities, as the main building of the San Fransokyo Institute of Technology (Fig. 14), which appears to be a re-worked Royce Hall from Los Angeles’ University of California.

Interestingly enough, also in Big Hero 6 we can witness to some actions of city writing: a university building is burned to the ground in the first half of the film, while a research lab is sucked into a portal towards the end. Both buildings are destroyed by the main villain, but, while the first one is destroyed to cover up a crime, the second one is intentionally erased from the city in order to get revenge over its owner.
The portal device used to this end dismantles the building through an invisible force and makes it to completely disappear, leaving nothing behind (Fig. 15). The struggle for the control of the city, then, it is not political anymore, but scientific: both the villain and its victim are brilliant scientists, the building is a brand new, incredibly advanced research-lab and the method for erasing it is also based on sci-fi.

That of a clean, endless technological advancement is certainly the first ideology outlined by our analysis of the city of San Fransokyo: it is a modern city, full of technology-related buildings, its sky dotted by flying wind turbines visually similar to Japanese kites, where, however, the artificial is equally balanced by the natural (the large presence of trees and parks) and the spiritual (the temples). This technological utopia goes side by side with a cultural utopia, the latter one
organized around an ideology of perfect cultural hybridization. Every aspect of the city, and of the culture it produces, seems to be a blend of Western and Japanese elements. Monuments and buildings, transportation (Fig. 16), food, religious practices, gadgets: all seems to be equidistant from both cultures, while neither one ever prevails.

Fig. 16: Screenshot from *Big Hero 6*

If in *The Man in the High Castle* flags were omnipresent, in San Fransokyo there is hardly any flag: we can see just two of them outside the Police Offices, but they are unrecognizable: from the little that we are able to see they do neither resemble the flag of San Francisco, nor the symbol for Tokyo, nor that of their respective regions/states or nation states. In fact, if it wasn’t for Scott Watanabe’s claim, it would be impossible to determine in which country is the city is located, even if it appears rather clear that the substratum is San Francisco, that was later made-up to look more and more Japanese. This layer of Japaneseness, however, goes rather deep in the city, it changes the shape of its buildings, the spiritual life and dietary habits of its inhabitants and so on.

To realize this hybridization, several aspects of the Western perception of Japanese culture have been selected and magnified.

The idea of a tech-friendly Japan, where ordinary life is embedded with hi-tech devices is the obvious basis upon which one of the main ideologies of this possible cultural universe is built. Japanese culture is here portrayed in its friendliest examples: playful, nerd and *kawaii* (or cute). The city is full of figurines and drawings of cute fishes and manga robots, robot-fighting is an illegal but highly popular practice, research labs are full of flying cats and fun projects and so on. The esthetic element, finally, is very important. Most of the things retrieved from Japanese culture and engraved in San Fransokyo are beautiful and graceful: cherry trees, kites, temples, architecture,
decorations. Japaneseess is eye-candy, it is used to make the city look more beautiful, to create awe.

**Conclusion**

The two different approaches to the idea of a Japanese San Francisco that we have analyzed can be summarized by their representations of the Golden Gate Bridge. The iconic symbol of Frisco plays an important role in the popular image of the city, and both the narratives we have approached dedicate their attention to it.

In *The Man in the High Castle*, the Golden Gate is identical to the real one, with one, important difference: on its top they are now present some flags of the Japanese Pacific State (Fig. 17). The monument is untouched in its iconic appearance, but its ownership is made clear: it might have been the product of American talent, but it is now part of the spoils of war and belongs to the victors.

![Fig. 17: Screenshot from Big Hero 6](image)

On the other hand, the Golden Gate Bridge in San Fransokyo is rather different from the real one (Fig. 18). If it is immediately recognizable, at the same time its appearance is now a hybrid with the aesthetic of *torii* the traditional Japanese gates generally situated at the entrance of a Shinto shrines. The new bridge, then, is a beautiful-looking cultural mix with spiritual undertones.
The two narratives that we have approached, then, feature diametrically opposed depictions of Japanese culture engraved in the cities they portray. A cold, disciplined, militaristic culture on the one hand and a friendly, nerdy, eye-candy culture on the other. Both their possible cultural universes are created by operating a selection into the vast entry of the Western encyclopedia that is Japanese culture. Among the many prejudices, stereotypes, fashions and influences that the West have of Japanese culture, the authors have chosen those that better fit their narrative and discarded the others: the cities that they have created, after all, are not made to be an academic study of cross-cultural influences, but to be the setting of the story they wanted to tell. These selections, however, are particularly interesting, because their elements seem to be rather coherent with different historical takes on Japan. Without indulging too much in the analysis, it appears that we are facing two faces of Japan that we could describe as an “old” Japan and a “new” Japan. On the one hand, with these terms we refer to the cultural changes that operated in the country after the defeat in World War II, where the militaristic past of the Japanese Empire was replaced by a mostly pacifist attitude toward foreign relationships. On the other hand, however, we refer to the American and Western perception of this change, also related to a change of status of the country from war enemy to ally. The portrayal of Japanese culture in *The Man in the High Castle* is clearly influenced by a certain idea of Japan built in the wartime propaganda and the main traits of this representation are all present in its narrative. In *Big Hero 6*, on the other hand, the representation of Japan is based on its cultural influences build on *manga* and *anime*, on videogames, and on tech gadgets import that started to grow strong in the 1980s.
These representations are, of course, partial, both because they are functional the entertainment-oriented narrative of their authors, and because they are based on strongly partial historic perceptions of Japanese culture. In this paper, however, we are not interested in moralistic arguments about the representation of foreign cultures. What is more interested is how the cityscape and its subtexts can be used in a variety of ways for representing a wide array of cultural aspects. Our two Japanese versions of San Francisco, although based on similar procedures, end up being completely different cities according to the ideologies that they are charged to represent, being them dystopic and full of dangerous tensions or utopic and harmonious.

Works Cited