THE VIEWING MIND AND LIVE-ACTION JAPANESE TELEVISION SERIES: A COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVE ON GENDER CONSTRUCTIONS IN *SEIREI NO MORIBITO* (GUARDIAN OF THE SPIRIT)

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ABSTRACT

The recent (2016–2018) live-action Japanese television series, *Seirei no Moribito* (Guardian of the Spirit), was produced by NHK in the vein of the *taiga* (big river) historical drama, but challenges this and other Japanese generic and cultural conventions. It does so not only through its production as a fantasy series or its warrior heroine rather than the usual masculine samurai hero, but also through clever narrative strategies which operate to maintain viewer interest and produce affective engagement with gendered positionings. A cognitive narratological exploration of these story-telling devices and the scripts and schemas they conjure helps demonstrate how the series operates affectively to deconstruct dominant patriarchal ideologies. This examination explores how narrative techniques prompt viewer mental processing with regard to cultural schemas and scripts of, for instance, male/female roles in family relationships, women's participation in the employment sector, and marriage and childbearing. A close analysis of the filmic strategies and devices which encourage audience engagement with the main female protagonist, Balsa, and her relationships casts light on the state of some of the changing attitudes to gendered social and personal roles in the context of recent and topical social discourse in Japan.

0. **INTRODUCTION**[1]

Interpretations of creative productions such as fictional film and novels rely on the interaction between narrative strategies and the mental activity of audiences. While narrative strategies build up the storyworld and its main thematic significances, they also prompt mind work which helps construct, reiterate or deconstruct the story in collaboration with inherent cultural knowledge which is called up, often unconsciously. As cognitive narratology scholars suggest, the basis of all human cultural activity is that we think in stories which require capacities such as language, perception, memory, predictive thinking, embodiment, and metaphorical reasoning (Herman 2013; Richardson and Steen 2002). Fictional representations are thus important for cognitive development and for reiterating and creating meanings in interaction with the social world. Television drama series fall into such a category but generally utilise more complex narrative stimuli than singular film narratives in order to, as Shim et al. (2018: 1973–4) suggest, provoke the excitement and curiosity that will keep viewers returning for future episodes and seasons. Techniques such as flashbacks, preview trailers, cliffhangers or other open-ended closures all operate to construct narrative suspense, complexities, or ambiguities. The latter help activate affective functions such as curiosity, predictive skills, memory capacity, or emotional engagement with story elements and characters. As John Fiske discusses in his seminal work *Television Culture* (1987), the medium of television produces particular affective engagements with media texts which, for instance, encourage viewer alignment with characters in series. A cognitive enquiry into how narrative strategies encourage the viewing mind to operate while watching and interacting with protagonists in the recent (2016–2018) 3-season (22-episode) television series, *Seirei no Moribito* (Guardian of the Spirit, henceforth *Moribito*, which means "guardian") offers insight into attitudes towards some of East Asia's dominant masculinist discourses. It casts light on how this and other drama series can affectively conjure and subvert dominant gender binaries by provoking deep consideration of the main protagonist's rejection of conventional feminine, familial and employment roles within Japan's conservative and stratified social milieus. As *Moribito*'s first (2016) season introduces the series' main

tropes and encourages audience engagement with the main character, Balsa, in challenging ways which continue throughout the three seasons, Season 1 provides the focus for the investigation.

Moribito, nominated in 2017 for the Best Drama Series category in the 45th International Emmy Awards (Pickard 2017), is a beautifully-produced, high-tech (4K format) experimental fantasy. It is based on the multi-volume, award-winning young adult fiction series of the same name, written by Uehashi Nahoko in the 1990s. The novels became so popular with general (adult) readers that they were subsequently re-published with, for instance, more complex orthography. They also inspired offshoots in other media forms such as a radio play, and an anime series (in 2007) which aired internationally, so the title is well known throughout Japan and the rest of the world.

Both the *Moribito* novels and the latest television series have been at the cutting edge of two separate currents in Japan which relate to female characters, roles, and audiences. In the first, Uehashi's works arose amidst an emergent genre of neo-Japanesque fantasy written for young adults by women who created strong roles for women and girls.[2] In contrast to many previous Japanese narratives set in 'the West' or with European female protagonists, the *Moribito* novels explored the politics, economics and religions of five fictional countries and broke new ground in terms of scale, complexity, and character appeal (Doi 2017: 401). The series is set in an alternative world based on a richly layered but unknown time and space which, as Itsuji Akemi (2006: 92) suggests, is unusual in Japanese fantasy, especially in that it is firmly marked as within Asia. Instead of making the usual references to ancient Celtic times, the King Arthur legend, or the *Record of Ancient Matters* (Kojiki), for instance, it blends a cultural mishmash of Asian history, mythology, and customs from a political rather than spiritual logic (Itsuji 86).

In the second current, the *Moribito* live-action television series has arisen amongst an international climate of interest from television networks in female audiences (Le Fèvre-Berthelot 2018: 9; Umibe in Pickard 2017). Despite being produced by NHK in the vein of the corporation's *taiga* (big river) realistic historical drama – a major staple of Japanese television – the series, which aired in prime time on Saturday evenings, breaks with *taiga* (and other) con-

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2   Another of these neo-Japaneseque series is *Twelve Kingdoms* by Ono Fuyumi which was, like *Moribito*, transformed into an anime series which aired in the 2000s.

ventions in several major ways. *Moribito*'s heroine, Balsa (*Barusa*, played by Ayase Haruka) not only contravenes the genre's male samurai or wandering artisan heroic convention, but its supernatural elements also challenge the dominance and approach of historical realism. As indicated by the series' executive producer Endo Masafumi (2016), fantasy is unusual in Japanese live-action television. According to Joon-Yang Kim (2013: 225–6), the *taiga* has also had a Yamato-centric focus which emphasises a homogeneous – and masculine-driven – nation; one which has subsumed minority groups and erased marginalised identities.[3] Balsa's subversion of the fictional New Yogo colonisation process is therefore iconoclastic of centrist patriarchal regimes and their processes of power and domination, cultural elements which often remain unquestioned in *taiga* and other television productions. The name Balsa (バルサ) is written in katakana, the Japanese script used for foreign names and words, so is immediately recognisable to Japanese speakers as non-Japanese, thus signifying her as from outside New Yogo and/or the series as set outside Japan (but comparable to the region and historical setting). Further, Balsa is prominent throughout the series despite her absence from several volumes in the original novels. As chief producer Umibe Kiyoshi reveals, this decision was jointly made by script writers, including author Uehashi.

The *Moribito* production team's attention to audience indicates the currency of the gender issues raised in the narrative and an awareness of the process of adaptation. Indeed, the team created the series with an international audience in mind (Umibe; also see Endo 2016 and Pickard 2017). The process of adapting a well-known work requires strategies that stimulate interest for previous and new audiences from varied cultural backgrounds, both internal and external to Japan. Viewers who have read the *Moribito* novels (or seen the anime), for instance, already know the basic storyline so they, along with new audiences, must be kept stimulated with, for instance, different narrative techniques from those found in written works.[4] That is, stimulation occurs at least partially through different narrative devices which demand different reading strategies, such as the more complex ways in which characters' viewpoints and motivations need to be pieced together by audiences.

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3   As Kim indicates, Yamato is an old name for Japan which centered on Kyoto and/or Nara and sometimes has nationalist implications (2013: 225).

4   See Jason Mittell (2010) for differences between reading novels and television series.

1. NARRATIVE DEVICES AND COGNITIVE PROCESSING

In most if not all television series, narrative devices operate with cognitive processes to prompt the mental evaluation of new information against familiar cultural understanding and experience. The presentation of various scenes which incorporate partial information, ambiguities, or complexities necessitates imaginative mind work by which narrative and emotional gaps are filled while watching. As with other art- and complex- film narratives, *Moribito* uses narrative sequencing which strategically confounds in order to invoke complications, excitement, or ambiguities. These convolutions create puzzles which affectively stimulate conscious or unconscious mental activity. As Steven Willemsen (2018: 4) has suggested, complexities which "strategically confuse, perplex, mislead, or destabilise" can add an enjoyable and challenging mental engagement through what he calls "cognitive puzzlement". Moreover, the emergent confusion and (momentary or enduring) uncertainty not only make viewing more rewarding, but "can in turn incite viewers to engage in more active sense-making and interpretation [as long as they maintain their narrative interest], by which they attempt to attribute or restore the story's logic or coherence" (Willemsen 2018: 23). This kind of narrative complexity moves well beyond the descriptive mode and encourages the kind of active mental exercise which *Moribito* prompts so well. Indeed, *Moribito*'s narrative entanglements and complications demand significant cognitive processing of the socio-historical fantasy elements and of character subjectivities. This processing combines to help construct, interpret and deepen meaning. In short, complex mental activity creates a more embodied or affective understanding of story and character development.

Moreover, as the fantastic operates at a further remove from reality, series like *Moribito* require more mind work to make deeper metaphorical connections than realistic fictions do. Nevertheless, fantasy still relies on a complex dynamic of mimesis whereby, as Jan Alber et al. suggest about literary texts, readers must both activate and adjust real-world parameters when making sense of them (2018: 440). This kind of sense-making similarly applies to filmic fiction, and this paper explores how *Moribito*'s televisual techniques operate in co-operation with mental processing of cultural knowledge (particularly schemas and scripts) to produce affective engagement which challenges many of the dominant masculinist discourses found in Japan (and elsewhere).

2. **THEORY OF MIND (ToM)**

A cognitive perspective (at least partially) examines how fictional characters, readers and viewers perceive what other characters think. Just as the brain has an effect on how people think and act in certain situations in real life, the same kind of perceptive capacities are stimulated when reading fiction or when watching fictional drama. Narrative understanding relies on accessing a higher mental capacity to make inferences about the subjective feelings and experiences in the minds of any fictional characters. As Lisa Zunshine suggests, reading fiction calls for "mind-reading – that is, the inference of the mental state from the behaviour – that is necessary in regular human communication" (2006: 9). This "mind-reading" ability is also known as theory of mind (ToM): the human capacity to imagine and predict what other people may be thinking or feeling and to attribute reason or cause to their behaviour (Garfield, Peterson and Perry 2001: 495). ToM is thus required to build up protagonists' subjectivities, or what is known more generally as characterisation. Subjectivity, as John Stephens (forthcoming) explains,

> is a product of the constantly changing relationships a person has with the multiplicity of social discourses he or she engages with – that is, the "subject positions" which a person occupies from moment to moment and from which subjectivity is negotiated through interrelationships.

As Stephens further indicates in relation to connections between ToM and subjectivity in fiction, ToM is a key part of "the cognitive processes employed in constructing the illusion of complex characterization", and it occurs through the mental mapping of character subjectivities, or "getting inside a character's head". This kind of mental attribution of subjectivity to fictive characters "pivots on the representation of thoughts, feelings, emotions and intentions, and this again comes down to theory of mind" (Stephens). In other words, narrative forms and devices not only prompt mental activity in order to interpret story events and schemas or scripts, but also to understand characters. Filmic strategies which encourage complex theory of mind activity therefore have a large influence on the mental processing of gendered and other subjectivities in building up a picture of main characters like Balsa and her interlocutors.

3. **SCHEMAS AND SCRIPTS**

Although *Moribito* can be viewed (or read) from various critical perspectives,[5] this examination of the live-action series' narrative strategies demonstrates how they utilise cultural schemas and scripts to prompt and deconstruct discourses of gendered social participation. Schemas and scripts represent stereotypical and expected information (Herman 2013). Whereas a schema guides mental expectations about more static concepts such as a samurai, scripts guide expectations about more dynamic processes such as what may happen during or after a rescue. The *Moribito* series conjures a (masculine) samurai hero schema, for instance, only to challenge it through the introduction of the exiled Balsa as a champion spear fighter and saviour of the young Prince Chagum after an attempt on his life. Balsa is thus introduced as a courageous defender of justice, a commoner who not only flouts the standard hero schema, but also some of the New Yogo domain's (and Japan's) most entrenched gender conventions and scripts.

Many gender conventions stem from women's life-course schemas such as those of the "good wife, wise mother" (ryosai kenbo) or housewife (sengyō shūfu). These schemas and their associated scripts have dominated Japanese culture since at least the 1890s (Meiji Era). Even though these ideologies were promulgated by hegemonic powers who wanted to project a "modern" (western) image to the world in order to gain equity in trade and economics, as Alissa Freedman (2015) and other scholars have shown, male-dominated economic and corporate concerns remain deeply entrenched in Japanese cultural productions today. The discourse continues to be reinscribed through many television dramas despite many transformations through education and popular media since Meiji. *Moribito* and Balsa's prominence in the series, however, help challenge the patriarchal values often reinforced by other post-war television shows and film about women and girls. 30-year-old Balsa goes against the status- or power-driven dictates of each fictional kingdom's male establishment figures, for instance, and affective engagement with her position – her demeanour, age, voice, lifestyle, major life decisions, thoughts and emotions – is stimulated precisely because she is highly unconventional within both her textual and extra-textual domains. Indeed, the renowned talent (tarento), Ayase had to lower her usual

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5   For respective politics, class, gender and postcolonial deconstructive analyses, see: Itsuji 2006, Enomoto 2007, Kido 2007, Kilpatrick and Muta 2013.

voice for the role of Balsa and did most of the action shots herself (Umibe). The role also contrasts with most of Ayase's previous dramatic roles, including that of a wife in the recent *taiga* historical drama series, *Idaten* (2019), about the (1964) Tokyo Olympics.

4. EMPLOYMENT SCHEMAS AND SCRIPTS

The latest *Moribito* series now sits amongst a trajectory of television narratives about working women for female audiences, but disrupts the masculinist employment scripts which other shows continue to reinscribe. One such script involves women's labour force participation. Women's labour generates much social debate which can be linked to "good wife, wise mother" schemas and associated scripts, especially in relation to working mother and child-rearing activities. As some scholars have indicated, women are often blamed for putting their careers before relationships and childbearing (see, for example, Freedman and Iwata-Weickgenannt 2011, Sugawa-Shimada 2013, Mandujano-Salazar 2017,). This kind of discourse is intrinsically tied to economic perspectives which become particularly evident amidst Japan's recent labour shortages. Whereas women's participation in the Japanese workforce has been encouraged by government and other vested interests through, for instance, the Equal Employment Opportunity Law of 1986 (and supporting legislation in the 1990s), high rates of women's under-employment, lesser pay, and limited career tracks have continued. Indeed, as women's employment rates have been increasing (*Nikkei Asian Review* 2018), masculinist anxieties have persisted. These concerns revolve around, for instance, the breakdown of the family unit, the disinclination of young women to marry (or to marry late) and declining birth rates – all matters which negatively impact economic growth. Although the government has been trying to manage declining fertility rates since they fell to 1.57 in 1989, its failures of inclusion and egalitarianism can be seen through the constant updates to measures and policies such as the inaugural 2007 Charter for Work Life Balance (see, for instance, Ikezoe 2014: 108–9, and *The Economist*, 2016). Nevertheless, such measures have neither increased birth rates nor improved women's more precarious labour-force trajectories.

Further, women who have made alternative life choices such as not marrying or having children have been disparaged in pejorative terms such as *make-inu* (loser dogs) – versus *kachi-inu* (winner dogs) who are married with children – and

arafō (around forty). (For more on the genesis of such terms, see Freedman and Iwata-Weickgenannt 2011: 300). Such derogatory terms persisted at least until an awareness of the consumer power these women cohorts wielded, after which the more neutral term "single" *o-hitorisama* gained currency (Mandujano-Salazar 2017). By recent Japanese convention where the marriage age would be twenty-seven to thirty, women would either be thinking of marriage or be married with children, especially by forty. These are of course significant ages in a woman's biological life which affect childbearing, family relationships and workforce participation. As Ysela Mandujano-Salazar (2017: 530–1) indicates, this age range forms part of the Japanese *seken* (social "jury") discourse in which society and industry have been reluctant to expand concepts of femininity and women's social roles. As Freedman and Iwata-Weickgenannt (2011) have indicated, despite the promise of more and varied career opportunities for women, most Japanese television series have mostly reinscribed masculinist discourses about women's work and life concerns. These programmes are more inclined to see women and girls as sexualised objects or as aides for the (masculinist) corporate world, and are often more interested in socio-economic concerns than any form of social equity, in the employment sphere or elsewhere.

5. EMPLOYMENT AND SOCIAL SCHEMAS AND SCRIPTS IN JAPANESE DRAMAS

A brief overview of some prominent female dramas and anime in Japan helps trace dominant discourses on what Mandujano-Salazar calls the ideal "female life course" (2017: 536). Japanese television dramas have reflected post-war gender transformations and anxieties since at least the 1960s. As Tamae Prindle (2016: 430) asserts, questioning of women's roles began to occur during the 1960s amid Japan's so-called "economic miracle" period. This fledgling interrogation was in response to earlier television live-action dramas such as the 1920s–50s' "hahamono" (mother) tragedies about maternally-oriented women who make sacrifices for their children. 1960s' and 70s' genres included the love story and "domestic bliss" films. Manga and anime series in the high-economic-growth period from the 1970s to the 1990s then produced what Sharalyn Orbaugh (2003) has called the "busty battlin' babe", the strong, attractive young female fighter with magical powers, such as Honey Kisaragi from *Cutie Honey* or Major Motoko Kusanagi from *Ghost in the Shell*. Moreover, as Akiko

Sugawa-Shimada (2013 205) indicates, both the "magical girl" (mahō shōjo) and the feminine Romantic beauty (bishōjo) who was set against regal European backgrounds have also featured prominently in many Japanese novels, manga and anime series. Nevertheless, as Gabriella Lukács (2010) has indicated in her groundbreaking research on Japanese television, aesthetic and economic concerns remained a dominant motivator for programming. Even so, Noriko Aso (2010) has demonstrated that there has been an increasing questioning of values and expectations for women. Aso argues that there is some rejection of mainstream societal beliefs about gender and family roles in her examination of animated television series such as *The Rose of Versailles* (Berusaiyu no Bara, 1979–80); *Those Obnoxious Aliens* (Urusei Yatsura, 1981–86); and *Revolutionary Girl Utena* (Shōjo Kakumei Utena, 1997–98). On the other hand, Akiko Sugawa-Shimada has indicated a more ambivalent trajectory in gender transformations and their representation. Although she has shown how manga and anime such as *Meg the Little Witch* (Majokko megu-chan, 1974–1975) and *Candy Candy* (1976–1979) have reinscribed the shōjo as a "thoroughbred, upright, fashionable, and lady-like" or "cute" object of the male gaze (2013: 201), she also notes that some later "magical girl" animations have offered some resistance by invoking a "cute goth", a blend which has helped subvert "hegemonic femininity and gender roles" (2013: 202). As Tanaka Hiko (2011: 229) suggests, however, even the portrayal of Balsa in the 2007 NHK *Moribito* anime series, depicts her as more voluptuous than muscular in theatrical action scenes which place the anime in the historical context of beautiful girl soldier animation such as *Sailor Moon* (Doi 2017: 404).

These series about and for young women have more recently been followed by a relatively new or trendy Japanese (and Asian) television drama. As Gabriella Lukács (2010) has suggested, trendy dramas were created by commercial television networks in the late 1990s in response to economic challenges caused by market downturns. As neoliberal market trends saw productions moving away from story-driven dramas towards more consumer-driven shows, the new dramatic form began to feature celebrities (or *tarento* working in various genres) who became valuable as signifiers of lifestyle (or "affect", in Lukács terms). In the context of neoliberal reforms, although they were created and designed so that viewers could keep up with the latest trends, they also encouraged social adaptation to widening social inequities, new consumer systems and exploitative labour practices. These trendy dramas targeted the demographic with the highest disposable income, young single working women, and focused on the realisation of happiness which, as Ysela Mandujano-Salazar (2017: 536) suggests, mainly came to centre around marriage and work. Indeed some of these dramas were named according to prominent issues in the female life course. *Around Forty*, for example, is the name of a 2008 TBS television series which aired in a time spot often reserved for dramas which tackled "difficult" issues, thus underscoring the perception of unmarried, childless women as a "social problem" (Freedman and Iwata-Weickgenannt 2011: 302). *O-hitorisama*, too, became the title of a 10-episode drama broadcast in autumn 2009 on TBS dealing with female singledom (Freedman and Iwata-Weickgenannt 2011: 300). Mandujano-Salazar argues that some of these dramas, such as *It is not that I can't marry, it's that I won't* (Watashi kekkon dekinai-n ja nakute, shinai-n desu, 2016, the same year as the first *Moribito* season), provide examples of resistance to dominant discourses "the idea that wifehood and motherhood are the only valuable female roles" (2017: 537) and showcase "alternative models of femininity" (2017: 526). In contrast to this view, however, Alissa Freedman has shown in her body of work on *Tokyo Sonata* (2015) that there has been a marked tendency in primetime dramas to reinscribe patriarchal economic values through, for example, lead female characters who are usually corporate secretaries and who cannot be seen as more successful than their male colleagues. Further, they are often depicted as having to make a choice between their careers or having their own families, decisions which ultimately help maintain the aims of corporate Japan (Freedman 2017: 66). Freedman further demonstrates that many of the successful female workers decide to go overseas to follow careers after love has failed them at home, and that these dramas continue to classify gender roles by putting an emotional face on discussions about women in mass media.

Whereas the latest *Moribito* live-action series has arisen amidst these kinds of conservative portrayals of women and girls in film and television drama, it shatters many of their hegemonic conventions and values. Despite (or because of) its quasi-medieval, fantasy setting, it provokes deeper and more complex questioning about binary feminine or masculine roles and choices in life. Even within the fictive patriarchal domains around New Yogo, Balsa's border transgressions (both physical and metaphorical) subvert many dominant East Asian gendered social and familial conventions. She is not only strong and feisty, but also a working woman in an androcentric world which is in many ways analogous to present-day patriarchies. Further, Balsa's life choices about love, family and marriage

contrast with trendy dramas and their ilk where she decides to remain single and without children despite her latent romantic interest in Tanda, her constant and faithful domestic backstop who firmly supports her work in the social sphere. By provoking interrogation of Balsa's (and others') choices and behaviour then, the series destabilises many of the conventional life-course discourses. Balsa's role subversions include those of: the rebellious and fierce fighter (anti- or failed-) daughter figure to Jiguro, her foster father and life teacher; the steadfastly single, tough (non-maternal) adult protector of the young Prince Chagum; and the close friend (non-wife) for the shaman Tanda whose overtures she ignores. The drama thereby questions feminine roles and life choices in ways which engage viewers in an ongoing enquiry about gendered schemas and scripts of work, marriage and domesticity to which Balsa and others close to her do not conform.

As Gabriella Lukács indicates, production and consumption elements operate through a "web of (inter)textual relations" (2010: 79) which has an affective dimension that influences viewing agency. Whereas Lukács shows that meaning goes beyond any individual programme, **s**he also finds that producers' focus on ratings (based on viewers' and advertisers' satisfaction) to keep customers happy can negatively affect the ability to provide objective commentary or critique on contemporary social issues. In contrast with such consumer-driven affective engagement, the *Moribito* experiment stimulates more agentic affective reading relationship with the text and its surrounds. Intertextual comparisons of Balsa's gender-role transgressions with earlier television models of, for instance, the devoted mother, the demure daughter, the beautiful or magical shōjo, or the busty fighting girl, and the "trendy" working woman lead to mental evaluations which challenge such representations. Whereas Balsa may have special powers, she is quite different from the schematically-driven magical or battling bishōjo (beautiful girls), the conventional fighting girl in many manga or anime. Moreover, as a fighting woman who is in the same age group as many of the single, more fashionable and consumer-oriented protagonists of the current trendy dramas, for instance, Balsa breaks various conventions that these earlier images promulgate. Her common clothing and life decisions, for instance, contravene the materialistic lifestyle tendencies or other marriage/career choices and familial conventions they promote. Further, Balsa is not only staunchly non-materialistic and unconcerned with her appearance, but her weathering and independence also set her apart from most other popular female and shōjo television characters by firmly rejecting any

objectification by the male gaze. She also shows remarkable fortitude in her rejection of love, marriage and a comfortable home life, and instead of leaving Japan for a career overseas (after giving up on love and marriage at home), she remains in the immediate region to pursue her fighting career. That is, she remains to fight against corrupt patriarchal systems in her own and other proximate nations.

Aside from her superior physical competence in martial arts (which she has acquired through hard training) against lesser-skilled male soldiers, Balsa's actions and behaviour evoke a more negotiated subjectivity in interaction with influential masculinist plotters. Whereas Balsa is predominantly contrasted against an array of such male protagonists, be they close personal friends, acquaintances or antagonists, her considerable warmth, kindness and mundane humility contrast and blend with her superior intellect and fighting skills throughout. She often makes friends of erstwhile enemies, and her values of equity, loyalty and justice are able to be assessed in many episodes through her collaborations with, for instance, commoners, elite, or the indigenous Yakoo (ヤクー); all those who work with her to uncover imperial deceits and plots (see Kilpatrick and Muta 2013). Balsa is thus a much more complex and multi-dimensional (and older) "modern" woman who, in both appearance and demeanour, earns her place by surpassing the prowess and ethics of the powerful men in the story's patriarchal world. As a mature, single, weather-beaten, warrior-working woman who makes considered life choices, Balsa contravenes schematic gender norms, and helps set the stage for cognitive assessment of her independent subjectivity. Such mental assessment occurs through the contrast of cultural conventions laid down in both previous dramas and in the rigidly patriarchal New Yogo and its surrounds. Assessment of Balsa's and others' subjectivities arises in relation to, for instance, various situations, time-frames, emotions, causes and effects.

6. SEQUENCING STRATEGIES AND COGNITION IN *MORIBITO*

Much cognitive assessment is stimulated in *Moribito* through sequencing strategies which bring some elements to the fore and cause others to recede. These elements then need to be (mentally) retained and later integrated into the broader picture in order to assess and ascertain potential meanings and significances. Mental activity not only connects newly-provided information in events being viewed with past narrative

action and what is known or given about the story as a whole, but also incites active consideration of connections between events and characters. Open-ended or cut-off scenes and sequencing can generate, for instance, highly-nuanced predictive capacity as the brain compares stored knowledge and experiences with incoming information and makes predictions about what will come next. An example of how ToM combines with audience predictive activity in *Moribito* occurs through the ultimate cliffhanger which comes at the end of Episode 1.04. Here, Balsa throws a knife from one direction at the Kanbal king she despises, while Jin, her erstwhile foe, fires a crossbow from another. Because the camera cuts away from the target after Jin's arrow, the audience must speculate about whether it is directed at Balsa or the Kanbal king. Under the assumption that Balsa must survive (because a new season could not begin without her), postulation is also needed about other potential forking paths and character motivations. In other words, the ending not only sparks questions about who Jin's arrow is aimed at but also conjecture about what his intentions are, and what will happen next if he or Balsa succeeds or fails in killing the king. How will the incident be a catalyst for the next season? Will Balsa be compelled to flee from New Yogo, and seek safety in yet another kingdom? The cliffhanger thus not only whets a viewer's appetite to return for the next season, but simultaneously incites deep thinking about what is in characters' minds and about possible scenarios which have been conjured and held in memory, and which will then need to be confirmed or rejected later.

7. **SETTING AND SUBJECTIVITY**

Sequencing and other film devices also operate with the construction of setting which in turn affects character assessment in crucial ways. Setting and sequencing become important in the building up of information about Balsa's attitudes towards the world, especially in her interactions with the storyworld's patriarchal state. Different camera techniques, angles, or quick shot-reverse-shot segments early in *Moribito*'s Episode 1.01, for instance, require the audience to consider her subjectivity against temporal and spatial connotations or dissonances. They conjure cultural schemas which provoke cognitive consideration of the socio-historical setting and how elements build and relate to each other within the more rigid, status-oriented space against the flow and space of nature. Class divisions, for example, are

invoked in the initial scenes through Balsa's introduction within a hierarchical patriarchate even before the opening credits, where the camera shots allow for a mental contrast of the appearance and tone of Balsa with the participants in a regal procession which immediately conjures a status-conscious past with hints of danger amidst the lonely mountain pass. Here, mind work is driven entirely by camera work, sound and music for the first four-minutes, without any verbal dialogue until the end of Balsa's dramatic rescue of the as-yet-unknown young prince. The rescue showcases Balsa's transgressive spear-wielding talents as she saves him from an assassination attempt (a scene which itself is significant for its script-breaking elements, as discussed below). In the build up to the rescue, an initial aerial shot over the remote mountain ravine pans in to a close up of a swirling river far below, then pans along a high mountain path and closes in on the pageantry of an archaic-seeming retinue, replete with clashing cymbals, as a palanquin manoeuvres the perils of falling rocks. The setting is not necessarily Japan, but for those familiar with Japanese history, the procession is reminiscent of a *sankin kotai* (alternate attendance) retinue of the Edo period (1603–1868), where daimyō lords were required to travel to Edo (modern Tokyo) to pay (enforced) respect to the shogun who resided there. The subsequent cut to a distant human figure on a narrow path across the mountains (who turns out to be Balsa) may initially evoke a schema or script of a (male) wandering merchant or rōnin (masterless samurai) from the *taiga* historical drama convention.

The proximity of the two separate scenes prompts viewers to speculate about how they may be connected, and encourages a recognition of the markers of a class differential between the characters. As the camera closes in on the as-yet-unnamed Balsa from behind, and as she turns back (towards viewing space) and is looking around intently, the pacing allows for mental adjustments to any schema called up, from a male *rōnin* to a female wanderer, for instance, and the audience must search further for connections and potential significances. As John Fiske (2011 69–70, 96) has suggested in his seminal work *Television Culture*, the convention of the close-up is an important ideological and technical tool. It can engage viewers' assessment of the subject under scrutiny in televisual moments of hostility or intimacy. As Fiske further indicates, these assessments also depend on other technical, social and ideological codes by which subjects are contextualised. Assessment of the two separate scenes thus involves speculation about Balsa's potential circumstances and how she will be linked to the procession. As the camera zooms in

FIGURE 1. SEQUENCE DEMONSTRATING BALSA'S RESPONSES TO STIMULI.

yet closer, the timing and lack of dialogue allow for viewer scrutiny of Balsa's clothing, posture and apparent positioning in the world and her attitude and responses. The shots not only show Balsa as woman, but in contrast to the colourful, luxurious attire of those in the retinue, she is wearing a duller, comfortable travelling cloak, with a bound-up spear (which is being carried as a stick with bundle over her shoulder). The extreme close-ups of Balsa also mean that viewers are unconsciously aligned with her position as she is noted as an outsider or commoner protagonist in this apparently hierarchically-oriented, masculine storyworld. This alignment further encourages anticipation about what will happen to her and what will happen next. These early scenes thus immediately conjure ideas of this woman as a breaker of conventions particularly as, by the end of the rescue, she has transgressed many physical or metaphorical boundaries or gendered schemas and scripts already existing in an audience's mind.

Whereas these critical opening scenes encourage assessment of Balsa's subjectivity through their close-up scrutiny of Balsa's visage – her gestures, facial expressions and eye-shifts at critical sounds and sights – the camera work prompts further complex mind work and predictions about her role as a seasoned wanderer-heroine. The partial pieces of information encourage assessment of her as a woman accustomed to the elements and comfortable in the natural environment, yet also alert and ready to take action if necessary. Indeed, she is introduced as being so acutely aware of her surrounds that she seems to have special powers of perception. For instance, when the camera cuts away from her at a sudden loud screech, a long pan follows her line of sight as she is observed intently watching a giant, surreal-looking bird of prey (the first sign of fantasy) fly past and up towards the imperial procession as it is proceeding over a high bridge in the distance. (Known as *nāji* [ナージ], these birds are a recurrent motif and eventually play a crucial role at the end of Season 1.)

Another cut back to Balsa's face and body, however, shows her suddenly alert to something untoward across the mountain (at 00.00.55). As the camera again follows her line of vision up towards the procession, the sightline moves to a higher viewpoint of the retinue which could not be hers. Rather, the sightline is constructed firstly to register an aerial shot of the procession, potentially from the point of view of the *nāji* (see top left image in Figure 1), and then the point of view of someone who has apparently shot a projectile. There is also a fleeting, blurry image of a splash of colour from the procession – an extreme close-up of the cymbal

player's attire – and an ox's eye (see Figure 1). Together with the perception of both Balsa's alertness and the ensuing melee in the procession, the shot-reverse-shot sequence arouses audience suspicions about something or someone apparently out-of-place in the higher mountains. The partial information encourages the formulation that the ox pulling the palanquin has been shot. The camera work here thus helps foreshadow Balsa's embroilment in the assassination attempt. The cuts help formulate postulations and must be retained in memory in order to assemble these and other hints which indicate the possibility that the person who has shot the projectile is behind the young Prince Chagum's "accident".

In alluding to Balsa's highly-attuned skills of perception, and to the cause of the "accident", the sequence generates connections to the deeper levels of intrigue – between Balsa and the New Yogo kingdom she is visiting, and between her and the prince she later saves and who she eventually comes to protect. That is, together with the concept of hierarchical differences as the potential cause for the narrative action and story development, these filmic strategies foreground the concepts of political and personal intrigue by prompting questions about what Balsa has seen, how it might fit into the story, and what her role will be. The open-ended shots not only build curiosity and foreshadow the upcoming action, but also encourage the attribution of important characteristics to Balsa. Theory of mind needs to be applied in relation to Balsa's actions, assessments of her moral stance, and anticipation about her position in connection to those in the world around her and particularly to her future relationship with the young prince. The world itself must also be mentally connected to the imperial powers she is about to encounter. Such assessments then need to be held in memory to be adjusted against later scenes.

8. **RESCUE SCRIPT**

Filmic strategies also operate together with ToM and other mental activity in the subversion of the normal rescue script – that is, intrinsic cultural knowledge of expected behaviour after a rescue. The script prompts further cognitive assemblage of information about the storyworld through interaction with Balsa's attitudes towards (masculine) authority figures, for example. A basic script for an encounter with a rescuer after the saving of someone's life would usually include some expression of relief or gratitude, and/or a reward or token of appreciation of some kind (which may come later). It may also

involve a gendered script with a stereotypically male saviour and a female being rescued or an expression thanks from a relieved relative or acquaintance of the rescued person. In accordance with David Herman's suggestion that scripts are particularly useful for understanding how narratives "focus attention on the unusual and the remarkable" (2002: 90), Balsa's rescue of the prince is not only remarkable in its subversion of the conventional "skilful male-rescuer" stage of the script, but also at the gratitude stage. Indeed, the narrative's already-established status/power dichotomy is likely to trigger schemas and scripts related to unequal gender relations and strengthen affective viewing alignment with Balsa's attitude (already well-established after having closely witnessed her exclusive skills, prowess and moral ethics).

Theory of mind interaction with Balsa's attitudes is generated at the first dialogue after the rescue (at 00.03.47) in the form of a demand initiated by the aggressive male soldier who the audience has witnessed watching Balsa's exploits as a bystander. He is apparently in charge of protecting the prince (deduced through mental assemblage of events and appearances). After Balsa has emerged from the swirling rapids after saving Chagum and is walking across the riverside rocks, this guard contravenes the gratitude stage of the standard rescue script by appearing singularly unimpressed with her presence let alone her prowess. When he crudely demands to know her name instead of thanking her, or even politely acknowledging her bravery, Balsa's equally curt response also contravenes rescue script expectations. She immediately turns on her heel rather than showing any respect for his authority or providing any further information. While such a dangerously-executed rescue by a woman is remarkable in the socio-historical setting, the soldier's apparent indifference to her feats is also highly untoward. His lack of awe, appreciation, or respect for her success in saving Prince Chagum from certain death, and his abruptness or rudeness in the situation are strategically positioned to arouse audience curiosity. Together, the soldier's gruffness and Balsa's response call up audience ToM to try to ascertain and attribute possible reasons for the apparent hostility between them. His terse attitude may be postulated as a soldier's or masculine arrogance, an annoyance with her interference in matters of state as a bothersome woman or commoner. The attribution of ToM to the soldier's antagonism towards Balsa not only foreshadows suspicions about his attitude towards her rescue of the prince, but they must be recalled later. Some of these speculations are at least partially confirmed in the next scenes which help piece together the basis of the intrigue.

In comparison with assessment of the guard in this scene, ToM may attribute Balsa's dismissive stance towards him as an expression of her surprise at his contravention of the rescue script, or her impatience with, disregard for, or hostility towards military, imperial, or masculine authority, and alerts the audience about a deeper intrigue with a potentially hostile regime. Regardless of whether the audience registers the power or gender relations consciously or unconsciously, the characters' contravention of conventional rescue, gender or power schemas and scripts prompts a mental search for potential cause-and-effect explanations for characters' behaviour. These various speculations must then be held in memory and assessed against upcoming scenes in order to put together more information about the protagonists' respective attitudes and the already-insinuated power dynamics among characters in the land at large.

Analysis of the momentary but suspenseful conclusion to this untoward encounter further demonstrates how filmic techniques activate ToM to arouse misgivings about the motives of the palace guard. ToM operates to build up potential causes for the mystery (which is later exposed as part of the machinations of New Yogo's hegemonic patriarchy). Immediately after Balsa's withdrawal from the soldier, for instance, the camera abruptly cuts away from her to a split-second shot (at 00.03.50) from a slightly lowered viewing angle towards an out-of-focus guard in similar uniform to that of her interrogator. Along with a sharp whooshing sound, the quick, blurred images show the male's right arm pitching back then forward. (See Figure 2.) Audience mind work must link the man in this flash with the soldier who has just questioned Balsa in order to recognise that he is now attacking her as she is walking away. These shots thereby call forth further speculation about the reasons behind Balsa's attitude while also providing partial confirmation of earlier suspicions about both characters and the intrigue.

Filmic techniques thus engage the viewing mind through the crucial aspects of speculation and memory capacity. This shot of the attacking soldier recalls the earlier image and whooshing sound which the camera fleetingly registered as moving towards the procession just before the melee when Chagum's carriage was upended, and when Balsa's gestures and facial expressions conjured a sense of something awry (at 00.00.55–57). Viewers must mentally compare these shots through memory in order to come up with the explanation that the palace guard is the "someone" behind the uproar in the procession and the upending of the prince's carriage. Whereas the audience has been able to previously draw an as-

FIGURE 2. IMAGES OF THE ATTACKING SOLDIER (AT 00.03.50) AND EARLIER SHOTS OF THE LEAD-UP TO HIS "DEMAND".

sessment of the situation through witnessing Balsa's reaction to the earlier arrow directed at the procession, because this sword attack on Balsa is directed towards the viewing space in close proximity to her (in her absence), her feelings or emotions are unable to be witnessed, but are instead transferred to the viewer-as-Balsa. That is, in Fiske's terms, the close-ups align the viewer with Balsa-as-receiver of the blow against the soldier as the villain. Nevertheless, the contrastive shots disconcert and incite further enthrallment. While emotions and questions are left up in the air, the camera work also fosters attentiveness to the guard's awareness of Balsa's suspicions and knowledge as dangerous to him.

Camera work further arouses speculation about the reasons for the guard's attack and about deeper upcoming mysteries to alert audiences to the need to activate memory – to be particularly attentive to each and every potential clue. Awareness of the need for further memory capacity is stimulated, for instance, when the camera cuts away from the attacking soldier just as suddenly to the opening credits (which showcase Balsa's signature spear). The brevity and positioning

of the attack signal to audiences that elements of the attack should be retained in memory. Later recall of this cliffhanger explains why, when Balsa next appears in "present time" (00.07.55), she is tied in a prison cell with a facial wound (after having apparently been struck with the flat of the sword). Such sequences not only stimulate questioning about significance and connections but also presage continuing narrative complexities about palace deceptions and scheming.

Ultimately, these as-yet-unanswered sequences – the fraction-of-a-second camera shots at key moments of intrigue – establish the narrative pattern: that answers will only come in parts, and only to the attentive, alert viewer to be assessed and processed as bits of stray information to be pieced together. In other words, understanding of the story and postulations about reasons for subjects' actions require cognitive capacity – alertness, attention to detail, memory and recognition of momentary fragments – to put together the answers to the deeper mysteries, all of which are later partially revealed and related back to power, gender, class and race relations which have arisen from earlier scenes or episodes.

In order to further demonstrate the effectiveness of techniques which generate complex cognitive dynamics around representations of gender, these open-ended strategies can be contrasted with the more descriptive explications in the preview montage of the series which was produced for screening as a nominee for the 45th Emmy Awards. The preview, created for English-speaking audiences, uses a para-textual masculine voiceover which explains the story's plot rather than leaving viewers to deduce or deconstruct any potential significances arising from the narrative presented in the montage itself. For instance, the initial voiceover focuses on the 'guardian' subjectivities of Prince Chagum and Balsa – in that order: "This is the story of a young prince who becomes the "guardian of the spirit" and the woman who protects him".[6] Rather than encouraging audience mental activity, such oration (also projected in writing across the screen) immediately instantiates Chagum's class status as a "royal" protector and host of the water spirit – referred to as an egg (tamago) – which inscribes him with the higher social role (as protector of the wellbeing of the storyworld). It thus relegates Balsa to a secondary "guardianship" script, inscribing her as the more domestic and maternal protector of a child in contrast with the more worldly intellectual and integrative prowess she demonstrates throughout the series (as implied through the preview montage). Whereas later visuals from this same montage indicate a different story – of Balsa's bravery, skills, and defiance against the arrogance of the male "protectorate" – the denotative (versus connotative) voiceover produces a less interrogative, less compelling and challenging viewing or interpretative experience. Perhaps the socio-cultural references and complexities of the narrative were deemed too demanding for an English-language audience, or perhaps the subtleties of the deconstructive elements were somehow missed by the production or translation teams, or maybe this narration is simply an indication of the implicit and entrenched dominance of the masculine voice in English. Nevertheless, the mental impact of gendered binaries in the initial narration is hard to override once provided in such an authoritative manner. While the narration in the preview discourages much self-reflection on the more nuanced aspects of dissonant gender roles in the series, astute viewers may nevertheless be intrigued enough by Balsa's integral role as the bodyguard heroine who works hard at social rather than

maternal or personal bonding. If so, such viewers would certainly be kept stimulated by the mental activity required by the continually evolving complexity of plots and relationships which unfold throughout this stimulating series.

9. NON-CONSANGUINEAL AND SUPERNATURAL BONDS

Indeed, one part of Balsa's rescue conjures another type of schema which stimulates mental consideration of familial relationship ties such as mother/child bonds or blood connections. The supernatural connection scene between Balsa and Chagum which occurs under the water, before Balsa pulls the prince out of the river, conjures the mother/child schema but explodes conventional connections or scripts through its defiance of earthly or blood-related orientations. The formation conjures the beginning of a deep bond between Balsa and Chagum but the scene also encourages conceptual work about different kinds of ethics for bonding with and protecting others. In contrast with previous scenes which showcase Balsa's tough physical skills (such as her acrobatic skills with the spear and rope), as the underwater Chagum becomes illuminated with the strange light of the egg within him, Balsa gently flows into the Moebius-like penumbra of light and water surrounding him. (See Figure 3.) All the light and fluidity of this transcendental underwater connection allude to a higher (and more intimate) form of non-consanguineal bonding which subverts dominant (real- and story- world) schemas or scripts of genetically-related, maternal/paternal and protective ties. As Ella Tennant suggests in a different context, water "possesses a magical quality which enables it to absorb our imaginings and projections – the perfect gender fluid shapeshifter [which] is often easily equated with spirituality, sexuality, mysticism and the soul" (2017). Mystical water (and other elemental) connections are contrasted with more mundane physicality throughout, especially as the egg actively grows within Chagum as the series progresses. The water scenes connote a blended sense of a protective spirit which opposes any simple binary construction such as mother/parent and child, or earth and sky, especially as the fluidity of water symbolises how beings from all walks of life in the realm need to bond together to combat the present drought throughout the land (which is tied up with the water spirit now manifest within Chagum). The entire scene suggests a supernatural (and near-death) experience in which Balsa and Chagum are bound together in a "cocoon" which anticipates

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6   See the preview at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YsxSZ-sHWyg. It can be compared with NHK's synopsis (in English) at https://www.nhk.or.jp/moribito/en/season1.html, which puts Balsa firmly at the centre.
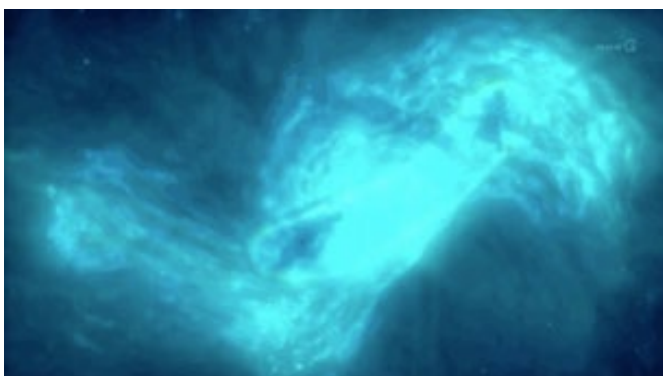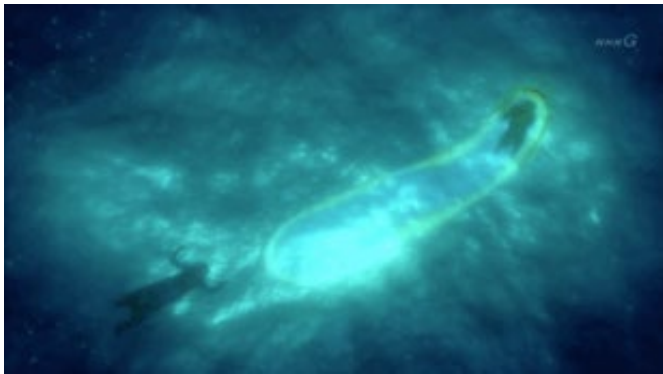
FIGURE 3. BALSA (AT BOTTOM LEFT) BREAKING THROUGH CHAGUM'S UNDERWATER "COCOON".

their future ties and can also be later ascertained as integral to their different "guardianship" roles, and to the storyworld at large.

Moreover, a similar kind of metaphorical bonding schema or script applies to all the central relationships in *Moribito*. None of the familial or protective connections are through blood ties. For instance, Balsa is the reluctant then affectionate foster-parent-protector of Prince Chagum, while Chagum is the fearful, then hopeful, protector of the (wa-

ter) spirit within him (and is also more affectionate towards Balsa and Tanda than to his blood father who is embroiled in plots to destroy him as heir-apparent). Further, Balsa's guardian, Jiguro, acts as her foster father – as nurturer, trainer and physical protector (from assassin hunters) – while the male healer-shaman figure, Tanda, is Balsa's affectionate base and home-maker/carer and Chagum's foster-parent-protector. This fluidity of gender roles within non-blood affiliations also contrasts markedly with the land's staunchly patriarchal New Yogo court and its ideas of what needs protecting (or destroying) and how such "protection" should be carried out. It transpires that Chagum's father, the god-emperor, has plotted with his courtiers to have his own son killed in order to protect the throne/realm because the "demon" spirit within Chagum will expose the secret of the emperor's mortality. These contrastive familial/protective metaphors all activate audience ToM assessment of character subjectivities through the mental attribution of reasons for characters' bonds with others close to them and their attitudes towards others in the story realm. In other words, mental comparisons between real- and story- world scripts operate with narrative gaps, trial-and-error explanations for characters' behaviour, and intrigues to interrogate the traditional hierarchical, familial and gendered human relationships.

10. **FLASHBACKS AND NURTURING SCHEMAS**

Audiences must further interpret nurturing schemas through cognitive processing of flashbacks or mises-en-scène which present disjointed information and/or interrupt the main narrative's timeline or flow of events. As Jason Mittell (2010) points out, such disjunctions necessitate more complex comparative affective processing of the story's characters, temporalities and causal connections. Indeed, *Moribito* producer Kiyoshi Umibe indicates that the insertion of scenes from Balsa's earlier life into the present day makes the story harder to follow, but can make "the protagonist's emotions and motivations easy to grasp" (Pickard 2017). Crucial background information about Balsa's past has to be pieced together through cuts back and forth in time and juxtaposed scenes which occur at particular points in the narrative sequence. Many flashbacks call up nurturing scripts which act to subvert the three main female "life course" schemas of (obedient) daughter, (maternal) protector, and potential (romantic) partner or wife. Scenes of Balsa's life with her now-deceased

FIGURE 4. DISSOLVE FROM THE TRAUMATISED CHILD, CHAGUM, TO TORTURED ADULT, BALSA (AT 00.07.50).

foster-father Jiguro, the hard-nosed but caring warrior, are strategically positioned at important moments in the development of her most personal present-day relationships.

The first flashback after the opening credits in 1.01 (at 00.06.00), for instance, prompts comparison with Balsa's rescue of Chagum by depicting her own rescue by her father's faithful friend Jiguro. Jiguro has become the foremost figure in her young life when she is six years old, after her father, who had been loyal to the then Kanbal king, has been murdered at the behest of the treacherous aspiring king. As the fleeing Jiguro pulls the young Balsa onto his horse, the camera zooms in on her doll as it is dropped and left behind. As the scene conjures all the searing trauma of the abrupt departure, viewers can attribute Balsa's emotional loss (of, for instance, her dislocation from all that is familiar to her; homeland, family and treasured doll) as a metaphorical farewell to her girlhood. The trauma of such home/father/daughter/girlhood displacement is further reiterated in the next scene where Jiguro responds to the young Balsa's continuing tears by telling her somewhat harshly that she can never return home (in a scene mirrored later in her own protective relationship with Chagum). The sequence is neatly woven together by the dissolve from traumatised child to tortured adult at 00.07.50. (See Figure 4.) This kind of juxtapositioning of her present life with flashbacks to her ruptured earlier life in Kanbal with Jiguro helps viewers piece together how she has developed her skills and determination, her worldview or *raison d'être*.

This early montage prompts mind work which postulates Balsa's practical attitude and toughness as a sloughing off of "girlishness" through her mirroring of the tough love of Jiguro, her non-blood-related father. Such mirroring also helps map situations such as Chagum's own ruptured relationship with his father, the god-emperor, and its role in his own develop-

ment of subjectivity, onto and through Balsa's experiences and his receipt of her foster care and training. Echoes of the now-revealed deceptions behind the new Kanbal throne further conjure parallels with the machinations behind the New Yogo court. This new-found awareness of the treachery in turn arouses consideration of some of the potential reasons for Balsa's lack of respect for patriarchal blood lines, structures or religiously-endowed state authority figures (such as Chagum's father and the present ruler of Kanbal).

11. FLASHBACKS AND THE WORKING WOMAN

Much of the attribution of Balsa's adult subjectivity as a working woman-bodyguard/protector is also built up through flashbacks of developmental moments in her early life with Jiguro which interrupt scenes of her own present-day training of Chagum in the martial arts. Whereas these evocations draw attention to Jiguro's nurturing and hard training of the young Balsa, they also provide access to the development of her spear skills and to her frustrations, failures and determination along her "career" path. As the narrative progresses, in 1.03 in particular, a series of Balsa's memories encourage consideration of potential rationale for her present work ethic (and how this rationale transmits to Chagum). Several scenes which project Balsa's memories while she is tending to Chagum in the remote cave stimulate thought about her career decisions. Tanda has found the cave in order to harbour the three of them while they wait for the egg to hatch, but he is presently away researching the legend of the spirit of the egg. As the egg is now growing within Chagum and becoming restive (ascertained through its illumination in his chest and expressions of his fear and of adult concerns), Chagum

questions Balsa about why she learnt to fight. The camera cuts (beginning at 00.20.00) back and forth from present to past as she begins to answer that she had wanted to acquire strength to defeat the Kanbal ruler (and thus help the kingdom) rather than simply wanting to learn to protect herself. The first flashbacks cut to Balsa as she witnesses Jiguro do battle with a man he eventually kills, then to Jiguro's deathbed with Balsa at his side. As the cuts go to and fro from present-moment scenes Balsa is simultaneously recounting the story to Chagum: Jiguro had to kill eight of his former close friends who, although they were fellow-Spears from Kanbal, had been ordered to hunt him (and Blasa) down and had been doing so for eighteen years. At the deathbed scenes, Balsa promises Jiguro that she will save eight people. The compensatory nature of her act of saving Chagum needs to be postulated (by both Chagum and the audience) here as the camera cuts back to the present where Balsa expresses her regret about her own selfishness and Jiguro's wasted life: that Jiguro had to give up his life to look after her. That is, Balsa's belated recognition that Jiguro had killed friends and given up everything – his home, country, livelihood, and family life – for her must be measured against her rescue of Chagum. Back in "real" time (at 00.25.39), Chagum similarly uses ToM to ascertain that her pledge to Jiguro to save eight people is the reason that Balsa rescued him. The audience must then measure his (vocalised) reasoning against Balsa's response: that saving someone is harder than killing because, as she ruminates, someone gets hurt in any rescue and that wound will create a new conflict. These philosophical reflections may further trigger the memory of Jiguro's early advice to the crying six-year-old Balsa in 1.01 (at 00.06.00) that one can never look back, but can only make the most of this life. In turn, the memory flashbacks encourage consideration of the life experiences and hard choices which have moulded Balsa into the fiercely independent career woman and tough but affectionate guardian she has become – just as Jiguro was to her.

12. SUBVERSIONS OF "GOOD WIFE, WISE MOTHER" SCRIPT: THE (NON-)DUTIFUL DAUGHTER

The cuts back and forth depicting Balsa's deep indebtedness to and affection for Jiguro also call up and deconstruct daughterly aspects of the "good wife, wise mother" script. For instance, an implication of the juxtapositioning of battle and domestic scenes with Jiguro (and Chagum) is that Balsa

contravenes "proper" daughterly conventions. The usual "dutiful daughter" script is one of obedience to fathers (and elders), rather than of the feisty rebellion, independence and self-determination which is evident in the flashbacks of Balsa's training sessions with Jiguro and in her battles against others. While her self-purported "selfishness" further conjures a sense of her daughterly failure, alternatively, it simultaneously interrogates notions of requisite "daughterly duty". Observations of Balsa's expressions of regret about not fulfilling her daughterly obligations encourage, for example, a contrastive empathetic alignment with her as an ethical and responsible being who has succeeded in getting through difficult life circumstances; without a homeland, any fixed abode, or any "natural" family. Another cut back to Jiguro affirms this more empathetic perspective as he reassures her (at 00.24.00) that he has enjoyed spending his life with her (as she is now enjoying her time with the sometimes petulant Chagum), even as Jiguro implies its difficulties when he observes that saving people is harder than killing them (words she repeats to Chagum). Balsa's subjectivity as a devoted, loyal and caring "daughter", her unusual care of Chagum, her training, and the affective dismissal of her sense of failure as a daughter to Jiguro's (maternal and paternal) nurturing are mapped from one generation to the other to call up alternative life scripts for both genders in relation to caring and bonding. Balsa's positive intersubjective relationships, together with the responsibility she takes on for Chagum and the difficulties and rewards it brings, also affirm her career choice (to be a bodyguard). Such mental affirmations encourage rejection of the concept of the need for fulfilment through the more conventional female "life course" script – of love, marriage, housework and children. All of Balsa's difficult life choices are spurred by rationale which flouts conventional scripts.

13. THE SINGLE WOMAN (O-HITORI-SAMA)

While the memory flashes with Jiguro often mirror stages of Balsa's relationship with Chagum to imply reasons for her attitudes towards work, other memories are juxtaposed against present moments with Tanda to provide consideration of her resolutely single status. In a rejection of the conventional schema of marriage as "domestic bliss" for women in Episode 3 (from 00:40:00–42:00), Balsa is seen refusing to acknowledge Tanda's overtures of marriage. While Tanda rejects the stereotypical marriage proposal script by simply

asking her to live with him rather than explicitly proposing, he suggests even more significantly that she continue with her bodyguard work and just come back "home" to him when she needs. Although Balsa displays no surprise at his suggestions, her face and body language (as she turns away from him) imply her refusal, her active choice to deny something which may be attractive to her. Theory of mind may attribute Balsa's implicit rejection as a resolve to remain single despite her evident respect and (maybe romantic) affection for Tanda, and despite her reliance on him as her "backstop" for refuge, respite, or healing after her battles in the social world. Together with the camera's focus on bodily gestures, her silence further encourages the speculation that Balsa is contemplating his proposal. Her departure back into the cave without answering may thus be taken as her decision to put her work and duty before any personal desires or comforts. This assumption is confirmed in later scenes in which the young Chagum continually sees them as a couple. On the other hand, Tanda, who is biting his lip as he anxiously awaits an answer outside the cave, is obviously disappointed but appears reluctantly accepting of Balsa's decision (and he does not bring it up again, although other scenes allude to it). While this particular scene encourages consideration of alternative familial and working choices for both genders, it also leaves room for consideration of the difficult emotions which come with this kind of major decision in life.

14. SUBVERSIONS OF GENDER BINARIES

Public/private-sphere gender reversals such as Tanda's domestic skills, Balsa's bodyguarding skills, and Chagum's egg-birthing role (Doi 2017: 402) further subvert the "good wife, wise mother" schema and associated scripts by provoking interrogation of set binaristic (masculine/feminine) roles. When Tanda makes a home for Balsa and Chagum in the cave, for instance, it is apparently natural – unquestioned by the characters – that he tends to Balsa when she returns to his hearth from her bodyguard duties. Indeed, Tanda performs stereotypically femenine roles such as cooking and tending to the sick, weak or wounded, and they sit alongside his apparent comfort with taking a secondary role in the more violent battles of the social world. (See, for instance, 1.03, at 00.53.00, where he stands back and watches Balsa's fierce defence of Chagum from the giant serpent, Rarunga, which is trying to obtain the egg.) At the same time, switches in convention are wryly noted in the same episode when Balsa's lack of prowess in the kitchen is highlighted by Chagum's teasing and wel-

come relief at Tanda's return to cooking after a few days alone with Balsa, and by images of her chopping wood for Tanda's cooking fire (in 1.03, at 00.07.02) which alert viewers to the masculine/feminine role subversions. Indeed, the occasional visual joke overtly mocks other stereotypical scripts such as that of offering a helping hand to women, children or the elderly, all of whom *Moribito* depicts as valuable, capable and independent members of society. In 1.03 (at 00.00.08), for instance, Tanda's hand is knocked away in no uncertain terms as he offers it to the feisty old Toragai, the ambiguously-gendered, but ultimately woman "master" of the parallel universe (of Nayugu) who has special knowledge, skills and supernatural powers (such as the ability to transport her spirit/soul). While the joke is on Tanda here, it also conjures a light-hearted camaraderie which can be contrasted with the serious plotting of the male antagonists from the upper echelons of each of the kingdoms. Such subversions of conventional binaries prompt further consideration of male-dominant martial arts' skills or female-only mothering/caring/nurturing. Whereas some of these relationship roles may be considered as superficial role reversals, Balsa and other characters are always more multidimensional than a rigid binary model would allow. Indeed, viewers must interact with and assess various gender, age and class concepts and characters who have multiple subjectivities as sometimes flawed, yet independently capable and successful at various combinations of nurturing, caring (for others and/or the environment) and employment. Individual talents become especially apparent when the characters collectively unite for the common good rather than compete for more selfish purposes such as career enhancement or the maintenance of individual or deified courtly power in the realm. Although the series offers only a few women characters, especially at the upper echelons, Balsa is surrounded by supportive and equally multi-faceted males and other more ambiguously gendered characters who all help subvert the typically masculine heroic convention (of the *taiga*, for instance) and other more fixed binaries.

15. CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the narrative strategies in the *Moribito* television series prompt highly complex mental activity through scenes which conjure, suggest, thwart and surprise rather than explain events or characters' actions. Particular filmic techniques operate, for instance, to conjure schemas and scripts which then need to be held in memory to inspire en-

quiry into the narrative's potential connections with contemporary socio-cultural constructions, particularly those related to gendered structures and institutions. In other words, the filmic methods utilised to develop Balsa's character in interaction with her social milieu stimulate viewing minds by raising questions about women's roles and participation relative to modern patriarchal Japan (and elsewhere), where there are continuing failures of inclusion and egalitarianism. Audiences must, for example, consider the complexities of Balsa's (and others') evolving subjectivity – or why Balsa thinks, feels and acts the ways she does – against more conventional discourses of the "good wife, wise mother" and its life course. Techniques such as close-ups, flashbacks, mise-en-scène, and cliffhangers all combine to activate theory of mind and the mental assessment of Balsa's (and others') subjectivities. They build up information and fill in gaps about present relationships, then subject these assessments to scrutiny across staged settings and events of the recent and distant past. They must also be further measured according to relationships amongst the dominant authorities in each of the kingdoms, including those with (super-) natural powers.

Furthermore, these techniques provoke engagement with Balsa as a much more complex feminine/ist character than many of the socially-constructed images of women produced through other televisual media in real life. By prompting mind work which draws attention to the limitations of the implicit and entrenched stereotypes found in many other Japanese media narratives, and in Japan as a whole, audiences are encouraged to build, reflect upon, and deconstruct many of the conventional schemas and scripts which underpin these media. Balsa must be measured against, for instance, the schema of the sacrificial mother, obedient wife or dutiful daughter which were prevalent in early television. The series' constructions and viewing alignments (or distancing) with Balsa and other characters steadfastly avoid any reinscription of the male gaze found in previous anime images such as the cute (kawaii) fighting girl (sentō shōjo) or "busty battlin' babe". The timing of the *Moribito* series further means that Balsa can be directly contrasted with many of the women characters from more recent trendy dramas who are problematised as loser spinsters or career women who become such merely because they have "lost" in love or similar. *Moribito* succeeds in cleverly challenging stereotypical gender roles by interpellating audiences into alignment with Balsa as an independent career woman who works hard for both social justice and the personal rewards she attains. Indeed, after she works through losses, anxieties and failures, hers is the narrative of a heroine who

flourishes in broader and unexpected developments which encourage new scripts for girls and more mature women.

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O-hitorisama (TBS October 2009 – December 2009)
Revolutionary Girl Utena (J.C. Staff 1997 – 1998)
The Rose of Versailles (Tokyo Movie Shinsha 1979 – 1980)
Sailor Moon (Toei Animation 1992 – 1997)
Those Obnoxious Aliens (Kitty Films 1981 – 1986)
Twelve Kingdoms (Pierrot 2002 – 2003)