



# ALITA: BATTLE ANGEL – A STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION FOR ANIME ADAPTATIONS

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## Abstract

Anime adaptations may not be as common as other kinds of adaptations during the 21st century; the few that have been done and released all have been met with negative reviews from both critics and fans alike. Some of the issues raised in regards to anime adaptations are casting Caucasian actors and actresses as characters of Asian origin, and that maintaining complete fidelity to the source material has proven to be an insurmountable task altogether. That is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the list of problems found in anime adaptations. Despite the growing list of bad apples that have been released, one recent anime adaptation has been showered with praise and acclaim by many people, and that is the 2019 film *Alita: Battle Angel*. Currently acting as a gold standard for all anime adaptations being done in Hollywood, this article looks at how *Alita: Battle Angel* successfully tackles the various aspects that have plagued anime adaptations in the past.

## Keywords

Adaptation, anime, live action film, fidelity, whitewashing, *Alita*, Battle angel



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Not many people are aware of this, but anime adaptations have been around as early as the 1990s. Back then, anime adaptations came off as more cartoonish compared to modern incarnations due to how limited filmmaking technology was back then, and how filmmakers wanted to maintain the comical nature of the original anime in a live-action film.

One of these early examples include *Fist of the North Star*. Taking place in a post-apocalyptic world that has been wrought with nuclear war, the protagonist Kenshiro who is the sole practitioner of the deadly martial arts *Hokuto Shinken* (Fist of the North Star) wanders the dystopian landscape bringing death and chaos to anyone unfortunate to cross his path while keeping the innocent safe but at bay from himself. The anime series is known for its extreme violence as well as an excessive amount of bloodshed with body parts and organs exploding into puddles of blood.

However, once the series got adapted into a live action film directed by Tony Randel in 1995, a slew of problems arose. Most notably is the effect of the head exploding into a puddle of blood; it looked too cartoonish and too fake for a live action film to the point it almost looked like a B movie. The story also diverges too far from the source material, bringing in a completely new plotline. And let us not dismiss the fact that Kenshiro is portrayed by British actor Gary Daniels, though the casting can be justified since Daniels is a martial artist himself with the appropriate physique for a live action Kenshiro.

During the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the number of anime adaptations increased along with bigger production value. However, that was not enough to overcome the number of negative reviews that would be thrown at it by critics and fans, even the original creators. *Dragonball Evolution* (2009) was supposed to be a major hit considering the popularity of the original *Dragon Ball* anime series. Instead, *Dragonball Evolution* was slammed by everyone including the original creator Akira Toriyama. Toriyama stated in an interview with Kotaku:

*“At the time of the live-action Hollywood version, the script didn't really capture the world or the characteristics (of Dragon Ball) ... What's more, because I thought the content was bland and not so interesting, I cautioned them and gave them ideas for changes ... Nevertheless, they had this odd confidence and didn't really comply with my suggestions. And just as I thought, the result was a movie I cannot call Dragon Ball.”* (Ashcraft, 2013)



Anime adaptations have since become a taboo in Hollywood. Even more so in 2017 when two of the most popular anime in Japan, *Ghost in the Shell* and *Death Note*, hit the big screen in Hollywood, both which have been met with abysmal reviews from fans and critics alike. Despite the unpopularity of anime adaptations, one recent adaptation has been gaining good reviews and solid box office performance worldwide, thus breaking down the stigma that is associated with anime adaptations. That film is *Alita: Battle Angel* (Rodriguez, 2019).

## 2. THE STORY OF ALITA: BATTLE ANGEL

Based on the anime and manga *Gunnm*, *Alita: Battle Angel* takes place in the distant dystopian future in the former United States during the 26th century with the setting being separated into the ground-level slums of Iron City and the utopia in the sky known as Zalem. The story centers around the titular cyborg protagonist Alita, originally named Gally in the anime and manga, whose comatose head has been found in the garbage dump by Dr. Daisuke Ido, or Dyson Ido in the film version. After being put back together by Ido, Alita awakens in a new body but with no recollection of her past except for the ancient martial arts Panzer Kunst. Contemplating that through the use of Panzer Kunst might give some clues to her past, Alita registers herself as a Hunter-Warrior, bounty hunters who take the place of the now defunct police force, and hunt down various cyborg criminals like Grewishka; and Vector, the corrupt organizer of the dangerous sport Motorball.

Along the way, Alita also befriends and eventually becomes romantically involved with Hugo, who secretly strips cyborgs for spare parts for Vector in exchange for money in order to buy his way into Zalem. Unfortunately, one operation gone bad puts Hugo on the run with a bounty on his head. Alita, conflicted between her obligation as a Hunter-Warrior and her feelings for Hugo, puts emotions before duty and helps Hugo to collect enough money to get into Zalem. That is before Hugo gets sliced up by another Hunter-Warrior named Gime. Alita defeats him and brings Hugo to Ido who saves Hugo's life by giving him a cyborg body. Hugo, still determined to ascend to Zalem, climbs up one of the factory tubes leading into the city, but his body gets destroyed by a defense ring and his shredded body falls into the wastelands below with Alita unable to do anything.

Ultimately, it is revealed that the mastermind behind all these events is a Zalem scientist named Nova, whom Alita and her former comrades were tasked to defeat along with destroying Zalem. After coming to terms with



the loss of Hugo, Alita makes it her mission to finish what her compatriots could not and destroy Zalem. It is here that Alita's real battle begins.

### 3. THE FIDELITY DEBATE

When it comes to adaptations of any kind, the first thing that always pops up in people's minds is the fidelity debate. How faithful is the adaptation compared to the source material? And is it possible to maintain a 100% fidelity rate? To answer these question, we must first understand that different medium have different properties.

One of the earliest adaptations was *Greed* (Stroheim, 1924) based on the novel *McTeague* by Frank Norris. When the director shot the film, the duration was more than 9 hours, leading to the producers requesting for the duration to be compressed and a lot of things to be left out. The harassment of women while unconscious along with premarital sex were some of the darker themes of humanity during the 1920s that had to be cut out to avoid displaying anything taboo during that period (Ebert, 1999). The result was a 2-hour long film which did not go over well with audiences or critics (Adkins, 2015). Since a big chunk was removed from the director's cut of the film, fidelity could not be maintained as a lot of details that were in the novel did not make it to the theatrical release. Therefore, the fidelity rate between the film *Greed* and the novel *McTeague* was not at 100%.

The *Greed* case also highlights another point about fidelity: duration, specifically duration restraints. As shown through various film adaptations of novels, one to two hours is simply not enough to showcase every single detail from the books. In fact, creating a television series out of a novel would be more practical, which is what they have done for *Game of Thrones* (2011-present) based on George R.R. Martin's novel series of the same name. With the series running for 67 episodes so far with the duration of each episode at around 50 minutes, that is about 3,350 minutes, or 55 hours and 50 minutes, and counting; which is sufficient for covering the multitude of novels by Martin. If *Game of Thrones* had been a film series like *Twilight* or *Maze Runner*, then there would not be enough time to lay out everything from the novels.

Let us look at another hypothetical situation. Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* is a centerpiece of world literature spanning more than 1,200 pages chronicling the French invasion of Russia in 1812. Robert Stam (2000) speculated that if *War and Peace* were to be adapted into a single film without leaving out a single detail from the novel, then the film would last approximately 30 hours. No one in their right mind would sit for 30 hours straight watching a single film without any breaks in between. Films are



meant to be a gateway for audience members to escape reality, but 30 hours would be pushing it; thus the illusion of the film world would be lost.

Little do people know that an adaptation to *War and Peace* has been made in the Soviet Union during the 1960s. Even then, the filmmakers knew they could not fit everything onto a single film and decided to make it into a film series, or segment the one film into several parts. The Soviet-produced *War and Peace* (Bondarchuk, 1966-1967) was released in 4 separate parts, all adding up to 421 minutes, or 7 hours and 1 minute (Janus Films, n.d.). You can imagine if all the parts had been released in one go without any partitions, people would lose interest before the end of the film.

#### 4. WHITEWASHING AFFECTS FIDELITY

The practice of whitewashing has been a staple of Hollywood ever since the early 1900s. Films like *The Good Earth* (Franklin, 1937), which depicts the life of a Chinese farmer before World War I, had a more elaborate form of whitewashing called “yellowface” which sees Caucasian actors being draped in heavy makeup and facial prosthetics to appear more Asian. Another infamous example of “yellowface” is Mr. Yunioshi from *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (Edwards, 1961) portrayed by Mickey Rooney.

Eventually, “yellowface” died down as Asian actors rose to prominence over the years. Yet the practice of whitewashing still persists even during the 21st century. *Aloha* (Crowe, 2015) is another film that has come under a lot of scrutiny due to the casting of Emma Stone as Captain Allison Ng, a character with obvious Asian roots due to her last name. As accomplished as Emma Stone is as an actress, there is a time and a place for everything, and casting her as an Asian air pilot is not really the best choice. They would have had a better reception if they had cast other Asian talents like Ming-Na Wen or Grace Park in the role, or just not have an Asian character altogether.

Whitewashing is not only a controversial issue about racial preference but also about how the makers in Hollywood would twist things around and not stay true to the source material. The film *21* (Luketic, 2008) adapts the real-life story of a group of Asian American students from MIT and Harvard who used their intelligence to count cards to win a ton of money from casinos. However, the film itself changes the ethnicity of the main characters from Asian to Caucasian. The producers’ defense is they wanted to appeal to a wider audience; plus, they did not know of any bankable Asian actors or actresses at the time (Ghahremani, 2013). More importantly, fidelity has already been lost due to the change of race, and



that has also been the issue among most anime adaptations that have been done in Hollywood so far.

## 5. ALITA: BATTLE ANGEL AND OVERALL FIDELITY

Back to the topic at hand, the makers of the *Alita: Battle Angel* film has learned from past mistakes and put together what people are calling “the best anime/manga adaptation by far”. First and foremost, when James Cameron first acquired the rights from the original creator Yukito Kishiro back in the 1990s, he already began doing his homework by reading the manga and watching the anime, and compiling a bunch of notes for a live action adaptation. He also knew that making the adaptation back in the 1990s would prove unfruitful since the filmmaking technology back then was not advanced enough to bring a cyberpunk world to life and would only end up looking cheesy like most other adaptations during that time. The breakthrough was found when Cameron was making *Avatar*, released in 2009. The combination of CGI and real-life was nothing new at the time, but Cameron took it to the next level by combining innovative motion capture performance technology in order to create photorealistic computer-generated characters.

This technology would later be applied to the creation of *Alita: Battle Angel* under the direction of Robert Rodriguez with Cameron in the producer’s seat. They felt it was necessary to give Alita a soul along with something physical for other actors to interact with, and a complete CGI character created out of a computer simply would not do. Therefore, they used the same technology from *Avatar* to enhance Rose Salazar’s portrayal of Alita.

Needless to say it worked. While the physical appearance of Salazar is completely altered with enlarged eyes and a cybernetic body, Salazar herself brought forth the innocence and vulnerability of Alita as she walks through the world trying to piece her memory back together. Simultaneously, Salazar displayed tremendous amounts of strength and courage of Alita as she stands against those who would do harm to others close to her.

It should also be noted that enlarging the eyes not only gives Alita the “anime” look of the source material, but also brings forth the teenage look of Alita which is what is needed to stay truthful to the youthful look of Alita in the anime and manga. If Rose Salazar herself were cast as Alita looking exactly the same as in real life, it might not exactly appeal to audiences from a visual perspective since you would have a “30-year-old Alita” on screen.



While Alita may appear more like a child in the anime, changing her age to that of a teenager's in the film is actually a smart move as it allows for more depth to the character. The film places a lot of focus on Alita questioning her origins and critically thinking about her purpose for a second chance while still maintaining that child-like innocence and curiosity seen in the anime.

## **6. THE FATHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIP**

Story-wise, the live-action film successfully captures the essence of the anime and the manga. The core story surrounding the protagonist Alita is one of self-discovery, trying to piece together her memories about who she is. At the same time, Ido who has become a surrogate father figure to Alita helps her to recover her identity, sometimes reluctantly if it puts Alita in more harm than good. Despite all his objections for Alita to go running back into violence when she has been given a second chance to leave all that behind, Ido still understands the importance of Alita's memories for her to feel complete and gives her the freedom to explore and stretch her mind.

The first time Alita defends Ido against the renegade cyborg Grewishka, she comes to the revelation that because of her expertise in the ancient martial arts Panzer Kunst, her whole existence revolves around combat. Therefore, in order to unlock the far corners of her past, she decides to register herself as a Hunter-Warrior; hence putting herself right back in the heart of battle. Ido objects to this but realizes that as much as Ido would not want to put Alita in harm's way, in the end he is simply imposing his will and his dreams on Alita without giving much thought to how Alita herself would feel about all this.

The first battle upgrade for Alita comes in the form of the Berserker armor; however the way Alita first encounters it is different between the manga and film version. The Berserker armor in the manga is stowed away in Ido's basement after discovering it in an ancient warship and only makes an appearance after Alita's initial body has been destroyed. The Berserker armor in the film is given much more significance in the context of the story as it is a cornerstone of Alita's identity. Here Alita herself discovers a crashed warship from Mars and enters the confines to find the armor. Ido recognizes the significance of the armor in Alita's history, yet he refuses to give Alita the upgrade much to Alita's chagrin. Not being the type to wallow in disappointment, Alita instead heads over to the nearest bar filled with other Hunter-Warriors beseeching them to join her and fight against injustice, namely Grewishka who has been given an upgrade and breaks in



to taunt Alita into attacking him. Alita obliges and blinds Grewishka, but not before losing her limbs and half her torso. Ido's paternal love for Alita convinces himself to give Alita her new Berserker body in order to save her life.

As impressive as the Berserker armor appears to be, Ido assures Alita that the armor is merely a shell; "it is neither bad nor good" as Ido puts it (Rodriguez, 2019). The decision of which moral path to take is left for Alita to decide, once again reinforcing the fact that freedom of choice is granted to Alita since her rebirth. She does not fight because it is part of her nature or her history; she fights because she feels it is right in order to protect her existence and the ones she holds dear. This concept is consistently touched upon throughout both the manga/anime and the film; a concept which makes the *Alita: Batte Angel* film a very faithful adaptation to the source material in terms of story.

## 7. LOVE AND PASSION BETWEEN ALITA AND HUGO

Ido is not the only person Alita has an emotional attachment to; Alita's love for Ido is more of an affectionate love a daughter would have for a father. Hugo is another character that Alita develops feelings for throughout the entire anime and film, which is more of a romantic love between two individuals. The anime only has them meeting casually at Ido's cybernetic clinic. When Hugo first meets Alita in the film, the meeting is more dramatic. Alita instinctively take a defensive stance in the middle of the street in front of a huge Centurion tank while taking care of a stray dog she just met. Hugo, who happened to be passing by at the time, rushes in to pull Alita out of the way after which she dodges under the tank's metallic limbs to carry the dog out of harm's way. Thus, a spark ignites between the two of them. Alita sees her "knight in shining armor" in Hugo, while Hugo is astounded by her bravado and the intricacies of Ido's handiwork in Alita's body.

It is not long before that fascination between Alita and Hugo blossoms into something akin to a relationship. Within the subtext and body language, you can already sense that between the two characters; it is only until later in the story when the two seal the deal with a kiss that their emotions for one another come to light. Here is where things get interesting as the context for the situation involving the kiss are significantly different between the anime and the film.

Let us first look at the events in the anime leading up to the kiss. The dynamic between Alita and Hugo are more like two children playing with each other. They explore the different sections of Iron City while Hugo





tells Alita his dream of one day earning enough credits to ascend to the city of Zalem. Alita appears touched by Hugo's naive yet innocent fantasy that she dedicates whatever credits she has earned as a bounty hunter to fund Hugo's ambition. Alita's attitude towards all this as shown in the anime is like that of a young girl holding a crush on another boy.

It is not long before Alita gets wind of Hugo's little side job which involves stripping cyborgs for spare parts and selling them on the black market. Alita tracks down and confronts Hugo in an abandoned warehouse on the outskirts of town. Hugo admits to his wrongdoings but justifies them as a means of escaping from the scrapheap of a town called Iron City and into the paradise of Zalem. Hugo refers to his struggle as a "war" with the "prison" he calls home (Fukitomi, 1993). Feeling sorry for Hugo, Alita confesses her feelings for him in the hopes of making him feel better; however, Hugo, still wallowing in his pain, dismisses those feelings but not before Alita plants her fist into the wall past his head in frustration. Backed into a corner and staring deeply into Alita's eyes, Hugo gently places his hand on Alita's face stating that they are now "partners in crime" immediately followed by a sudden kiss from her.

Taking a deeper look at the scene, you could hardly call it love between Alita and Hugo. It is more like a mixed barrel of emotions running through with passion running high. Alita and Hugo have to put aside other negative feelings like anger, disappointment, humiliation, guilt, etc. just to get to the one sole epiphany that they genuinely care for each other. And the kiss itself feels more like a child who has just discovered puberty; it felt more like an impulse without much thought put behind it.

Now we take a look at the film version. Ever since their first encounter with each other, Hugo has been meeting up with Alita and showing her around town, like showing a new girl at a high school the ropes. He introduces her to many different things like chocolate and the high-paced sports Motorball. Hugo also attempts to piece together vital information about Alita's past, reaching a theory that Alita may have come from high above, from the city of Zalem, or have some connection with it.

Later, Hugo strips a Motorball player for his grindcutters to be sent as an upgrade for a damaged Grewishka. He does not realize this at first until the moment Grewishka crashes the Hunter-Warrior bar Alita is at. After Alita has her current body completely shredded, Hugo appears to have some sense of regret because his actions have nearly cost him someone he cares about deeply. This causes him to think twice about his job stripping for spare parts, only doing it for the money without much thought put into the consequences. Once Alita is outfitted with her new Berserker armor, Hugo embraces her and examines her new body out on a bridge under the



rain. Initially drawn to her physical exterior, being this close to Alita brings out Hugo's feelings for her as he places his hand on her cheek and kisses her. Later, he confronts the other members of his gang and tells them that he quits, but not before getting caught by another Hunter-Warrior named Zapan doing the dirty deed, after which the bounty for his head is posted on every street corner.

The romance in the film feels more natural as compared to the anime and manga since there is a developmental curve that can be seen from their initial encounter. Some people might disagree with this statement and have mentioned that the film felt rushed especially on the love story front. Jack Pooley (2019) criticized how the romance felt corny at best, and even the line said by Hugo during the kissing scene, "You're the most human person I've ever met," makes "your toes curl in embarrassment." Sure, that dialogue may not be the best or the most original of lines, making the whole thing play out more like a teenage romance during the 1990s. However, if you think about it, that line might be a reference to how even though Hugo is human, Alita actually has more heart than him, going the distance in order to fight for justice and "not stand by in the presence of evil" to the point of even losing her body and her life (Rodriguez, 2019).

This is a nice Segway into Alita and her heart. Some time after Alita confronts Hugo about his job, Zapan mortally wounds Hugo with his life now hanging by a thread. Reassuring Alita that he only did what he did for the both of them to enter Zalem, Alita responds in kind and tells him that she loves him too. But Alita is not the type to let go so easily and connects his head to her life support system, namely her heart. Here we see the phrase "two hearts beating as one" being demonstrated visually. The love for one another is so powerful that Alita risks using her own heart to keep Hugo alive long enough to bring his comatose head back to Ido so he can engineer a replacement cyborg body.

This alludes to something Alita said to Hugo in an earlier meeting. Alita climbs in through Hugo's bedroom window and chats with him for a bit. When Hugo mentions that his dream of entering Zalem is so close yet so far with only a few tens of thousands credits remaining, Alita assures him that she can help by taking up the most expensive bounties, even going as far as selling her heart to secure enough money for the both of them. Hugo warns her not to give something so precious away for anyone, and that not everyone can be trusted.

Let us take a step back and read between the lines for the metaphorical clues. Alita giving her heart to Hugo is another way of saying she loves him and trusts him with her life. It also shows how innocent her thoughts and feelings are, and that her heart is "in the right place" so to speak. Hugo



rejecting that offer is him telling her that he is not worthy of holding let alone touching something so pure, clean and untouched by the stains of corruption that have left their mark on him. With that being said, it should be reiterated how ironic it is for a cyborg with a metallic artificial core to have more “heart” than a human who is born with a real one.

## **8. TONED DOWN VIOLENCE FOR GENERAL VIEWING**

It should be noted that while the creators behind adaptations try to be as faithful to the original as much as possible, it is nearly impossible to achieve a 100% fidelity as previous studies have shown. The changes made in adaptations have generally been met with negative criticism by fans and audiences because those changes do not live up to the standard set by the original. However, in the case of *Alita: Battle Angel*, the alterations have actually made things better.

The original anime had extreme instances of bloodshed; gore with limbs torn off; and guts spilling everywhere, making it all too gruesome to be adapted into a live action film. In order to conform to a PG-13 rating from the MPAA and appeal to a wider audience, all the scenes of brutality had to be toned down or omitted entirely. One method of doing so is changing the color of every cyborg's blood from red to green, making it appear like mechanical fluids have been spilled instead of “human blood”. As far as cut or altered scenes go, one significant scene involving the dog Alita befriends is heavily altered. The anime shows Grewishka's grindcutters digging into the dog exposing its ruptured organs and intestines. In the live action adaptation, as soon as Grewishka primes his grindcutters, the film cuts to Alita's horrified expression, indicating that all the brutality takes place off screen. Even when Alita reaches down to the dog, we only see a puddle of blood and nothing else. We can see that the PG-13 rating only allows for implied violence and not showing it all.

## **9. CHIREN – MORE DEPTH GIVEN**

Certain characters have also been given a major overhaul, namely Chiren. Chiren is a character created specifically for the anime and made no appearance in the manga at all; therefore the storyline between the manga and anime have already been altered because of this. Even then, Chiren is merely a former colleague of Ido when they were in Zalem with no emotional attachment whatsoever, merely giving him an opportunity to put his skills to use by working with her. So there is not much depth to explore with that character.



James Cameron and Robert Rodriguez probably noticed this about Chiren, and that is why you can see more dimensions to the live-action version of Chiren. Here, Chiren appears as Ido's ex-wife, giving her and Ido a past together and the events leading up to their divorce. Ido and Chiren had a young daughter named Alita who was crippled, which prompted Ido to build a cybernetic body for her, which will later be used for the protagonist Alita. Unfortunately, Ido's daughter never got around to using it after a burglar broke in and Alita happened to get in the way, resulting in her early demise. Chiren blames Ido for their daughter's death and leaves him.

Now working for Vector, the organizer of Motorball events, Chiren bumps into the current Alita wearing her daughter's body. When Chiren reminisces about the past with Ido, she ponders over the thought that Ido threw that body to let go of the past. Ironically, it is Chiren who cannot seem to let go of the past; seeing another entity inhabiting her late daughter's cyborg body does not sit too well with her. Even after she gave Grewishka the means to destroy Alita, which he was nearly successful in doing so, Chiren still comes down not with feelings of pride but of resentment. She even screams at Ido, "You think you can replace us that easily? Bring her back as many times as you like," (Rodriguez, 2019).

## 10. WHITEWASHING JUSTIFIED

Lastly, we should address the whitewashing issue that everyone brings up whenever an anime adaptation is made. In 2017, when *Ghost in the Shell* and *Death Note* anime adaptations were released, both were the subject of whitewashing and lack of Asian representation. Naturally *Alita: Battle Angel* would not be excluded from the conversation ever since the first teaser trailer was released at the end of 2017. It was not until May 2018, months before the film was released, that Rodriguez along with producer John Landau have issued statements that there is no whitewashing in this anime adaptation. Landau further elaborated through Vulture:

*"The author, Yukito Kishiro, did something very different: He wrote manga that is not set in an Asian world. He wrote it set in a place called Iron City, which is a melting pot. He actually set it in Kansas."* (Lee, 2018)

Even after the film was released in February 2019 to favorable reviews from audiences, *Alita: Battle Angel* was still subjected to criticism on the whitewashing front especially from the Media Action Network for



Asian Americans (MANAA). MANAA President Robert Chan attacked the film by referencing *Ghost in the Shell*, another anime adaptation that was under scrutiny for whitewashing the protagonist:

*“I said it when Ghost in the Shell was released, I’ll say it again: ‘Apparently, in Hollywood, Japanese people can’t play Japanese people anymore.’ There’s no reason why at least Alita and Dr. Ido couldn’t have been portrayed by Japanese or Asian actors instead of Rosa Salazar and Christoph Waltz, respectively. Besides Lana Condor and Leonard Wu, were any Asian American actors even considered for the larger parts?”* (“MANAA Refutes ‘Alita: Battle Angel’”, 2019)

While Chan’s quips for more Asian representation in Hollywood films are understandable, maybe we should take a step back and deduce whether *Alita: Battle Angel* really violates that sentiment. Brian Ruh’s (2012) research in adapting anime for foreign markets outside of Japan has revealed that even though anime itself is a Japanese product, the contents of most anime do not necessarily reflect Japanese culture as most people would believe. Instead, in order for anime to be appealing on a global scale, the creators need to opt for subjects and stories that would be catered to audiences more accustomed to Western films (Ruh, 2012, p. 15). In fact, the Japanese culture and values portrayed in anime surprisingly have more in common with the West to begin with.

On that note, we turn back to *Alita: Battle Angel*. The setting for the manga and anime is located somewhere near the former Kansas City, Missouri in the United States; with the residents originating from diverse backgrounds. The film version still takes place in the Western Hemisphere albeit located somewhere closer to the equator while maintaining its diverse population. Regardless, everything is set in a completely Western or multicultural environment instead of a Japanese one; thus there is some justification in having a mainly Caucasian cast. Now we take a look at the protagonist Alita. The name itself does not have any Asian connotation whatsoever. In fact, even if the character Alita does not have any clear race indicated, the name itself has clear Spanish origins (“Alita - Girl's name meaning, origin, and popularity”, 2019). Therefore, the choice of casting Hispanic actress Rose Salazar can be justified.

Daisuke Ido, renamed as Dyson Ido, portrayed by Christoph Waltz, is more of a gray area. The name Daisuke already indicates that this is an Asian character and thus should be better portrayed by veteran Asian actors who have potentially held prominence in Hollywood. A few names already



pop into mind like Ken Watanabe and Hiroyuki Sanada. It is with the last name Ido that things get a little fuzzy. Ido might appear to be a Japanese name when hearing it with the naked ear. Upon closer inspection, however, the name is not exclusive to Japan as it is a multicultural name holding origins in Hebrew, but it has been used by people of other races like Dutch and South African (“Ido: Name Meaning, Popularity, and Similar Names”, 2019). If we follow that logic, then Daisuke Ido the Japanese is changed to Dyson Ido the Dutch. So casting Christoph Waltz can be justified by using this explanation.

There are some points to Chan's argument that I can concur with. One of Hugo's friends is named Tanji, a man with clear Japanese heritage; yet he is portrayed by Jorge Lendeborg Jr. who is originally from the Dominican Republic. This could have avoided controversy if they had cast another up and coming Asian actor. At least they took the effort to include diversity among Hugo's friends with Asian American actress Lana Condor being cast as Koyomi; and within the ranks of the Hunter-Warriors with the inclusion of Leonard Wu and Rick Yune, the latter having spent years in Hollywood with major roles in *The Fast and the Furious* (Cohen, 2001), the James Bond flick *Die Another Day* (Tamahori, 2002), and *Ninja Assassin* (McTeigue, 2009). But it is only the one or two Asian actor in the mix; a mere needle in the haystack full of actors of other races mainly Caucasian. Though Condor has a significant amount of screen time playing Koyomi, we can agree with Chan's push for more Asian talents to be cast especially in a product that originated from Asia. But as far as whether whitewashing violates the context of the story, the issue is generally justifiable without much need for concern.

## 11. CONCLUSION

In contrast with most anime adaptations done in Hollywood, *Alita: Battle Angel* successfully captures the essence of its original counterpart with majority of audiences praising the film and critics giving generally positive reviews. Naturally, like most adaptations, it is nearly impossible to achieve complete fidelity due to certain factors concerning the different forms of media. Therefore, changes had to be made in order to compress all the necessary details from the anime and manga to fit a live-action film. Some changes include cutting out certain events, while others like building up the character of Chiren so as to enhance the story by giving it more depth. Anime adaptations have also been the center of whitewashing criticism among audiences and critics alike, but *Alita: Battle Angel* manages to tackle the topic since the setting and the main characters are not



Asian to begin with. Overall, *Alita: Battle Angel* is not a perfect film, but it does set the standard for those who intend to film anime adaptations in the future.

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## АЛИТА: БОЕВОЙ АНГЕЛ – ШАГ В ПРАВИЛЬНОМ НАПРАВЛЕНИИ ДЛЯ АНИМЕ-АДАПТАЦИЙ

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### Аннотация

Аниме-адаптации, возможно, не так распространены, как другие виды адаптаций в XXI-м веке; те немногие, которые были выпущены, получили отрицательные отзывы и критиков, и фанатов. Одной из проблем, отмечаемых в отношении аниме-адаптаций, является кастинг актеров европеоидной внешности на роли персонажей азиатского происхождения. Но к этому следует добавить также и неспособность полностью следовать исходному материалу. Все это только верхушка огромного айсберга из списка проблем в аниме-адаптации. Несмотря на растущее число плохих работ, выпущенных за последнее время, имеется одна недавняя аниме-адаптация, заслужившая похвалы и одобрения многих людей – это фильм 2019 года «Алита: Боевой ангел» (Alita: Battle Angel), который заслуживает того, чтобы быть воспринятым в качестве золотого стандарта для всех аниме-адаптаций, снятых в Голливуде. Данная статья анализирует то, как данный фильм успешно решает различные проблемы, с которыми сталкивались аниме-адаптации в прошлом.

### Ключевые слова

Адаптация, аниме, лайв-экшн, верность, вайтвошинг, Алита, Боевой ангел



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