

***In/Spectre* and the Construction of “Truths”**

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Abstract: With growing criticism of universal metanarratives and singular objective truth, for the man in a society of the post-truth era, the emotional response becomes an essential variable in his subjective understanding of truth or reality. Truth, as Michiko Kakutani explains, “increasingly seems to be in the eye of the beholder, facts are fungible and socially constructed.” This paper analyses how *In/Spectre* engages with and complicates ideas of objective and subjective “truths” by exposing the politics of the construction of “truths.” The troubled relationship between the contemporary man, reality, and truth weaves the background of the popular thriller anime *In/Spectre*. *In/Spectre* or *Kyokō Suiri* is a 2011 Japanese novel by Kyo Shirodaira that has been adapted into an anime series since 2020. It revolves around Kotoko Iwanaga, the Goddess of Wisdom of the spirit world, and Kurō Sakuragawa, a spirit-human hybrid. This anime, however, is unique as, unlike other thriller-mystery works focusing on unravelling “the truth” by logical deduction, *In/Spectre* brings to light how logically constructed “truths” can satisfy the listener’s desire for meaning. Iwanaga’s real “superpower” is to meticulously create “truths” that are both logically sound and curated to satisfy the audience’s appetite. Her knowledge of the complexities of objective reality, the desires of the listeners, and how stories can “feel” like “truth” grant her authority similar to Foucauldian power. Thus, *In/Spectre* does not simply represent the construction of possible realities in a post-truth society additionally points to the complex relationship between the knowledge system, power, alternate truths, and popular belief. Besides analysing the politics of truth construction, this paper also aims to enquire how *In/Spectre* represents the relation between power and truth, thereby revealing the volatile nature of reality, power dynamics, and the human belief system.

Keywords: Power, Post Truth, Alternate Facts, Anime, Mass Imagination, Desire

As the protagonist of *In/Spectre*, Kotoko Iwanaga reveals her strategy of defeating the antagonist Rikka Sakuragawa and the ghost of Steel Lady Nanase to the police inspector Saki Yumihara, and a chill runs down the latter's spine. Yumihara's fear is not a result of her scepticism of Iwanaga's capabilities but rather due to the faith that Iwanaga might actually emerge as the victor, and this victory would further reinforce the volatile nature of truth in the post-truth society. Iwanaga mentions that to get the support of the masses, she will just have to present a story that is plausible and interesting enough. "As long as they (the stories) seem reasonable at a glance and are entertaining enough...Then we can turn fiction into fact" ("Episode 08" 21:28-21:39). Iwanaga's proposition exposes how truth is not "objective facts" but rather possibilities often curated by dominant power structures to shape popular belief in accordance with its aspirations.

Kyoko Suiri (2011) is a Japanese novel by Kyo Shirodaria that was adapted into a manga series in 2015 and 2019. In 2020, the first season of the anime version of Shirodaria's work came out under the English title *In/Spectre*. While *In/Spectre* initially appears as an exemplary detective story, it gradually reveals a striking twist on the detective's "quest for truth" as the detective's motive here is to construct probable "truths." The young protagonist, Kotoko Iwanaga, seldom concerns herself with the truth of the mysterious incidents she acquaints with. Instead, what drives the plot is her ingenious deduction skills and knowledge of human nature to deconstruct a scenario or outcome and reconstruct a possible solution that "feels" like the truth and satisfies her audience. With her accomplice Kuro Sakuragawa, the Goddess of Wisdom of the yokai world, Iwanaga solves multiple mysteries to maintain order between the human and the non-human world and secure her position of power.

In the anime's first season, Kotoko Iwanaga is introduced as a young girl with an amputated leg and a prosthetic eye, who also happens to be the "Goddess of Wisdom" of the Yokai (spirits and ghosts) community. The eleven-year-old Iwanaga, who was kidnapped by some spirits, exhibited her remarkable deductive skills to resolve the conundrum of the dim-witted spirits. Astonished by the young girl's ability to think critically, the spirits requested her to become their Goddess of Wisdom

to guide them. Iwanaga complied with their wish and followed the ritual of sacrificing her right eye and left leg, thereby gaining the title that grants her power over knowledge production in both the human and the spirit world.

What is striking is the nonchalance of an eleven-year-old girl at the mention of sacrificing her limbs and her instant willingness to pay this price to achieve the power of being the God of Wisdom. Georges Bataille's theory of sacrifice can justify Iwanaga's compliance with sacrifice for her desire of almost divine discursive power. According to Bataille, the extravagant sacrifice of one's extra energy and resources naturally culminates in death, as life is expended in an attempt to outlive even life itself. Bataille's idea of sacrifice pushes human beings to explore the confines of not only their communities but also their beings (Connolly 108-10). Iwanaga gains her identity and power by her sacrifice, and at the same time, the sacrifice, the representative of extravagance as Bataille mentions, also ascertains (and commodifies to a great extent) her knowledge. She gains the symbolic "eye of wisdom" by sacrificing her physical eye, and her loss of a leg foreshadows the resultant chaos, disorder, and imbalance that would soon follow.

While the anime presents the sole perspective of Iwanaga, it also introduces us to the inconsistencies of her narrative through the discrepancies between how she presents certain characters and how they are when they appear. Iwanaga mentions at the beginning that the spirits are dim-witted and unable to solve simple problems—the reason she decided to become their Goddess of Wisdom and help them. However, as the anime progresses and we get glimpses of spirits such as the Guardian Serpent or Lady Nanase, they appear far from being dim-witted. Another factor that problematizes Iwanaga's position as the Goddess is that she was offered the role by the few spirits who kidnapped her and were bewitched by her capabilities. She formed a homogenised idea of the intellectual inferiority of the spirits. She represented that to her companion Kuro Sakuragawa and the audience as the general "truth" of the Yokai realm. In comparison to the inferiority of the spirits, Iwanaga appears to be the intellectually superior one worthy of holding the title of the Goddess of Wisdom.

As we see the inconsistencies in Iwanaga's accounts, we are forced to question the truth-value of her perceived intellectual superiority and the stability of her position. Iwanaga becomes aware of her superiority when she figures out about the dimwittedness of the spirits. Thus, the powerful "self" comes into being due to the existence of the inferior "other", and throughout the anime, Iwanaga struggles to prevent her God of Wisdom "self" with the construction and manipulation of subjective truths. According to Michel Foucault, knowledge is essentially an exercise of power, and power plays a significant role in producing knowledge. Power is achieved, exercised, and justified, using the existing knowledge system. On the other hand, power structures reproduce and perpetuate knowledge systems, shaping them according to their desires and anxieties (Foucault 1988). *In/Spectre*, the intricate association between power and knowledge production becomes apparent through Iwanaga's position as the Goddess of Wisdom of the Yokai world. Iwanaga gains the title due to her knowledge of and association with the human realm.

From Iwanaga's flashback, it is clear that the two separate realms of the spirit and the human world are unaware of the structure or mechanism of the other. The humans are primarily unsuspecting of the existence of the spirits most of the time, and even when they happen to stumble upon some affair of the yokai realm, their judgment of the latter is shrouded with mysticism and prejudice. The spirits also find human matters and ways incomprehensible. Representatives of both realms are often found to rely on and seek aid from Iwanaga, as she is the rare intersection between the two worlds. Iwanaga holds the liminal position where she knows both the human and spirit worlds. However, not her awareness of the structure and dynamics of the two realms gives her the upper hand. Rather, what grants her power is her intricate knowledge of the mechanics of the two realms and her ability to mould the knowledge according to her benefit before sharing it with the representatives of the two realms. Just like the spirits get the idea of the human world from her perspective, the depiction of the yokai realm reaches the humans and the audience, filtered by her point of view. What then appears interesting is the lack of any objective truth in the anime. The anime, a representation of the real world, highlights the impossibility of the existence or awareness of an absolute objective truth.

What is considered truth is the subjective perceptions of multiple variations of “truths” filtered by individual biases or ideologies. In the anime, Iwanaga appears as the chief force behind the construction of “truths” and the production of knowledge regarding both the spirit and the human world. She moulds these “truths” in a manner that would justify her position of power—a position that is otherwise volatile and dependant upon other’s acceptance of the position.

The narratives Iwanaga provides become the accepted “truths” and are not questioned. On the other hand, her narratives gain credibility as she occupies the position of the Goddess of Wisdom. When a spirit desires to know something or has doubts regarding the human world, the spirit seeks the aid of the Goddess of Wisdom, as all accept her to possess wisdom. Similarly, the monster-human hybrid Kuro Sakuragawa and the human police officer Saki Yumihara rely on Iwanaga for her knowledge and hold over the spirit world. Her account and ideas of the spirits are unquestionably accepted as the only truth. Thus, the Goddess of Wisdom gains power due to her knowledge, and her knowledge system is further perpetuated due to her position of power. However, just like the knowledge system, power is also not stable. Iwanaga’s position as the Goddess would cease to exist if the Yokai community stopped treating her as one or started questioning her accounts. This is perhaps the reason why Iwanaga is more concerned with what “feels like the truth” to her audience than the proven facts.

Iwanaga appears as the representative of Michiko Kakutani’s idea of a totalitarian regime under the rule of which conspiracy theories and ideologies reign over scientific knowledge, research, and expertise. Kakutani mentions that modern propaganda aims not to spread misinformation but rather to annihilate truth and destroy people’s thinking. Iwanaga aims to hold such a discursive hold when she declares, “If we present a plausible story that fits with enough of the facts and is interesting enough, the masses will irresponsibly support it and vote in our favour. Which means anything goes with this committee. We can obscure and hide the real data, call black ‘white,’ and present several contradicting answers...I will put everything I have into these lies” ("Episode 08" 21:08-21:55).

Iwanaga employs her ingenious deduction skills and her understanding of the listener's psyche to chalk out stories that satisfy those listening, and the central driving force behind this narrative construction is to quench the curiosity of the listeners. Often, the actual truth or the real incident is given away almost immediately. However, the fundamental truth appears too weak to satisfy the curious listeners, and hence, Iwanaga constructs stories that are accepted as "the truth." We witness Iwanaga's ingenious skills at play when the wise old Guardian serpent calls for Iwanaga in the second episode of the anime. It is immediately revealed that Iwanaga consciously painted a false picture to Sakuragawa about the serpent being a dangerous spirit so that she can fulfil her desire for Sakuragawa to join her in this adventure, emphasising that Iwanaga is an unreliable narrator who often misrepresents facts for her benefit.

The Guardian Serpent, an ancient spirit, called for the Goddess of Wisdom to decipher an incident that the Guardian witnessed. There was a woman who climbed up the mountain to get rid of a corpse. After dropping the body in the Tsukuna swamp, the residence of the Guardian Serpent, the woman whispered with vengeful and teary eyes, "I hope they find you" ("Episode 02" 10:58-11:02). The Guardian was curious of the entire story about what that woman had meant and why she chose to dump the corpse in the swamp. The anime, at his point, adapts to the form of a classic detective story where the detective has to solve the murder mystery. However, instead of rationally tying the strings of arguments to reveal the truth, Iwanaga presents the serpent with multiple possible scenarios to satisfy the serpent as the serpent mentioned, "I would like to hear an answer I can be satisfied with" ("Episode 02" 13:03-13:06). We see that the aim of neither the detective nor the listener is the quest for truth but for explanations that appear as agreeable truth. Hannah Arendt says, "The need for reason is not inspired by the quest for truth but by the quest for meaning" (15). For the Guardian Serpent, his desire was never to find out "the truth" but "a truth" that would fulfil his quest for meaning—an explanation that would fit into his preconceived idea of what the truth might be.

Iwanaga, true to the listener's aspirations, presents multiple possible scenarios, each becoming more thrilling than the previous one and painting a more complicated psyche of the murderer. Even

though the serpent likes each of the following stories a bit better, none gives him the satisfactory resolution he wishes for, and he nit-picks each of Iwanaga's stories. Finally, Iwanaga can construct a probability that is so thrilling that it satisfies the serpent, and he expresses his gratitude to the Goddess of Wisdom for shedding light upon the "truth." Later, Iwanaga reveals to Sakuragawa that what she told the Guardian as "the truth" was a mere far-fetched possibility as he did not believe when Iwanaga revealed the possible truth that the murderer was not in her right state of mind while dumping the corpse in the swamp, and hence, whatever she uttered does not make much sense. The murderer, who had grown up listening to legends of a man-eating serpent spirit, wanted the yokai to find the corpse and consume the dead body—a fact that is verified when a ghost sent by Iwanaga eavesdrops on the murderer. However, the serpent did not believe this could be true because this did not satisfy the serpent's desire for an "interesting" truth. Iwanaga reveals to Sakuragawa that another possibility is that the aged Guardian serpent misheard the murderer—something that he would never accept. However, these possibilities were not lucrative enough for the spirit who, more than to know the truth, wanted an explanation that would satisfy her curiosity and his desire for meaning. Thus, the secondary title, *Invented Inference*, appears apt for the anime. Inference, the celebrated trope of detective fiction, is to reach a conclusion depending upon logical reasoning and deduction. In *In/Spectre*, there is the antithesis of this process—the deduction, or rather the reconstruction of the truth. Iwanaga literally "invents" inferences to appease the listeners, thereby perpetuating her status as the Goddess of Wisdom. Sakuragawa, voicing the audience's mind, mentions that he now finally realises Iwanaga's true powers—it is not to decipher the truth but to use her deductive skills to construct possible satisfactory truths, keeping in mind the probability and the psychological mindset of those who seek answers from her.

Iwanaga's reconstruction of truth complies with Friedrich Nietzsche's notion of the impossibility of objective truth. Instead of any perceivable universal truth, what is commonly accepted as truth is the individual perception following one's interests or "Will to Power" (Nietzsche 267). In her world, Iwanaga desires to uphold her title of the Goddess of Wisdom, which grants her

a powerful hold on discourse in and about the Yokai realm, which is the chief impetus behind her construction of “truths.” A similar case is represented through the construction of the ghost of Steel Lady Nanase by the antagonist, Rikka Sakuragawa. Rikka, a yokai-human hybrid, can recognise and immortalise her cousin Kuro Sakuragawa. Giving in to the superstitions, the Sakuragawas would feel a bit of Yokai flesh to their children, most of whom would die. It is only through Kuro and Rikka that their desire to create what Nietzsche calls *Übermensch* or “overman” is satisfied. This, however, brings disastrous consequences for the children. Rikka, a depressed child who has spent her childhood in hospital rooms with doctors performing experiments with disregard to her sensation of pain, grows up to be an adult determined to challenge the rules of God by creating her weapon of self-destruction. While the mysterious death of Nanase raised scattered speculations among people, Rikka ingeniously turned these speculations into mass belief, thereby bringing the ghost into existence. We discover that the Nietzschean Icarus that Rikka is created the ghost to explore the limitations of her seemingly inscrutable powers. She believed that if she pushed herself enough, she might end up constructing a monster that would destroy her miserable life against her fate. While, according to Nietzsche, the “overman” ultimately brings self-destruction, Bataille mentions that this transgression is not unconscious or an indirect effect but somewhat inevitable for the actualisation of the self. Following Bataille’s idea that self-destruction is to accept the unavoidable destruction of humans, thus actualising the self fully, Rikka aims for a creation that would challenge her fate of immortality and, therefore, by destroying her, Rikka would have a self, more powerful than any god—she would become the true *Übermensch* (Armstrong).

Rikka created an anonymous online site titled “Steel Lady Nanase Wiki”, where she fabricated accounts of multiple people coming across a vengeful spirit. By painting a picture of the spirit, Rikka gave the mass speculation a material shape, thereby shaping the mass belief. People believed in the fabricated accounts of the ghost, believed that the ghost existed, and, based on the biases, added their own accounts of possible ghost sightings. Thus, curated by the mass perception, the vengeful spirit of Steel Lady Nanase comes into existence. People’s perspectives about the truth of Nanase have

created the destructive spirit of Steel Lady Nanase. The belief of something as the truth constructs truth as an abstract idea and brings the idea into material existence. Iwanaga explains that the spirit of Steel Lady Nanase is not the ghost of the late singer Nanase but rather a product of mass imagination—it is the construction of people’s belief in a vengeful spirit. Iwanaga mentions that the spirits generated by imagination are difficult to control because their existence and power depend upon popular belief. Even though the real reason behind idol Nanase’s death is broadcasted, people refuse to believe it as the truth because the fact that Nanase’s death was merely an accident is much less interesting than the idea that there might have been some conspiracy behind the idol’s death. Iwanaga analyses how popular an interesting truth rather than facts shape belief. Instead of believing boring, proven facts and harsh truths, people tend to lean towards interesting theories that appeal to their emotions. In his “A Government of Lies,” Steve Tesich claimed that the American people were complacent in their acceptance of the government’s theories and consciously chose to live in a world where objective truth became irrelevant (Tesich). *In/Spectre* portrays a similar kind of world, in which the people choose to believe in different versions of probabilities that appeal to their emotions rather than to believe in the official report of Nanase’s death as given by the police.

Rikka would foresee the future and curate the figure of the spirit that satisfied and intrigued people, who ultimately had more faith in her constructed truth than the true event. Iwanaga defeats this monster by defeating Rikka’s narrative and creating more compelling and trustworthy narratives. Iwanaga dominates Rikka’s superpower of precognition through her knowledge of the human desire for meaning and the politics of truth-formation. Unlike Rikka, she does not shape people’s ideas by feeding them a fake story. Instead, Iwanaga mentions multiple alternates to Rikka’s narrative, making each one more convincing than the previous. In the process, she subtly repeats certain familiar tropes in each story, thereby naturalising those ideas and formulating a counter-ideology. Finally, the people form their version of “truth” based on Iwana’s subtle, naturalised points. They believe they have come to the conclusion themselves, unaware of Iwanaga’s trick. This illusion of free and conscious choice corresponds to the Althusserian notion that “those who are in ideology believe themselves by

definition outside ideology” and interpellates an individual under the guise of free choice where the individual’s subjection is “all by himself” (Althusser 117-23).

Unlike popular action sequences, in *In/Spectre*, the real fight happens behind digital screens between Iwanaga, Rikka, and innumerable other people. Iwanaga gains victory with the help of social media, and her action of “discipline” is justified as it is done to maintain order and to defeat the possible threat to people caused by Steel Lady Nanase and Rikka. Matthew Stein observes in analysing Foucault’s idea of biopower, “Wars, which were once waged on behalf of the sovereign, began being waged on behalf of the existence of the entire population. Essentially, death became a tool to ensure an individual's continued existence and, moreover, the perpetual existence of the population” (2). Thus, Iwanaga’s actions become an excuse to reestablish order between the spirit and the real world and eliminate the threat Nanase poses on the population. Therefore, ultimately, Iwanaga uses her knowledge of the spirit world as well as of the human mind and powers of constructing believable truths to perpetuate her position as the Goddess of Wisdom—someone who brings wisdom and maintains balance. Social media, in this case, becomes what Foucault called a panoptic surveillance through which the authorities, in this case, Iwanaga, constantly keep an eye on and control the minds of people to fortify order and justice. According to Foucault, a perfect disciplinary structure would oversee all of the subjects in a single gaze (Stein 4).

Iwanaga compares her battle with Rikka to passing a bill in parliament, with the audience behind the screen being one with voting rights. While Rikka has already established the existence of Nanase’s ghost, Iwanaga will now have to prove otherwise, and this is possible as, unlike the real court or parliament, people here are not judges bound by proof, facts, or even the truth. The judges are, as Saki points out, “irresponsible judges who have no idea they’re involved” and it is not difficult for Iwanaga to convince them of anything as “All that’s here is fiction...This assembly bears no responsibility, that nothing will hold them back. Not the law, justice, or even the truth” (“Episode 08” 19:18-20:55). So long as she can feed them with a more interesting and rationally sound story, they would believe it to be true and the truth that they have discovered themselves.

In the end, while describing the power of precognition that he and Rikka possess, Kuro explains that his precognition ability is not recognising the future but rather identifying the possible future based on current circumstances. Hence, there is no such thing as a definite future, as there is no such thing as a definite truth in this world of multiple truths. Just like truths can be manipulated and constructed, so can the future. Finally, Iwanaga emerges as the winner as she can force “a future” she desires by constructing truths and manipulating mass imagination. In Iwanaga’s world, there is no such thing as objective truth. Truths are mere possibilities curated by people in power to uphold their powerful positions, exposing the unstable nature of both power and truth. Does truth then become meaningless in this post-truth world? *In/Spectre* forces the audience to consider such questions concerning the real world. Similar to the anime, in the real world, the things we consider true are also influenced by power dynamics. *In/Spectre*, then, appears as a warning against the complacent acceptance of narratives as truth by the masses by exposing the fractures of knowledge systems, politics of the construction of truths, and the relation between truth and dominant power structures.

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