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*Interpreting Anime* by Christopher Bolton (review)

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in the manga and anime versions of *Conan*; the “game play complex,” in which multimedia franchises center on videogames rather than manga or anime; and the “portable interface complex,” in which the screens of mobile devices, be they handheld game consoles or smartphones, become increasingly significant alongside television screens. Interestingly, while the works examined represent different “phases” of the history of television, all four series are ongoing, further supporting Lamarre’s argument that the history of television is characterized by continuities and discontinuities, and showing how in this case assemblage is a more productive concept than linear progress.

Finally, another highly valuable aspect of the book is that it offers a thorough and clear survey of existing scholarship on television, particularly in Japanese but also in English, French, and Italian. In this sense, the book would be of great help to graduate students commencing projects in this area and also to all who want to expand their understanding of Japanese television and media more broadly. However, one drawback is that Lamarre’s writing style is rather difficult. An undergraduate student or general educated reader might find it challenging. While of course to an extent this is inevitable because the concepts addressed are complex in themselves, it is unfortunate, because in fact the content would be of great interest to anyone who has the experience of watching television, and therefore the target audience of the book could extend well beyond the circle of specialists that seem to be Lamarre’s intended interlocutors.

*Interpreting Anime.* By Christopher Bolton. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2018. x, 322 pages. \$96.00, cloth; \$24.00, paper; \$27.00, E-book.

*Reviewed by*  
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Anime, a type of animated fiction film made in Japan, has seen a significant increase in scholarship over the last decade motivated, on the one hand, by participatory cultures, franchising, and digital networks and, on the other hand, by an interest in representations of contemporary Japan. Many of the pioneering contributions to anime research have come from Japan studies or, more precisely, the study of Japanese literature. Christopher Bolton’s *Interpreting Anime* attests to that lineage. Based on articles originally published between 2002 and 2007, the deliberately revised and neatly inter-related chapters of this monograph allow recapitulation of how anime has

been discussed in advanced Japan studies settings, namely, through the lens of critical theory and with a special emphasis on human subjectivity, political critique, and the mediatedness of experience as articulated by Japanese texts. *Interpreting Anime* provides newcomers to the field with an exceptionally well-written, easily accessible introduction to structuralist analysis, phenomenological film theory, psychoanalytical approaches, postmodernism, and posthumanism, as well as queer studies, through discussion of selected animated movies that are part of the intellectual canon, but not necessarily that of younger viewers. Academics who have been engaged in anime studies for some time may appreciate the opportunity for critical retrospection, as well as the author's interest in anime that values formal qualities and close readings. In view of recent theories of media studies and their focus "not just on the interpretation of works but on the circumstances of their production and distribution" (p. 199), *Interpreting Anime* calls for renewed attention to aesthetic difference, and it does this in the name of literature.

Anime is understood here medium-specifically as Japanese cel or cel-look—animation based on the drawn image—and with regard to its critical potential equated with "other kinds of literature" (p. 81) related to "literature in its broadest sense" (p. 22). Identifying as a literary scholar in the introduction, Christopher Bolton takes his departure from an anime about literature, *Read or Die* (Studio Deen, 2001–2), to outline "the particular character and the unique power of anime" (p. 12), which he attributes to the ability to move the viewer back and forth between immersion and distance. These two poles form the monograph's uniting strand, alternately referring to content and form, identification and alienation, "accepting a represented reality and questioning or interrogating the representation itself" (p. 96).

*Interpreting Anime* promotes close readings of individual works with the ultimate goal to discover anime-specific "meanings that speak to broader issues of politics, gender, technology, and media" (p. 6) in connection to Japan as the initial context of production. This goal is accommodated by the choice of prime examples: feature-length theatrical films for nonsegmented adult audiences in addition to short OVA series (original video animation released directly to video). These two formats, the author argues, recommend themselves to interpreting anime, that is, reading rather than affectively watching, materially consuming, or fan-culturally sharing it, due to their manageable, more bounded narrative structure and "their higher production standards" (p. 18). In contrast, TV anime—those extended serial narratives that principally target specific demographics and keep their viewers hooked by changes in pacing and register rather than explicit messages—is allotted a secondary role, as it "often fails to generate the kind of oscillation between immersion and distance" (ibid.). It is noteworthy that *Interpreting Anime*

varies significantly from many similar discussions in Japan studies<sup>1</sup> by the well-substantiated explanation of its choices, for example, the decision to bypass seminal works of TV anime, crucial issues such as seriality and comic relief,<sup>2</sup> and new media theory.

Each of the book's seven chapters is organized around one main anime example, one comparison medium, and one strand of critical theory. The first chapter focuses on *Akira* (1988, dir. Ōtomo Katsuhiro), the first animated movie that attracted non-Japanese adult viewers to the medium. Comparing it to the manga series from which it arose, Bolton investigates the representation of characters in urban space as “metaphors for the political worlds” (p. 51)—the history of political protest in postwar Japan, to be precise—and arrives at the conclusion that anime's visual grammar affords the expression of confusion rather than solutions. The second chapter is centered on *Patlabor 2: The Movie* (1993, dir. Oshii Mamoru) which, in comparison with Oshii's hybrid live action films, is interpreted “as an examination of a contemporary society in which media has replaced firsthand experience, and as a critique of the resulting political situation” (p. 60). The movie's geopolitical contextualization stretches from Japan's postwar constitution to the 1991 Gulf War.

Chapter 3 interrelates Oshii's *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) with *bunraku* puppet theater in order to explore the concept of the individual human subject under posthuman, networked conditions as an actor who is performing and performed, unified and dispersed. Using as its starting point the observation that “the geopolitics of films like *Patlabor 2* are largely displaced by gender politics” (p. 95), the chapter concludes with the uncanny motifs of the puppet and the child. The fact that the movie's protagonist is ultimately “reborn” not just as a child but as a *shōjo* (girl)—unlike in the manga it adapts—does not attract notice, although it draws critical attention to both gender and the malleable, (proto-)digital, “animated” image.<sup>3</sup> Chapter 4 enhances the discussion of the puppet, turning it into a metaphor for the viewer—“Anime simply manipulates its viewers like puppets” (p. 142)—and proceeding from there to theories of the *otaku* (geek fans). The OVA series *3x3 Eyes* (Toei Animation, 1991–92) and *Vampire Princess*

1. For an overview, see Jaqueline Berndt, “Anime in Academia: Representative Object, Media Form, and Japanese Studies,” *Arts*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (2018), article 56; <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts7040056>.

2. For example, *chibi*, a word not used in *Interpreting Anime*, indicates a cartoony, or “super-deformed,” version of a character which visually represents an affective first-person perspective, suggests the fluidity of personal identity, and perforates medial transparency, that is, “distances” the viewer from realist illusion.

3. See Heather Warren-Crow's monograph *Girlhood and the Plastic Image* (Hanover NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2014), which considers, among other things, the animated movie *Paprika* (2006, dir. Kon Satoshi) from a media-aesthetical perspective.

*Miyu* (AIC, 1988–89) serve here as examples that allow reflection on what has been conceptualized by Japanese critics as a specific kind of anime audience. Bolton widens the scope and associates the *otaku* “with a mode of reading that moves back and forth between sincere absorption and a true critical perspective” (p. 168). Chapter 5 analyzes the multilayered confusion of identities in *Millennium Actress* (2001, dir. Kon Satoshi) which “provides an evocative image of the processes [Judith] Butler describes” (p. 188). The movie’s “optimistic postmodernism” is carved out in comparison to a contemporary stage adaptation.

Chapter 6 “juxtaposes visions of fast, floating freedom with the lumbering weighty responsibilities imposed on postwar Japan” (p. 212) through the example of *Blood: The Last Vampire* (2000, dir. Kitakubo Hiroyuki), which is contrasted with a later TV anime series from the same franchise. In his analysis, Bolton interrelates the characters’ movements, whose lightness rests on limited animation, with the weighty reality of war, and he focuses on vampirism as a metaphor for Japan’s modernization *vis-à-vis* the Western Other in general and the cold war ties to the United States in particular. The final chapter highlights *Howl’s Moving Castle* (2004, dir. Miyazaki Hayao) as a case that does not encourage the oscillation between immersion and distance, but rather privileges the first, and this is demonstrated through comparison with the eponymous novel by Diana Wynne Jones. The conclusion brings the book’s main arguments together through the example of *Summer Wars* (2009, dir. Hosoda Mamoru).

As a whole, *Interpreting Anime* covers almost three decades of animated film, spanning the years from 1987 to 2015 and following, more or less, a chronology, not only with regard to the considered works (p. 261) but also the respective theories. The general orientation is a retrospective one. The book contextualizes animated movies that have achieved transcultural renown within Japan’s political history, and it provides access to critical tools to which students of the Japanese language or of Japan may not necessarily be exposed. At the same time, questions about the lasting significance of its readings arise: In which way has the triple disaster of March 2011 affected anime? To what extent have the “crises of postmodernism,” and the related theories, lost their topicality for anime creators and viewers who experience fluid, networked subjectivities not as the exception but as the rule? And how may anime provoke the rethinking of “literature,” besides the inclusion of a different medium, that is, visual narratives?

*Interpreting Anime* rests on a notion of literature that treats anime productions as texts, or more precisely, readerly texts, to borrow Roland Barthes’s term.<sup>4</sup> Thoroughly created by author-directors as more or less bounded entities, these representations of the world by “language” reward

4. See Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Blackwell, 1974, 1990), pp. 4, 5, 7, 8, 15.

reading, that is, the interpretive unpacking of political messages and truly critical meanings which aesthetic forms metaphorically relate. The agent of such reading is not necessarily the intellectual literary critic but is still a modern individual positioned in and *vis-à-vis* society at large, beyond sociocultural communities, gendered fandoms, and generational cohorts. The book's frequent use of the inclusive pronoun "we" is indicative in this regard. While holding the potential to promote anime to the general public, it distracts from the actual situatedness of experiencing anime (including not only distributional platforms, but also conventionalized textual forms and established practices of use). *Interpreting Anime* conjoins a universalized "reader" with a generalized notion of anime that is modeled on one variant of the broader anime spectrum. This generalization applies also to manga, live-action film, and the novel, to which the animated films under discussion are compared, and it can be traced back to an understanding of medium specificity that abstracts from institutional frameworks and paratextual communication. From an anime studies perspective, one may wonder what kind of anime is being interpreted, under what conditions, and by whom, in relation to society at large or matters of geopolitical scope. One may further wonder what anime productions offer beyond deep, verbalizable meanings or, to rephrase, why people continue watching series that do not provide critical messages. In addition, one may find aesthetic innovation and critical self-awareness not in opposition to conventions and formulaic qualities but in relation to them, and one may complicate the "Japan" layer of anime production and consumption.

Bolton's book offers many insightful observations about the animated movies it discusses and the related critique, but in the main it commits less to anime, or animation, studies than to an interpretation of contemporary culture using the example of Japan. Because of its rigor which allows for discussion and supplementation, it will prove highly stimulating in Japan studies courses on popular culture and anime.

*Making Modern Japanese-Style Painting: Kano Hōgai and the Search for Images.* By Chelsea Foxwell. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2015. xiv, 281 pages. \$65.00, cloth; \$65.00, E-book.

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Chelsea Foxwell's *Making Modern Japanese-Style Painting: Kano Hōgai and the Search for Images* attempts to answer a seemingly simple question: by what process did Japanese painters in the early-to-mid-Meiji period