

Article

Anime in Academia: Representative Object, Media Form, and Japanese Studies

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Abstract: The transcultural consumption of Japan-derived popular media has prompted a significant amount of academic research and teaching. Instead of addressing globalization or localization as such, this article investigates the interplay of anime research and the institution of Japanese studies outside of Japan, addressing recurrent methodological issues, in particular, related to representation and mediation, intellectual critique and affective engagement, subculture and national culture. The inclination towards objects and representation in socio-cultural as well as cinema-oriented Japanese-studies accounts of anime is first introduced and, after considering discursive implications of the name *anime*, contrasted with media-studies approaches that put an emphasis on relations, modalities, and forms. In order to illustrate the vital role of forms, including genre, similarities between TV anime and Nordic Noir TV drama series are sketched out. Eventually, the article argues that the study of anime is accommodated best by going beyond traditional polarizations between text and context, media specificity and media ecology, area and discipline.

Keywords: anime; media; Japanese studies; TV studies

1. Introduction

The transcultural consumption of popular media from Japan, which this thematic issue of *Arts* addresses, is not only a matter of global markets and fan cultures; it also includes academia. Academic knowledge production has almost always been striving for transcultural relevance. More recently, considerations of students' transcultural media experiences have also been brought to the fore, motivated by critical, cultural-studies shaped intention and/or economic necessity. Thus, manga, anime, and video games started to migrate from subculture into higher education. Outside of Japan, departments that teach Japanese studies have been a frontrunner in that regard, and a significant amount of scholarship has been produced, especially in English and with respect to anime.¹ Among fans as well as academics anime is enjoying a higher presence than manga in part due to the institution of film studies (which holds a much stronger academic position than comics studies), but more so the increasing empirical and theoretical importance of digitalization and media ecologies. Guided by an interest in anime studies and related Japanese-studies pedagogy, this article reverses the focus on "animation as an alternative way to understanding Japan".² To determine in which way Japanese studies expertise may contribute to understanding anime, the article surveys major

¹ As a matter of fact, anime studies as distinct from animation studies (see Sections 2 and 3 of this article) is represented more strongly in the non-Japanese academic community than in the Japanese one as, for example, the Japan Society of Animation Studies evinces. Related to the specific position of both cultural industry and art-school education, the underrepresentation of academic research on anime in Japan calls for a discussion which goes beyond the scope of this article.

² This was the central concern of the international workshop *Japanese animation and European contexts: International dynamics, local receptions* held at Ca'Foscari University, Japanese section, in February 2018.

currents in publications based on Japan-related, or Japanese studies, expertise without aspiring to be an exhaustive account of anime research. While occasionally including publications in Japanese, it refrains from addressing the perceived lack of interaction between respective studies inside and outside of Japan, primarily because fundamental methodological issues cannot necessarily be ascribed to location and language, as, for example, papers by native Japanese academics working in non-Japanese academia indicate.

Naturally, the majority of publications are polarized, aiming at the study of either Japan or anime. Yamada Shōji³ from the International Research Center for Japanese Studies (*Nichibunken*) observes a gap between “manga/anime studies” and Japanese studies, which, from his point of view, reiterates the not easily reconcilable difference between the second and the third generation of Japan experts, that is, anthropologists/social scientists and media studies scholars (Yamada 2017, pp. 3–4). In Japanese studies settings, anime has, by tendency, been subsumed to “Japanese popular culture”. Tentatively, four orientations can be discerned: first, towards politics; second, culture (mainly in the socio-anthropological sense, while still prone to the national); third, Art (primarily in relation to [national] cinema); and, four, media (including industry, production processes, distribution, merchandising, consumption, technicity, literacy, genre conventions, etc.). Orientations 2 and 4 acknowledge fan-cultural expertise and creation. But, instead of discussing the four orientations separately and at equal length, this article highlights methodological issues that run across them: representation and mediation, intellectual critique and affective engagement, subculture and national culture. The incipient section introduces the second and third of the above orientations putting an emphasis on their actual similarities, while the next section turns to the discursive implications of the name *anime*. The third section considers briefly the media studies approach, including a contrastive look at TV anime and Nordic Noir drama series, while the final section addresses anime’s possible ways in and out of Japanese studies.

As distinct from philology, the mainstay of traditional Japanology, and against the backdrop of recent social-science dominance many Japan scholars promote a shift from texts to contexts, often equating textual analysis with an emphasis on representation (Smits 2017, p. 228). Yet, to a greater or lesser extent, all of the approaches interrelate text and context, exhibiting differences with respect to *which* contexts they consider and *how* they analyze texts rather than playing off one against the other. Often, this escapes attention as the institution of Japanese studies is traditionally more inclined to categorize research by *what* is studied rather than *how*—that is, to privilege object and area (or geopolitical rather than disciplinary territory). As literary scholar Michael K. Bourdaghs observes:

Area studies often treats its fields of knowledge as something like paint-by-numbers projects. Each new study fills in a predefined space on a given grid, coloring in another blank to provide a more detailed picture of the object—say, Japan. As a result, area-studies scholarship, even that which self-consciously adopts oppositional approaches—critical approaches to, for example, race, gender, sexuality, or fascism—tends to deal with its objects of study in terms of their seemingly given content, ignoring the ideological forces at work to generate the sense of givenness. (Bourdaghs 2018, p. 591)

Such an inclination limits the research of anime insofar as it does not consider notions of anime itself. But, there is also a challenge involved, that is, to question oppositions—not only between research on anime and Japan, or text and context, but also considerations of fandom and society, serial narratives and self-contained works, media specificity and media convergence, and genre fiction and art-house cinema.

³ In this article, the romanization of Japanese words follows the revised Hepburn system. Japanese names are indicated in the Japanese order, that is, surname preceding first name without separation by comma, except in the References. Globally used Japanese terms (such as manga or otaku) are not italicized.

2. Representation

Anime is occasionally touched upon by scholars engaged in political science, history, and international relations with respect to national branding (i.e., the infamous Cool Japan policy),⁴ neo-nationalism, or remilitarization, but the bulk of Japanese studies in the humanities pays attention to representations of Japanese culture and society in anime, whether in texts or usages, with a background in literary studies or anthropology. While there are discussions of animated movies in regard to Japanese religion, mythology, and folklore,⁵ especially critical accounts of gender representation abound. Anthropologist Dolores Martinez, for example, makes a typical case with her analysis of a character type called “cyborg goddess”.⁶ With the intent to shift the attention from the girl (*shōjo*) to the mature woman and from subcultural to national audiences, the focus is on “how the Japanese body is represented”. As it turns out the representation in question serves as an escape from present societal dilemmas, in a way that answers “the unspoken desire of many a Japanese: another chance to remake the nation-state after the war is won” (Martinez 2015, p. 85). While assuming to go beyond textual analysis in favor of the broader historical and societal context, anime texts—identified as “animated feature length films” (Martinez 2015, p. 72) and taken as a given, or tool—are “reduced to retelling the plot and offering [. . .] sociological and anthropological readings” (Kono 2011, p. 205), which themselves abet generalization.

Literary scholars, too, have approached anime through a socio-cultural lens from Napier (2001), who provides Japanological expertise to the fandom and wider public outside of Japan, to Alisa Freedman, who, together with Toby Slade, promotes “serious approaches to playful delights” in the Japanese-studies classroom and highlights “how popular culture reveals the values of the societies that produce and consume it” (Freedman and Slade 2017, location 312), how it teaches enduring “lessons about history, international relations, business, class, gender” (Freedman and Slade 2017, location 312). In line with the paradigm shift in Japanese studies since the 1990s, anime as part of Japanese popular culture is to open a gateway to “broader themes”, accompanied by pedagogical efforts that aim at turning attention away from fan communities to society at large. However, the focus on society at large through popular media texts is not that easily achieved. Two examples shall briefly illustrate that.

In the attempt to grasp popular sentiment in post-3.11 Japan, literary scholar Amano Ikuho analyzes the recent reception of the animated movie *Space Battleship Yamato* (or Star Blazers; Uchū senkan Yamato, 1977) introducing her example as follows:

In the eyes of the Japanese audience, *Yamato* was extremely successful partly because of its narrative design modeling the convention of the *Bildungsroman*, a diegetic frame in which an ordinary young man grows by adopting and learning from collective social norms and values. /On the other hand, [. . .] the social context of 1970s Japan allowed *Space Battleship Yamato* to be read as a manifest case of historical revisionism, rather than a story of straightforward nationalism. (Amano 2014, pp. 328–29)

Typical of discussions that employ anime as an occasional tool for the exploration of societal issues, the Japanese audience is first generalized and then short-circuited, i.e. immediately correlated, with individual media texts. In addition, already existing analyses, which by now include considerations of multiple audiences, escape notice. For example, animation historian Sano Akiko has diligently demonstrated what is common sense within Japanese-language anime criticism, namely, that the audience of *Space Battleship Yamato* was not homogeneous (Sano 2009, pp. 289–97). Because of its historical subject matter—the allegedly unsinkable Battleship Yamato that was sunk in April 1945—the movie attracted adult audiences, and critical intellectuals related it to the issue of coming to

⁴ See (Valaskivi 2013).

⁵ See (Ogihara-Schuck 2014; Okuyama 2015); and the excellent book chapter by Foster (2015).

⁶ See (Martinez 2015, 2017).

terms with the nation's past. But articles in anime-fan publications left the historic war untouched, focusing instead on the design of characters and vehicles as well as the effective minimalism in suggesting movement. In reference to both the movie and the TV anime series (26 episodes, first broadcast 1974–1975), fan critics paid exclusive attention to forms, or "the materiality of the medium" (Silvio 2006, p. 128), while the foremost interest of traditional intellectuals was directed to narrative contents, or representation.

Thus, a dichotomy emerged that still resurfaces in Japanese studies today, as the recent example of a queer-studies critique of Hosoda Mamoru's *Wolf Children* (Ōkami kodomo no Ame to Yuki, 2012) may indicate. At the beginning of the analysis by Germer et al. (2017), animation is defined as potentially offering "a twofold view of existential threat or liberating alternative vision of contemporary society, along with a process of constant metamorphosis" (Germer et al. 2017, p. 1), but the actual analysis considers mainly what plot and characters represent, which culminates in the conclusion that the movie ends up "reifying and reinforcing normativity" (Germer et al. 2017, p. 7). Remarkably, queerness appears as a matter of represented contents, reified, so to speak, by the director in a self-contained text, not as a matter of anime's own performance, its textual openness to audience participation, or the interrelation between the text and various audiences.⁷ Taking anime as a given, the movie is read as ultimately promoting the patriarchal ideal of "good wife and wise mother", celebrating Japanese-studies expertise. In addition, the director's œuvre is characterized as "a Japanese version of a national 'cinema of reassurance'" (Germer et al. 2017, p. 2). This obscures more than the possibility of multiple readings, including the meaning of reassurance for different actors. Not necessarily Japan-related discourses of national cinema, genre cinema, and animation as genre (see Section 3 of this article) pass unnoticed and so do the fundamentally collaborative nature of anime and its multimodal performance of subcultural tropes.

Regarding anime as cinema allows, among other things, for relating it to society at large and as such also to Art; but, at the same time, it runs the risk of privileging the conceptual work of the director while underestimating the physical labor of the key animators, and centralizing the narrative role of the plot while overlooking non-narrative elements.⁸ The "lens of social context" (Germer et al. 2017, p. 1), as applied by the articles introduced above, is apparently expected to warrant critical as political thinking, which again is often implicitly ascribed a potential to warrant the *raison d'être* of Japanese studies as part of the humanities. But reflections on the situatedness and forms of critical thinking remain rare; it is mainly identified by its opposite: fan-cultural "celebration" or "amusement". This orientation shows itself, for example, in Deborah Shamoon's discussion that calls for "transcend[ing] the superflat, database-driven aspect of anime", and for appreciating anime works that "radically challenged the otaku audience to detach from their fantasies and go out into the real world" (Shamoon 2015, p. 105). Criticality seems to be the *conditio sine qua non*, the opposite of the textual, philology-like focus that academics see returning in students' engagement with anime, manga, and games (Smits 2017, p. 228). When compared to the familiar opposition between uncritical (affective) fan activity and critical (intellectual) academia, Stevie Suan's article in this issue (Suan 2018) points into a different direction as it demonstrates how *sakuga* fans' activities may very well become critical insofar as their affective focus on form, in addition to craft and labor, allows for dismissing national-political representationalism. Reminiscent of modernist art and its mobilization of transcultural form, such a focus may admittedly go at the expense of situatedness, but it certainly draws attention to contemporary assemblages that escape polarizing assumptions.

Japanese studies tends to foreground national aspects of a transnational media form like anime. This manifests, among other things, in a penchant towards national cinema, as is the case in approaches to anime from art-theoretical and film-historical perspectives, exemplified by Swale (2012) and

⁷ Sharalyn Orbaugh's discussions of anime and manga offer an alternative in this regard, see for example (Orbaugh 2015).

⁸ See (Suan 2018).

([Novielli \[2015\] 2018](#)). At first glance fundamentally different from the accounts introduced above, they actually have numerous things in common: They, too, privilege feature length films, or “cinematic animations” ([Lamarre 2018](#), p. 9), over TV-prone productions; they highlight directors, assume a non-segmentalized audience, consider neither subcultural nor transnational contexts, and they juxtapose “serious” representation with amusement, commerce, or craft. Admittedly, the two monographs cannot easily be lumped together. Swale engages in a theoretically informed exploration of anime’s contribution to “art proper”, understood as “the imaginative dimension of both the creative process and the viewers’ engagement” ([Swale 2012](#), p. 59), and he applies an allegedly universal concept of autonomous art when he asserts:

The ultimate litmus for identifying the genuinely artistic aspects of the work of anime lies in the capacity to identify a process of expression that is not a slave to the instrumental aims of its constituent parts, i.e. craft, representation, amusement or magic. ([Swale 2012](#), p. 121)

In contradistinction, Novielli refrains from any consideration of theory or even medium (for example, variants of cel animation) when she presents her chronology from 1917 to 2013, which foregrounds outstanding (male) artists and their collectives as well as the politico-societal conditions and cultural particularities that are represented in character types and stories. The relation between individual and group features centrally in the discussion of older works, and so do symbolizations of Japan and America, or Europe.

Yet, despite their significant methodological differences both monographs share an inclination towards Japanese cinema (whose very end Alexander Zahlten’s book ([Zahlten 2017](#)) proclaims in the name of industrial genres, national times, and media ecologies). Indicative of that is the restraint exercised with regard to the word *anime*. Novielli mentions it only in a footnote ([Novielli \[2015\] 2018](#), p. 58), concordant with her attachment to experimental animation: The book concludes with a section on the professors and graduates of the animation department at Tokyo University of the Arts. Swale uses the word *anime* frequently, but omits it from the Index. This appears to correspond with his focus on the (likewise exclusively male) directors Miyazaki Hayao, Kon Satoshi, and Oshii Mamoru as well as his correlation of anime to cinema, regarding both Japanese cinematic traditions and recent “post-cinematic” trends. Closely related to the cinema focus is the orientation to Art, which surfaces less in the form of status claims than in the preference for bounded works, that is, movies that are capable of representing a director’s imagination and lending themselves to critical interpretation.⁹ Especially Novielli’s monograph seems to validate the observation that “... the preference is still highly modernist in that discrete art objects are leveraged against large social forces and power relations”. ([Lamarre 2018](#), p. 29).

3. Naming

Novielli’s book is dedicated to Yamamura Kōji, a creator of animated short films in various techniques such as *Muybridge’s Strings*, which received an Excellence Award at the 15th Japan Media Arts Festival in 2015 (where the Grand Prize went to *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* by director Shinbō Akiyuki, causing some friction between the two camps of “Japanese animation” at the time). The dedication anticipates the book’s emphasis on Japanese animation as something broader than anime, a position widely shared among animation professors at Japanese art schools, like Yamamura himself, and manifested in the volume edited by [Hu and Yokota \(2013\)](#). Against this backdrop, it may appear like an attempt at elevating anime to a level above entertainment and affective fascination to call it *animation*. In fact, European fans have been using the words interchangeably without such aspiration. This is evident in the French volume edited by [Pruvost-Delaspre \(2016\)](#), which speaks

⁹ In Novielli’s book interpretation is not always substantiated by means of historical evidence. Thus, it appears arbitrary to regard the characters of Masaoka Kenzō’s short film *Kumo to chūrippu* (The spider and the tulip, 1943) as representations of America (the spider), Japan’s Asian colonies (the ladybird), and the protective Japanese Empire (tulip) ([Novielli \[2015\] 2018](#), p. 31).

mostly of *l'animation japonaise* when actually *anime* is meant. Foregrounding distribution in the French market and reflecting on the split-up of discourse between traditional film criticism and fan expertise, the volume highlights cel animation, distribution formats (such as VHS and DVD), narrative genres, and franchises, rather than *auteurs*, festivals, and “high-quality standard” ([Novielli \[2015\] 2018](#), p. 47). Nevertheless, the appendix list of Japanese animations that were released and sold in France features only five TV series among a total of 77 entries ([Pruvost-Delaspre 2016](#), pp. 214–16). This is due to the specifics of anime consumption outside of Japan. With respect to the animated movies by Miyazaki Hayao, the “Kurosawa of animation”, James Rendell and Rayna Denison note:

Just as the transnational reproduction, promotion and dissemination of Studio Ghibli’s texts worked to spread Miyazaki’s cinema as a new kind of art animation, fans have actively embraced that cinema for the resistant and ambiguous subcultural capital that it affords [...] . ([Rendell and Denison 2018](#), p. 11)

The very fact that Miyazaki Hayao’s work has its own “database”¹⁰ points once more to the necessity to go academically beyond oppositions like the one between animation, or animated movie, and “anime proper”. After all, *anime* is a matter of perspective. From a fan-cultural (and especially non-Japanese) point of view, the movies by Miyazaki—as well as Takahata Isao or the above mentioned Hosoda Mamoru—may pass as both: cinema and anime. From an infrastructural and economic one, their movies may appear as the opposite of the commercially successful “franchise anime film”, which stays aesthetically and economically related to the world of TV even if screened in theaters ([Lamarre 2018](#), p. 9).

On the flipside of the coin that maintains, “not all Japanese animation is anime”, anime is uninhibitedly defined as “all animation made in Japan”. But although the word *anime* is in wide use now for the sake of convenience, not even all cel animation made in Japan (to take the medium-specific angle) has been regarded as anime in Japanese-language discourse. The name *anime*, derived from the English loanword *animēshon*, gained momentum only in the 1970s ([Tsugata 2004](#), pp. 18–21). Earlier, cel animation was called *manga eiga* (cartoon film) and, from the late 1930s onwards, also *dōga* (lit.: moving images). During Japan’s postwar democratization under US-American sway the Anglicism *animēshon* started to spread, denominating on the one hand Disney’s fully animated *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, which saw its first Japanese screening in 1950, and on the other hand experimental short films as pioneered by Norman McLaren. Thus, the word *animation* came to assume a twofold role: on the one hand, serving as an umbrella term for a specific film genre; and on the other hand, marking “art animation”, that is, short films to premier mainly at film festivals, such as Yamamura’s works. In contrast, *anime* has been associated with the technique of limited (cel) animation, entertaining fiction, and the TV series format, which started in the early 1960s. Distinguishing itself aesthetically by the central role of voice acting and sound design, a shared set of auditory, narrative and visual conventions, and a strong non-representationalist proclivity in its settings as well as the design and figurative acting of its characters¹¹ (and therefore not rarely mistaken as escapism), anime has assumed a global recognizability rooted in specific practices and discourses.¹² This anime is closely tied to TV series, pertaining to the segmentation of narratives into episodes and arcs with a recurrent pattern of pacing,¹³ the exhibition of fluid character-identity in the form of *chibi*,¹⁴ viewers’ media intimacy based on literacy, and the enhancement of a “media mix” affinity that was around already at

¹⁰ In the sense of a fan-cultural repertoire or virtual archive, which was initially conceptualized by Azuma ([Azuma 2009](#)) in the name of “database” and has not seen its translation into the vocabulary of recent archival discourse yet. With respect to Miyazaki fandom see ([Morimoto 2018](#)).

¹¹ See ([Suan 2017, 2018](#)).

¹² Pioneered by series such as *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (Shinseiki Evangelion, 1995–1996, dir. Anno Hideaki) and *Sailor Moon* (Bishōjo senshi sērā mūn, 1992–1997, dir. Ikuhara Kunihiko et al.); recent popular series by female directors include *K-On!* (since 2009, dir. Yamada Naoko) and *Yuri on Ice!!!* (2016, dir. Yamamoto Sayo).

¹³ See ([Suan 2017, 2018](#)).

¹⁴ Exaggerated (“super deformed”) midget character, or midget version of the same character, visualizing affective states and approximating a first-person perspective.

the very beginning. The Japanese late-night broadcasts of the last two decades (23:00–04:00) have been advantageous not only economically (that is, as a reasonable marketing tool for DVDs); they have also been crucial in shaping the global conception of *anime* as a basically open-structured media form for adults resting on serialization (within one series and beyond).

4. Media Form

The TV-induced type of anime has been at the center of a new strand of media-studies research that turned away from *what* anime texts as bounded entities represent, towards *how* they work within local and global media environments. Stretching from investigations of franchises (Steinberg 2012) and the collaborative practice in studios (Condry 2013) to explorations of distribution networks (Denison 2018) and media geographies, the new academic interest is empirically motivated by “a shift from the exchange of contents to the interconnectivity of distributional platforms” (Steinberg and Li 2017, p. 180) under the conditions of digitalization and globalization. Accordingly, the privileging of objects and their (national) production, or critical reading, abates, making room for modalities and distribution. In pursuit of “how the relation between television and animation hinges on infrastructures, multimedia franchises, and media ecologies” (Lamarre 2018, p. 1)—in Japan even before the spread of digitalization—Lamarre maintains that “animation becomes something other than a self-contained object or self-identical content existing apart from its distribution. It becomes a kind of nondiscrete object” (Lamarre 2018, p. 9). More specifically, he conceptualizes anime as “a mode of technosocial existence” (Lamarre 2018, p. 10).

As such, anime is not approached as a medium in the narrow sense being confined to support and technology, and prioritizing the object itself, but rather as media, that is, from a broader perspective that acknowledges the interplay of textual and contextual forms, a “crossroads of aesthetics, technology, and society” (Mitchell and Hansen 2010, location 174), which goes beyond technological determinism precisely because its focus is on relationality. Considering anime, broadcast slots, like the late-night one mentioned above, have proven to be as vital for its perceived and practiced media specificity as viewing devices. But, in Japanese, it is difficult to distinguish between medium specificity and media specificity as the word *medium* is only rarely used. Zahlten (2013), perhaps in disregard of this difficulty, dismisses media specificity in favor of media environments. While his argument against ahistorical culturalist and formalist approaches¹⁵ stands to reason, two questions arise, one with respect to object orientation, and another with respect to polarization: Is media specificity invariably a matter of objects to be approached in one specific way? And, in view of the fact that in practice media specificity goes hand in hand with media convergence, how does media (not medium) specificity change under media-ecological conditions?¹⁶

The focus on how anime mediates, and what is mediated as anime, draws attention to forms, albeit beyond the object-centered type of modernist formalism. In order to methodologically reunite texts and contexts, Caroline Levine has suggested to regard “all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference” (Levine 2015, p. 18) as forms (not structures) and to seek out “the intricacy of relations [between them] over interpretive depth” (Levine 2015, p. 39). In *The Anime Machine* (Lamarre 2009), Lamarre took his departure from such forms, in particular forms of animated movement as related to the treatment of space in anime—the compositing of the multiplanar image, and the handling of intervals between and within images, with the exploded view as one case. In *The Anime Ecology* (Lamarre 2018), he determines: “The multilayered image [. . .] implies the generation of a translayer force.” (Lamarre 2018, p. 6). Thus, the initial attention to underdetermination as the fundamental characteristic of the anime machine runs into a media-ecological theory that focuses on TV as entwining the social and the technical; relatedly, it foregrounds the interplay between

¹⁵ Elaborated in (Zahlten 2017); see, for example, locations 362–65.

¹⁶ Addressed within Japan-related film studies, for example, by Lee (2017).

aesthetics and economics rather than political representation or respective academic critique.¹⁷ In a similar vein, Suan highlights anime's formal conventions and how they are performed as a system that warrants the media's global recognizability, marketability and reproducibility across individual styles and cultural locations (Suan 2017, 2018). Form-conscious approaches like these show an openness for exploring and conceptualizing aspects of anime that go beyond the re-confirmation of Japan-related knowledge. They acknowledge the agency of producers, mediators, spectators, and matter itself, as well as the relevance of pre-representational and post-critical viewing. On top of this, they hold the potential to include considerations of anime's aesthetic materiality, stretching from Gekidan Inu Curry's collages¹⁸ to the interrelation between 2D (two-dimensional) and 3D (three-dimensional) imagery, including the insertion of (apparent) hand-drawn sequences into computer-generated film.

The transcultural, while situated, working of forms mediated by TV suggests itself also from a comparative angle. At the risk of taking a detour similarities between TV anime and Nordic Noir TV drama shall be briefly sketched out in order to illuminate the relevance of critical attention to modalities rather than objects and what they may represent. Both anime and Nordic Noir became globally consumed niche media almost concurrently: anime in the latter half of the 2000s, Nordic Noir in the early 2010s. In view of production modes and representational content, the two appear so strikingly different that the lack of comparative analysis does not come as a surprise.¹⁹ What was coined Nordic Noir by the British media company Arrow Films are mainly public service TV series, which are also known as "Scandi crime",²⁰ featuring complex female detectives while addressing the downside of the Nordic welfare state in a sociocritical, gritty realist way. In contradistinction, anime productions are privately funded, and their serial narratives evolve often around girl characters, in addition to boys or young men, who inhabit story worlds that do not reference contemporary society directly, even if they are set in Japan (*sekai-kei*²¹ being an evident case).

But in view of formats and modalities commonalities appear: Both Nordic Noir and anime have spread outside the markets that they were initially produced for, and in subtitled versions at that; both have seen (live-action) remakes in the US and UK; both relate to discursive transmedial clusters, involving more than TV series, and both have proven effective with regards to "contents tourism". Studies published in English on the Nordic Noir phenomenon over the last few years point to factors of success, which also apply surprisingly well to anime: printed popular fiction that laid the ground for the TV productions (Nordic crime novels, in part comparable to the role of Japanese manga for anime); seriality as programming strategy, production mode, narrative form, and viewing experience; non-broadcast viewing via DVD and streaming sites; and the connection to genre: "genre acts as a sort of battleground [...] for developing domestic film culture as a dynamic part of an international system of cinema" (Gustafsson and Kääpä 2015, p. 6). The last point, however, does not apply to animation as a cinematic genre, or anime as a genre of animation (at least not anymore).²² Similarly, "Nordic Noir is not a clearly defined genre, but a concept with genre affinities" (Hansen and Waade 2017, p. 9). Thus, the "genre" attribute implies two things: first, highly conventional and industrial "genre film" as the modernist antipode to art-house movies, and, second, thematic fictional genres therein. The international visibility of genre film from Japan or the Nordic

¹⁷ An example for the difficulties to address anime within the framework of "critical animation" is (Steinberg 2017), which shows criticality as a property of the critic, not anime itself.

¹⁸ See *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* (since 2011, dir. Shinbō Akiyuki).

¹⁹ Hills (2017, p. 53) mentions Casey Brienza's work on invisible cultural labor in paratextual industries when pointing out that, in contrast, Nordic Noir related labor has been rendered invisible by choice.

²⁰ Pioneering examples are *The Killing* (Denmark, 2007–2012) and *The Bridge* (Denmark and Sweden, 2011–2018).

²¹ Fictional genre where the relation between the protagonists and the fate of the world is not mediated by social institutions.

²² Hills (2017, location 207) notes that anime may have qualified as an "industrial genre" at certain moments in Japan's postwar history. He employs "industrial genre" as a relational concept to highlight "meaningful constellations of industrial structures and practices, media texts, spaces of circulation, and spectatorships" (locations 175–76). Besides, with their claim "anime is not a genre!" fans have resisted the subsuming of anime to an allegedly universal type of animation (modelled on North American productions).

countries is not entirely new; suffice to recall the former popularity of locally specific genres, such as sword-fighting (*chanbara*) or sexploitation movies. But the success of contemporary Nordic Noir drama and anime leans on globally shared genres, like mystery, horror, and science fiction.²³

At a glance, Nordic Noir and anime seem to have adopted the role that art-house movies (for example, by Ingmar Bergman or Ozu Yasujirō) once played as representatives of national cinema, although for different audiences. In fact, critics have observed with respect to Nordic Noir that “genre film transformed into an art film of sorts when it left the [. . .] national sphere” ([Gustafsson and Kääpä 2015](#), p. 7). This may also apply to anime, but only under the condition that the modernist polarization between internationally acclaimed national cinema and domestically popular genre film is dropped. In view of the placement of locally specific TV series in the globalized media market, Matt Hills argues that Nordic Noir “has been articulated with forms of anti-mainstream cultural difference that may be better thought of as potentially subcultural and *neocultural*” ([Hills 2017](#), p. 51). Two aspects are especially noteworthy here: “cultural difference” and the “*neocultural*”. As for the first, referencing and projecting locality (whether Nordicness or Japaneseness and in whatever form), more precisely, “attention to national/cultural distinctiveness that feeds into a fetishising discourse of ‘exotic’ difference” ([Åberg 2015](#), p. 101) has been vital for Nordic Noir as well as anime to appear as alternative to the Anglophone popular media mainstream. The “*neocultural*”, on the other hand, points to “quality TV”, which fuses subcultural and (national-)cultural capital, according to Hills: “‘Fan-like’ and ‘cult-like’ practices are culturally mainstreamed here, forming part of a newly dominant discourse of binge-watching” ([Hills 2017](#), p. 56). In other words, non-fannish viewers are invited to take a fan-like, in-between position.

In sum, it can be said, that, in addition to TV studies, genre theory sheds light onto what helped to establish Nordic Noir and anime as global brands, namely, the interplay of a distinctive representation, or invocation, of locality and globally familiar forms: Not anime as a genre, but thematic genres that are employed in anime have mediated “Japan” as a cultural form.²⁴

5. Japanese Studies as Media Studies?

[Choo \(2013\)](#) has maintained that area studies and media studies do not live well together, or more pointedly, that area studies alienates media studies. According to her, the American field of Japanese studies, since its inception, has not only generated comprehensive knowledge about Japanese society and culture, but also put that knowledge in the service of “seizing Japan” by means of occupying certain subjects. But the subject of anime does not enjoy much reputation within the humanities—be it for the alleged lack of social realism and political critique, its aesthetics of conventions and “database” references, or simply the fact that academics from other fields as well as administrators lack exposure. Thus, anime does not easily help to “seize Japan” apart from recent Cool Japan policies, which, in the wake of tourism as the new industry, have shifted anyway from entertaining media to folklore, fashion, and food. Against this backdrop the question arises where to locate anime research: within Japanese studies or better without?

Anime research is usually delineated by geopolitical area and disciplinary territory, associated on the one hand with Japanese, or Asian, studies, and on the other hand with departments that engage in film, media, art, or literary theory. But anime is not necessarily addressed within those departments, and if so, it is inclined to be subjected to allegedly universal, western-centric categories “that exclude certain kinds of cultural production from the realm of ‘art’” ([Apter 2013](#), p. 48), to name just one possible case. The disregard for the situatedness of concepts of Art is as symptomatic as

²³ See for example the discussion of anime in relation to the global genre of Science Fiction by [Posadas \(2014\)](#), who suggests to complement traditional Japanese-studies representationalism (introduced in Section 1 of this article) with “representing genre”.

²⁴ See ([Kacsuk 2016](#)), who employs the sociological concept of subcultural clusters, instead of genre, to explain rise and convergence of the anime-manga-otaku field outside of Japan.

is the exclusion of TV anime series from Swale's discussion. But "challenging basic, 'universal' assumptions of 'disciplines'" is accomplished not only by "presenting area studies as a modifier of discipline in the combination of 'discipline *and* place'" (Smits 2017, p. 227); it implies also historical time. Situating concepts of (anime as) Art, for example, provides an opportunity to acknowledge both cultural particularities and post-modernist commonalities, as it relates to differences within the institution of modern art in Japan as well as its global transformation in recent years.

Lamarre names Japanese studies as one of the fields *The Anime Ecology* is drawing on, and his book clearly strives to feed Japanese experience into transcultural media studies, with respect to traditions of transmedia storytelling, the "unbundling of TV from medium and platform" already debated in the 1980s, and Japan's "formation as an urbanized media center" (Lamarre 2018, pp. 2–3). Anime's new relevance in the age of digitalization and media ecologies (or anime as method) provides the point of departure here. In line with the modal conceptualization of anime, Japanese-studies expertise is employed as a tool to consider historically specific local situations that conjoin transnational aesthetic and economic configurations. This approach strikes as different from the inclination to link media research to the modern nation and its public political sphere in order to reach beyond area studies.²⁵ Zahlten's *The End of Japanese Cinema* addresses Pink Film, Kadokawa Film, and V-Cinema as examples of "industrial genres" but not anime, which is probably because anime appears less "deeply permeated with concerns about the nation" (Zahlten 2017, location 149). Leaving aside whose concerns these concerns actually are, it is interesting to note that they come to the fore from both within and without the institution of Japanese studies—in the attempt to connect Japan-related expertise to non-area studies scholarship, due to expectations by those not interested in specific (Asian) locations. Consequently, media studies' promise for making an intervention with regards to reading anime texts as representative objects that provide direct access to the "area" of Japan may get easily caught up in representational issues of a different, institutional kind. A radical way out of Japanese studies does not seem feasible.

With regards to undermining modernist notions of representation, authorship, and nation Japan-related media-studies publications on anime have been engaged not only in the promotion of media ecology but also media regionalism; the allegedly increasing irrelevance of anime's media specificity has been seen to be accompanied by the (often also managerially advanced) dissolution of Japan specificity into Asian studies. Indeed, anime has been flying both beneath and above the national radar, not evenly shared within the nation, while crossing borders in terms of production, distribution, and consumption. Writing on the emerging creative industries in East Asia around 2010, Pang asserted that in Japan anime was only slowly integrated into national-economic discourse (Pang 2012, p. 234). With respect to the tolerated practice of copying, which for her distinguishes cultural from creative industries, she stated: "The form's strong affiliation with copying enormously complicates any national and cultural identity produced thereby, because there is no such thing as authenticity." (Pang 2012, p. 251). It can be added that, as distinct from manga, Japanese anime has been based on (hierarchical) Asian production networks since the 1960s, and that recently Chinese web companies invest a lot in Japanese productions bringing anime's transnational dimension to the fore. Against this backdrop, anime research may seem to be best situated in Asian studies programs as they aim to unloose the tie to Japan specificity in line with media regionalism. Yet, Asian studies as area studies still finds its main *raison d'être* in object, or subject matter, orientation,²⁶ even if it focuses on relations within the geopolitical, sociocultural, and imaginary territory that it investigates. In such an institutional site, it is hardly surprising to see anime subordinated to a bigger purpose. But, while acknowledging that area studies does not provide the solution for the methodological issues raised in this article, it goes

²⁵ See, for example, the volume *Media Theory in Japan* (Steinberg and Zahlten 2017), which refrains from featuring manga and anime studies; presumably because these may easily appear too object-centered, too subcultural, or not theory-prone enough.

²⁶ The volume *Introducing Japanese Popular Culture* (Freedman and Slade 2017) gives explicitly preference to such categories (anime, manga, video games, literature, fashion, etc.) over "concepts" like otaku, Lolita, *kawaii*.

without saying that Japan-related expertise is relevant to the study of anime. Area studies' potential to highlight otherwise academically marginalized subjects, such as subcultural productions, should not be denied either: It offers a platform for anime research whenever film-studies departments do not welcome it. Consequently, the question of where in academia to locate anime—within or without Japanese studies—becomes itself an issue of situatedness. In view of the modality at the core of the media of anime, the challenge is how to mutually engage Japan-studies expertise and an anime-specific research, in other words, to interrelate area and discipline, context and text, media ecology and media specificity. An important step to conjoining what Japanese-studies convention more or less strictly divides may be to conceive of the “area” itself, not as end but means, or medium, so to speak, in order to focus not on *what* it is but *how* it operates on objects, practices, and networks, for example, in the form of anime.

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