Meta-, Hyper-, Inter-, Super-, Anime, World Creation, and the Role of Film Festivals

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Consistently using the term "film festival" for an institution that has undergone considerable transformations in form and purpose over the roughly eight decades it has been in existence seems brave and/or lazy. The same may be said of the four decades and a half of anime. The accommodation of change is, on the other hand, one of the small miracles of names and categories. The insight that there is an always ongoing double play of consistent referral to an inconsistent referent in categories is hardly new (sometimes seen as more, sometimes as less troubling) and was one of the basic obsessions of various strands of 20th century Euro-U.S. theory.

Nation in particular has been dissected as a constantly re-grouping and consistency-feigning, imaginary community-inducing category. Japan has experienced some of the most intense negotiations in this regard, struggling to achieve congruency between the ideas of intense historical rupture and essential national foundation.[1] These negotiations seem to function as a kind of case study of such nation-globalization discourses for the rest of "the world", resulting in a considerable fascination which that very world has displayed with Japan. Anime can be seen as a formulation of these negotiations, and its exportability may rely heavily on that fact. Film festivals as well have long been at the performative center of how to deal with the question of nation vis-à-vis "the world", and they too have experienced an immense surge in popularity since the 1960s, and especially since the 1980s. Examining the relation between these two media principles thus promises insights into the contemporary kinetics of the global narrative.

This paper will address the question of Japan and the imaginary in two senses. First, it will utilize (the principle of) anime to develop thoughts on some of the media-theoretical frameworks within which the trope of Japan currently circulates. This is seen as an important pointer to how relations between identity and globality are perceived. Then, it will attempt to think through the potential and the problem of (the principle of) film festivals within this discursively framed media context in general, and with regard to Japan in particular.

Anime has recently become the object of an ever-growing amount of publications that attempt to analyze its formal substance (see for example Lamarre 2002, 2009) or the social practice it seems to encourage, especially in the 'West' (for example Napier 2007).[2] The final goal of these efforts usually lies in gaining insight into what may be new mechanisms of subject formation, often theorized as encouraging decentering, fragmentation, or de-hierarchization. Very few of these attempts rigorously address the problem of even talking about anime as a single, hermetic medium or text type (one of the exceptions being Steinberg, 2006). The unasked question remains how to account for the effects and conditions of anime aesthetics or reception practices when they are not 'just' an animation text, but belong to a network of media texts such as series of so-called light novels, of console games, manga, drama CDs, music albums, figurines, concert events, an immense number of *dôjinshi* or fan-published magazines, card games, self-produced or re-edited anime versions called *mad movies*, etc. This paper will approach anime in a more abstract sense – treating it not as a text-immanent genre or subgenre of animation, but as a discursive nexus that organizes interactions between the spheres of economy, aesthetics, and politics. Thus an animated film may belong to the anime complex just as much as a live-action version/variation of the same story. There is no intrinsic conflict between a specific anime work and a specific film festival. Anime

by default produces various media outlets, and will always be compatible to film festivals in that sense. It is the principle behind the two that has a more strained relationship. On the one hand, it is simply not possible to talk about *Naruto* or *Pokemon* or *InuYasha* or of endless other anime just as animation when they encompass so many media-technological dimensions that are constitutive to their meaning, or put differently, that influence the way we constitute meaning. On the other hand, the idea of an intrinsic unboundedness of anime belongs to a wider development in the reflection on media today. A closer look at the themes that surface in anime will be used as a stepping stone to reflect on that somewhat older, but recently also very successful phenomenon, the film festival.

Worlds

Anime itself is suffused and surrounded by the iconic theme of the world. Structurally, as just mentioned above, anime presents itself as a complex constellation of products and practices, designed to create and/or connect multimedia worlds. Anime iconography abounds with images of the globe set in relation to its animated protagonists, from the well-known *Astro Boy*, *Space Battleship Yamato* or *Neon Genesis Evangelion* to countless less well-known series. Despite being identified and marketed as 'Japanese', anime has already fundamentally left nation behind, both on a text-immanent and extra-textual level. Implicitly, the 'Japan' that is attached to the integrative anime-cosmos as an organizer of worlds is not a Japan in the sense of a homogenous, national entity, but of a simultaneity of possible, commodifiable, and very global worlds. Within it, narratives abound with apocalyptic scenarios that threaten the entire planet, most recently typified in the highly successful subgenre known as *sekai-kei*, or 'world type', which synchronizes its protagonists' intimate emotional quivers with the fate of the entire world. Let us take a look at one of the most successful representatives of the genre, the 2006 series *The Melancholy of Suzumiya Haruhi*.

In one of the early episodes of the series one of the main characters, Kyon, learns that a member of the school club he belongs to is actually a being from the future. Other members of the club include a hybrid data being from outer space and a telepath, as well as the head of the group, Suzumiya Haruhi. Haruhi, unbeknownst to her, purportedly has godlike abilities of rewriting reality. The unlikely assortment of members has assembled in the club with the common goal of keeping her from getting bored. For if Haruhi were to surrender to her ennui she might subconsciously decide to destroy this uneventful world, which – a problem never addressed in detail – she might actually have created to begin with. Kyon is the only 'normal' character in this club, although it is at least hinted at that this entire setting could spring from *his* fantasy as well: In the first monologue of the series he professes a weakness for science fiction and fantasy, and the scenario revolving around the pretty but domineering Haruhi could just as easily be seen as a wish fulfillment fantasy on his part.

The series is highly self-reflexive and intensely intertextual, constantly referring to other anime, to the nature of fiction, of the world, of so-called reality, and to the position of the unconsciously omnipotent creator; in essence, it addresses a number of questions well known from postmodern and poststructuralist theory. The series dramatizes a confusion of fantasy and reality, subject and object, producer and consumer that may be seen as an expression of what Tom Lamarre calls anime's 'autodeconstructive tendencies' (Lamarre 2008, 176). Thus this anime's textual strategies mirror some of the basic questions this very conference poses with regard to the constructed entity called 'Japan', conceptually entrapped in a recursive structure of projection, production, and fictionalization. Through the maze of self-reflexivity and global-scale post-constructivist narrative, anime multiplies the world to create paradoxically holistic fragments. In consequence, it foregrounds and popularizes a certain model of the mediatized world it helps to construct.

Liquids

The explicit and possibly didactic compatibility between *Suzumiya Haruhi* and certain epistemological frameworks does not stop with the trope of the world. When the time traveler, portrayed as a hapless, well-endowed girl that is a constant object of lust for Kyon, explains to him the mechanisms of the space-time continuum, she utilizes animation, manga, and the flow of water as metaphors. While again the injections of reflexivity are striking, the third choice especially taps into recently highly popular ideas about the current global *conditio humana*. Liquidity and the nature of flows elevated to a global scale have recently become omnipresent concepts in sociology, media theory, political theory, popular journalism and any other field that attempts to explain or describe developments of a global dimension. Among others, Zygmunt Bauman has proposed that we have entered a phase of **liquid**

modernity (Bauman 2000), Manuel Castells has developed a theory of the **space of flows** that dominates what he calls the network society (Castells 1996), Bryan Turner speaks of **liquid differentiation** in his theory of consumer culture (Turner 2003), and economic theory is full of analyses on the **global flows** of bodies, products, capital and information. Just as *The Melancholy of Suzumiya Haruhi* insinuates, according to the way the world and its future are perceived today, everything is connected, everything is global in scale, and everything is liquefied. Due to the fact that anime generally integrates the spheres of economy, aesthetics, politics, language and nation, and is often highly reflexive at the same time, it is perhaps unsurprising that it can also be understood as a medium conveying the idea of a liquid world. In that sense, it is not at all 'culturally' unique, but an expression and conveyor of epistemological frameworks currently at work in many societies of the affluent, postindustrial world. The question is: whom are they at work for?

Hyper-, Meta-, Trans-

We have seen that anime currently oscillates between two models: that of multiple worlds and that of liquidity. Both of these relate to the contemporary media environment. Anime worlds are created in at least two senses: First of all, there is the textual/fictional world that the characters live in, and while there are specific anime strategies, this is in itself fairly conventional, and has been much theorized with regard to fiction in general. Second, there is what Marc Steinberg has called "extending the world of the anime text out into the larger social world" (Steinberg 2006, 202), the way in which merchandising and the spreading across various media – what is referred to by the contemporary buzzword of transmedia storytelling – surrounds the concrete environment of the consumer, who can watch the series in the evening, play the game in the afternoon, read the novel on the train, eat from a themed lunchbox and trade cards with friends after school or work, listen to the album while shopping and read the manga while eating, and wear the characters' costume to a convention. This enveloping marketing strategy is not unique to anime, nor was it invented by the anime industry, but arguably the anime industry has made it a fundamental principle with an intensity that rivals most other segments of the global entertainment industry, and even fixing it to the realm of entertainment begins to sound reductive.

In fact, the potential of anime to disregard such boundaries through its mobility has been noted by a number of parties. The academic disciplines that have begun to give attention to anime regularly slap it with the linguistic markers used to connote an intensification, a change in level, an extreme and something at the futuristic edge of the contemporary. In just two recent publications on anime, it was variably termed a super-, meta-, inter-, trans- and hypermedium (or genre) by the various authors (see for example *Mechademia* I). Such prefixes create a negative definition, in the sense that one needs an assumed preexisting norm that this 'new thing' apparently transcends. They imply that something has changed, but at the same time admit that one has not properly grasped what is new about it yet – it is simply 'hyper'. Much of the difficulty of defining anime has to do with the fact that the emphasis is still usually exclusively on textual immanence and the themes, narratives, and visual forms that go along with it. This simple transference of techniques from literary studies is already a long-standing problem in film studies, and of course falls far behind what is actually included in what might be called the anime complex.

In Japan, the situation is slightly different. For the policymakers in the Ministry of Export and Trade and for prominent theorists such as Azuma Hiroki, anime is the extension of what Tessa Morris-Suzuki called the computopia of the 1970s, when the information society was a top policy priority. Recently, the information society has married the concept of cultural branding, the idea of an economically viable 'Cool Japan'. It seems a pragmatic decision: In times of high oil prices and in a country with few natural resources, identity becomes an important potential asset for economic exploitation. When in July Prime Minister Vladimir Putin made negative statements about the steel conglomerate Mechtel, stock prices in Russia fell by 6 per cent. In Japan, when Prime Minister Abe Shinzo resigned, stocks for manga- and anime-related companies immediately rose by up to 18 per cent in expectation of manga fan and foreign minister Aso Taro becoming his successor. Aso is well known for his support for positioning manga and its specific practices and aesthetics as a 'cultural ambassador' with clear national implications.

Festivals

An interesting interaction that shows the complications of navigating through the role of culture as a reference point for audiences outside of Japan is the one between anime and film festivals. One of the early regulators of what

was understood as inter-cultural traffic under the umbrella term of 'world cinema', film festivals were originally an attempt to channel and regulate certain aspects of globalizing modernity. In an epistemological framework that understands the anime complex and the media environment it is based in as the postmodern commodification of enveloping, multi-channel but potentially liquefiable worlds, consistently embedding the free-floating consumer identity at every point, what role do film festivals that stem from the tradition of modernity play – and what role can they play? In this context the question branches out in two directions: For one, how does the film festival model relate to anime and its didactics of expansion in general? And second, how do film festivals relate to the identification of anime and its didactics with the idea of Japan?

I will address the first half of the question first. Initially, there seems to be an obvious incompatibility between film festivals and the anime principle. Film festivals as a medium rely heavily on scarcity and exclusivity. As spectacular events, they paradoxically combine a very public existence with a certain restriction of access to what they are showing. They deliberately create a spatially and temporally bounded event. The festival is something special because the films it screens are difficult to see, will be shown for the first time, or actors or directors are present. On the one hand, they are strangely half living in the age of mechanical reproduction, and on the other hand, are still half feeding off of an auratic attitude.

In contrast, the anime principle is a cumulative but non-hierarchical world builder, focused on creating omnipresence, on being available everywhere and always, in various forms, for purchase. There is no strong preference of sequence: Console games are made into anime, light novels into manga (and vice versa), or manga into card games, and from there on out into everything else. There is no exclusivity, everyone has access at any time, and indeed is supposed to be involved, at least partially, at *every* time. The principle is thus a perfect fit to and an educator about a media environment that prioritizes immediate and ubiquitous access, and indeed relies on it. This type of access also leads to a productive – or at least very profitable – tension between the global and the intensely private. Worldwide multimedia distribution and a vast fan base on the one hand, market and social fragmentation, fan subcultures, and a fixation on hermetic, fantastic worlds on the other. The *sekai-kei* subgenre, with its intense fusion of the public and the private, expresses this quite ingeniously on the level of its narrative.

Yet despite the apparent anachronism of film festivals, in the last twenty years they have experienced a boom and have multiplied intensely. As part of that boom, they have also been transforming. Especially since the early 1980s, they have been affected by what again can be viewed as postmodern fragmentization. While international film festivals oriented towards certain cinematic standards (which can be problematic in themselves) have increased as well, the real proliferation has taken place in the realm of the specialized film festivals: Independent film festivals, fantastic film festivals, silent film festivals, Turkish film festivals, Asian or Japanese film festivals have become the norm. This specialization is of course strongly connected to identity discourse, which is exactly the reason why film festivals have become a popular tool for social activism, leading to a wave of Women's Film Festivals, Lesbian and Gay Film Festivals, or Human Rights Film Festivals.

Now for the second part of the question, how does this relate to discourses of culture in general and to Japan in particular? Especially around ten years ago, specialized festivals for film from Asia and Japan began appearing, very successfully, in great numbers. The festival I participate in as an organizer, the Nippon Connection Film Festival – the largest platform for Japanese film in the world – was founded in 2000. The Vancouver Asian Film Festival was founded in 1997, the Japanese Film Festival in Sydney in 1998, the Deauville Asian Film Festival in 1998, the Barcelona Asian Film Festival in 1999, the Udine Far East Film Festival in 1999, the New York Asian Film Festival in 2002, the Asian Film Festival of Dallas in 2002, the Japan Film Festival in LA in 2003, the Dejima Japanese Film Festival in 2004, the Japan Cuts Film Festival in New York in 2006.

Japanese film festivals are highly successful; nearly all Japanese film festivals have increases in audience attendance from one year to the next. For the very first Nippon Connection Film Festival, optimistic estimates expected an audience of around 1,500 people, while 8,000 actually attended – a scale of interest the festival was completely unprepared for. In this context, it must be remembered that in Germany, regular theatrical releases of Japanese films are very rare as they are almost never profitable. Films from Japan are only released as pre-promotion for the real target market of DVDs.

Not only due to the marriage of spectacle and the concept of culture, there are certain problems connected to the very concept of a Japanese film festival: Simply by staging a Japanese film festival one is not only implicitly supporting the idea of a homogenous and delineated unit called Japan, one is potentially creating a fictional world ready for consumption. This becomes most obvious in the form of anime conventions, which attempt to marry the concept of film festivals with the wider pop-cultural expansionism of anime, but build heavily on an immersive, consumerist community.[3] What might encourage critical reflection on concepts of culture usually becomes a temporally limited, and therefore attractive, shopping opportunity, which is tied, today, to the self-

orientalizing brand of 'Cool Japan'. It becomes a window to the more professionalized cultural branding strategy of the Japanese government. It is therefore not surprising that the way that many Japanese film festivals are designed, in comparison with other specialized festivals, follows the logic of the world-creating anime principle more obviously than those focused on other so-called national cinemas. Japanese film festivals are (like anime conventions) much more prone to include additional performances, exhibitions, and especially merchandising that relies heavily on pop culture often completely unrelated to film. What is being sold, and presented, is a 'Japan package', and this brand identity is a large part of what makes these festivals successful.

Now, granted one sees a problem with this structural a priori – and in practice not everyone does – there are several ways to counterbalance these effects apart from simply refraining from staging a festival for film from Japan. The most obvious avenue concerns the kind of films that are screened: The level of programming. However, the effects of programming are difficult to estimate. As a festival programmer, it is a common and perhaps unsurprising experience that audiences are primarily led by expectations, and indeed the perception of the specific film is heavily influenced by these expectations. As the term expectation implies, audiences usually go to see a film with the implicit intention of seeing a variation of something they already know. Consequently it is difficult to shake up expectation-steered reception when audiences tend to seek films that reinforce their (cultural, generic, ideological) opinion, avoiding films that look too unusual and might have the potential to disturb expectations or reception patterns.

Another area that allows for strategically dealing with the problem of expectations is the influence that the advertising and self-portrayal of the festival has. Here also, there are difficult challenges, as any appeal to general audience interest must at least partially rely on usually biased or highly reductive pre-knowledge. Basically, any potential audience is attracted by what it already knows, or thinks it knows; expectations rely on a certain database of knowledge, which in the case of Japan can often be quite limited and full of assumed patterns stemming from orientalist traditions. Adherence to this database creates the possibility for any potential audience to engage with the prospect of a Japanese film festival. If stereotypes and expectations are ignored in the advertising – and therefore the framing of the festival – potential audiences will not respond and a very concrete financial disaster can be immanent for anyone organizing this kind of event. Apart from the difficulty of conveying the problems of orientalization and exoticism to advertising agencies and designers untrained in the reflection on such traditions, this presents considerable difficulties for any event interested in attracting a sizeable audience. Stereotypes supply high levels of efficiency in communicating with and attracting audiences, yet it is questionable if they can be counteracted by programming alone.

A central problem, therefore, lies in the *structural* affinity of specialized film festivals to a culturalizing anime principle. That may be why so many festivals concerned with Asian or especially Japanese cinema transport the traditional tropes associated with orientalism – if you browse the internet for a few Japanese film festivals and their respective poster motifs you will find ample examples of feminization and portrayal of submissive sexuality.

'Contents'

Cultural branding as proposed by policy makers in Japan is an attempt to take more control over these orientalistically flavored technologies of Othering and to make them profitable. Japanese governments have a 150-year history of navigating very complex identity discourses, of adjusting them according to whom they are addressing; the compatibility between the idea of the Other and certain basic systemics of capitalism have not gone unremarked by any party. That is why so many posters, t-shirts, festival catalogs and trailers for Asian and Japanese festivals appeal to the idea of Japan as the Other, usually as female, and more often than not as a strange hybrid supposedly caught in a conflict 'between tradition and modernity'. All these dramatizations are perfectly congruent with a market logic and the principles of product differentiation – which is also the logic of specialized film festivals. And it is no coincidence that since 2007 the Agency for Cultural Affairs and the manga/anime/film industry instituted the massive so-called Tokyo Contents Festival or CoFesta, a mega-event consisting of a number of mini-festivals intended to encompass every pop culture commodity currently branded as 'Japanese'. The discourses of multiple worlds and liquid identities strategically conceal and support a basic market framework with a monolithic conception of culture and Japan. This is, however, a qualitatively different kind of stereotype than the ones associated with modernity. Interestingly, this framework is obviously strategic almost to a performative degree, simultaneously capitalizing on and weakening the idea of stable and essential identity – which can become a major hindrance for mobility in the marketplace.

So the problem remains on how to deal with growing specialization in the film festival world, and the

increasing need to adjust to a transforming media environment that strategically uses stereotypes, simultaneously building on them and retaining a certain degree of flexibility. Without a question, responsible programming is a dire necessity. It is absolutely necessary to test the limits of what audiences are willing to watch, to stretch the degree to which their expectations can be disappointed. But it is impossible to rely on the individual texts; it is no coincidence that the Japanese government white papers on the media industry almost ironically speak of 'contents' when what is meant is a formally defined and exchangeable product. Festival organizers and programmers must think hard about how film festivals are organized *structurally*, how they can refrain from becoming pure passivity-inducing marketing events that channel a mercantilistically taxonomic idea of culture and instead responsible re-distributors and organizers of network possibilities and exchange dynamics. Even if this is done, however, in the current constellation, specialized film festivals remain a highly problematic endeavor, especially in times of shrinking public funding and growing importance of corporate sponsorship. The most problematic in this regard, and the ones to watch for possible emerging solutions, may well be Japanese film festivals.

Endnotes

[1] That the idea of nation and the specific essentialism it brings are themselves tied to ideas of the rupture of modernity is but one of the contradictions that these discourses attempt to make coherent.

[2] In fact, Thomas Lamarre has repeatedly emphasized the necessity of a more relational perspective on anime, even if it has not been the focus of his work.

[3] Anime conventions are certainly much more suited to the discourses abounding in the "anime complex", and it is perhaps unfair to view them as a radicalized form of Japanese film festivals. The immersive qualities and diversity of media celebrated at anime conventions are also much more compatible with the spatio-temporal unboundedness (i.e. multimedia, serial form) of anime. However, it would take up too much space here to elaborate on the implications of conventions. As this article primarily tries to relate the two principles of film festivals and anime, and (anime) conventions can roughly be subsumed under the latter, I will leave that for a different time.

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