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**Review on Christopher Bolton's *Interpreting Anime*.  
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Japanese animation, more commonly known as anime, is a relatively new genre, having been discovered recently in the West and its popularity started to grow in the past 20 years. We can see the fame of Studio Ghibli and Hayao Miyazaki, who won an Oscar with *Spirited Away* in 2003, or we can also remember the 90's when most of the kids in the US and Europe watched *Pokémon* in the morning, and this started the phenomenon referred as the "anime boom" (p. 16). The book of Christopher Bolton starts with "A Note on the Text", which picks up the readers' interest: he has translated the quotes himself and he currently teaches Japanese literature; thus he is knowledgeable not only in the language but also in oriental culture. His analysis does not barely rely on history; he tries to show us the mentality, and even the national trauma that lies behind and that is why Bolton's study tends to emphasise the importance of war, overshadowing everything else. World War II was a major trauma for Japan: they had to disarm their forces, and they became vulnerable to the USA. This historical event broke the Japanese spirit and pride, and a more popular theme was born. Life during and after war is known for most of the nations and one can understand its weight and sympathise with the casualties and sacrifices. Choosing this subject has its merits, but there are some cases where the topic of war overshadows the aspects that made certain shows popular. The author took special care to use not only Japanese sources, but also Western ones; in addition to Takashi Murakami and Masai Miyoshi, for instance, Roland Barthes and Francois Lyotard, which makes the book enjoyable for a wider audience.

The book has seven chapters and dives into nine anime franchises with great detail. In his "Introduction", Bolton states that his main purpose is to read Japanese animation. The book starts with the analysis of *Read or Die* also known as *R.O.D*, the three-part anime series directed by Masunari Koji (p. 1). Every chapter begins with a short synopsis of the anime itself, this one is not an exception. Japanese animation has its terminology and Bolton successfully introduces different concepts, for instance, the difference between an anime episode, OVA and a full-length anime movie and manages to introduce the segments of the genre. An anime is usually of 21-25 minutes long, including an opening and an ending, and both segments are attention grabbers with catchy songs (p. 1). Most of the OVAs are longer than 25 minutes, but they keep the opening and the ending segments. In Masunari Koji's *R.O.D*, the protagonist of the series is Yomiko Readman, a bibliomaniac who has surrounded herself with books and has a particular ability since she can manipulate paper as she wishes. Like other anime, it is based on a manga series that has the same title. The series thematises reading itself and Bolton's theoretical background is given by Roland Barthes' works. The action of reading is emphasised in the text and both Koji and Bolton have the same goal – to educate the viewers and readers. The writer does not fail to realize small details like how the sheets that Yomiko is using are blank but misses the opportunity

to discuss the desire of owning the book and the pleasure that can occur when it happens. It could lead to the differences between the book collector and the casual reader as Barthes in his *The Pleasure of the Text* highlights (touching upon libraries), owning the books is part of the pleasure that reading holds. For the collector, the happiness lies with the owning of the books, while the casual reader enjoys the text and its meaning. In Japan, collectors have their own space and social status similar to otaku (cf. “fan”). He describes otaku and the postmodern consumers using Azuma Hiroki as it is “characterised instead by animal needs that can be satisfied instantly, automatically, and solitarily. Otaku interest and arousal are so mechanical that they can be triggered by stock female characters remixed from a database of visual tropes to which otaku have become programmed to respond – huge eyes, maid uniforms, cat ears, neon hair” (p. 159). Someone also can be called otaku if they have an overwhelming obsession and passion towards something specific, like art or dolls and as in this case: anime. Bolton often brings in different terms and gives a brief definition, or he uses a concept and barely discusses it, then later he returns to them in a lengthy explanation; see for instance, Freud’s uncanny concept. On the other hand, in most of his analysed anime (*Ghost in the Shell*, *Patlabor II*, etc.), we can separate the real-world and at least one created domain that can be virtual (the internet itself) or an artificial world. In the real world, the protagonist is disappointed and pushed over into a fake reality that they can fully control. Bolton presents the new media’s possibilities using Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin’s argument and shows off the two side of the argument using Samuel Taylor Coleridge who wrote about the subject of poetic faith that can be linked to the otaku culture.

His analyses are full of clear and transparent political arguments as well as historical references making clear the privileged position of Japanese animations. They can be considered cartoons and have the same purpose: to stimulate. These stimulations can be as wild and bone wrecking as the writers and directors please, but we are sitting with a clouded mind, and the author attempts to help us interpret what we see. Bolton also warns us to be careful about theories because they are designed for other media, and they should challenge our ways to understand the art form (p. 19). This challenge is displayed in the second anime that he analyses, *Akira* in the chapter titled “From Origin to Oblivion: *Akira* as Anime and Manga”. *Akira* is an epic film that would define an area (p. 32) and it is made in 1988 but it is still as popular as ever while the audience is still confused and lost due to its complexity. In the movie, the topics of cultural, historical, and textual reading are presented, which incites various interpretations. In this chapter, the author puts more emphasis on WW II and nuclear wars and their effects, and he provides the background of generations of Japanese artists and writers and how they were influenced by Japanese politics. Later on, *Akira* is being viewed as a postmodern work because of its constant relevance and ever-changing interpretations and Bolton makes a strong argument to sustain

his point using Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*. We can see the "grand" narrative of the War as well as the inner political area, but in his analysis, he also shows the struggles of the individuals since Tetsuo's journey and his struggle are viewed separately. His personal illumination – through memory, self-realization, and enlightenment – that he takes into himself is presented as an example of Lyotard's "little narratives" (p. 47).

The next chapter is titled "The Mecha's Blind Spot, Cinematic and Electronic in *Patlabor 2*" and it is focused on Oshii Mamoru's *Patlabor II* movie. Bolton presents a well-loved anime genre called Mecha (cf. mechanical) and two movies that had a great impact on Western culture and inspired such cult movies as *Matrix*. Several of the presented anime focus on technology and its possible impact on humanity while most mecha feature humanoid robots or human and robot hybrids, where the humanoid robots are piloted by human operators (p. 60) and have great importance in wars. Director Oshii's two works and adventurous yet recognizable style is introduced by Bolton with detail; however, he seems to share too many details. In his analysis of *Patlabor II*, he touches on the phenomenon of "absorption" – in this case, technology is the suit that can absorb its user (p. 65) – and he also highlights the individuals' new fear: the fear of the disappearance of their existence. He differentiates realities; there are the real world and the virtual world. Similar to *Akira*, WW II also gives the background, in addition to, Oshii was inspired by *Akira*, but in his movie, he flipped the power structure, therefore the warriors have power and firearm and the will to fight. In mecha, escapism should be pointed out. Reality is often cruel, that's why anime and an alternative reality can give the viewers/readers the power and possibility to change themselves and the world itself. In chapter three, titled "Puppet Voices, Cyborg Souls; *Ghost in the Shell* and Classical Japanese Theater," the author discusses Oshii's more well-known movie from 1995, namely, *Ghost in the Shell*. In addition to the analysis of *Patlabor II* where geopolitics is placed in the centre, here gender politics is in focus. *Ghost in the Shell* is set in the future when technology is much more advanced: there is no clear line between information technology and the human body (p. 95). The female protagonist Kusanagi Motoko is a cyborg hybrid, while her body is designed/produced by scientists, her mind remains human. Or at least she thinks that she is still human. The concept of the human body is transformed, even so, the physical body is lost as they developed the technology to identify the mind/ soul and transfer it without damage.

In the next chapter, "The Forgetful Phallus and the Otaku's Third Eye; *3×3 Eyes* and Anime's Audience" he discusses two anime, *3×3 Eyes* and *Vampire Princess Miyu*, both are OVAs with several episodes. In these franchises, the female protagonist forces to face a choice between the needs of her humanity and the needs of society, including the duties she expects to fulfil (p. 122). The works seem to highlight women's empowerment, however, Susan Napier states that in the end, this power is stripped from them and sees anxiety about

the change of women roles (p. 139). Bolton offers different feminist readings based on Sharalyn Orgabaugh who sees the posthuman potential meanwhile Carl Silvio and Susan Napier centre on sexuality as the focal point. It turns out that neither of the protagonists can get rid of their stereotypical woman role and they are still overly sexualized even if it is about cyborgs, vampires, or shapeshifters. Japanese women are heavily sexualized, especially in hentai (pornographic anime), where women figure even eat up men during sexual contact and both parties getting tremendous pleasure in this act. While the country has developed, sexual urges are deeply suppressed, which results in the rising of different disturbing fetishes. The author mentions the “magical girlfriend” genre where women are given the power of a goddess with a passive childlike appearance (p. 146). Moreover, there is the genre of shota (cf. “young boy”) or loli (cf. “young girl”) where the Oedipus or Electra complex is alluded to as childlike characters are shown in a sexual way with an adult, who is often a blood relative or plays the role of one. In chapter five, “Anime in Drag, Stage Performance and Staged Performance in *Millennium Actresses*”, he analyses the anime titled *Millennium Actress*, discussing the process of the bending of reality. Relying on William Gardner’s, Bolton points out that mirrors in Kon’s films are intersubjective sites where an individual’s self-image combines with the expectations of others (pp. 178-179). In addition, Bolton emphasizes the position of the audience and how the director plays with the viewers,

In chapter 6 entitled “The Quick and the Undead: *Blood: The Last Vampire* and Television Anime”, he shows us a complex universe centred on Saya and her role in a never-ending war and how the series has spread to other media and can be consumed as a big narrative. He also gives a historical and technological summary of animation development in Japan focused on anime. In the seventh chapter “It’s Art, but Is It Anime? *Howl’s Moving Castle* and the Novel,” Bolton gives a summary of one of the most famous directors’, Miyazaki Hayao’s work and compares the Western original book to the anime movie. Quoting Susan Napier, he describes how his (Miyazaki’s) settings convey a sense of organic unity suggesting coherent (if quirky) history and culture (p. 238) and they also help the viewer find a strange familiarity within his art. Bolton contrasts the way how Howl’s evolving castle is presented in the movie’s narrative; constantly changing, yet still recognizable. In the last chapter, he offers a conclusion with the help of Mamoru Hosoda’s *Summer Wars*, where another perspective of reality and fantasy is discussed. The director’s goal was to make his work relevant and deep, while not difficult about intimate, global concerns like family (p. 254). He also points out how anime can shift between methods, themes but the consumer is likely to go on searching for a personal way to understand anime because the viewers are driven by curiosity. In the book, several possible paths of interpretation are proposed such as structuralism, postmodernism, queer theory or psychoanalysis but none

has a monopoly of truth (p. 258). In “Conclusion,” Bolton sums up that “finally, the critical perspective of each individual director reveals something different and worthwhile: Otomo’s apocalyptic politics, Hosoda’s faith in communication, Kon’s optimistically fragmented subjectivity, Oshii’s dire political and technological critique, and even Miyazaki’s stubborn Romanticism each have their role to play, and each sheds light on the others” (p. 258). Anime as a complex work of art has no boundaries and has an immense power to play on different theories at the same time. The reviewer is impressed by the bibliography that is even more useful to researchers, scholars, and students being accompanied with an index of frequently cited authors and concepts.

Anime is often considered a part of pop culture, but Christopher Bolton manages to show us that it can be handled and consumed as a piece of high art. Anime has “clear historical resonances and a transparent political argument” (p. 12) while the viewers seemingly are not dragged out from their comfort. To understand Japanese anime takes hard time and it is difficult to find sources that can serve as a guideline, or steppingstones. Christopher Bolton’s *Interpreting Anime* certainly gives this help due to the author’s immense amount of research work and dedicated enthusiasm.