

The Fan-Oriented Work: Anime Fan Culture as Narrative in North American Media

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## ABSTRACT

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Japanese animation, popularly referred to as ‘anime’, has recently experienced a shift in North American consumer contexts from its initial scarcity in overseas markets to its overwhelming presence online and in physical spaces. With streaming services such as Crunchyroll (an anime-specific streaming service) and Netflix’s selection of anime increasing its availability outside of Japan over the past decade, North American viewers are now able to interact with anime through heavily connected digital landscapes (Annett 6). As a result of this globalized viewership, an emergent subgenre of anime has formed, which I term “anime fan-oriented works.” In such works, North American anime fans become the target audience of North American-created material catering *to* anime fan cultures and experiences. Removed from the distribution cycle of anime content that originates from Japan, anime fan-oriented works divert the media flow (Leonard 299) by specifically addressing the North American anime fan through their own contexts. Using two web series as case studies: *Anime Crimes Division* (RocketJump, Crunchyroll, 2017-) and *Neo Yokio* (Netflix, Production I.G., Studio Deen, 2017-2018), I investigate the variety of approaches that the anime fan-oriented work can utilize in order to appeal to the dual media literacies of both the anime fan and North American, paying attention to the geographic, cultural, and narrative implications that help separate the anime fan-oriented work as a unique development in global media cultures.

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## Introduction

*“Do you know what it’s like to be deprived of that life-giving juice? That ramen-scented ambrosia that is Japanese animation?”*

*“I’ve got a pretty good idea.”*

*“Then you know it’s something you wouldn’t wish on your greatest enemy.”*

*(Anime Crimes Division, Season 2, Episode 3 “Silence of the Fireflies”)*

### Encountering North American Anime Fan Media

In 2018 I was browsing Crunchyroll, an online entertainment subscription website specializing in Japanese animation (anime). This search followed a research paper I had written at the time on how an anime titled *Pop Team Epic* (2018) reinterprets Ōtsuka Eiji’s definition of “narrative world” (108), where the world of a franchise is comprised of intertextual connections made across its individual components. While Ōtsuka’s article uses the example of franchise stickers that pieced together a larger world as more were collected, *Pop Team Epic* used entire franchises outside of its own in order to string episodes together, creating what I termed “empty narrative worlds.” In effect, the series became completely comprised of other works, with its protagonists acting as guides leading viewers from one reference to the next. As I was exploring Crunchyroll for other series that might demonstrate similar uses of franchise to create comedic and yet narratively empty worlds, I stumbled upon *Anime Crimes Division*, a 2017 web series created by Freddie Wong and Darnell Murphy in collaboration with Crunchyroll. Intrigued, I clicked on the title, and realized several things at once:

First, within an entire catalogue dedicated to anime, this series was unique in being live action. Second, the protagonist of the series was portrayed by YouTube sketch comedian and voice actor, Sungwon Cho, known online as ProZD. And third, that the series was produced by RocketJump, an indie film studio known for their integration of fan or niche subcultures into professionally produced projects (most notably *Video Game High School*, which ran on their YouTube channel from 2012-2014). Upon watching the series, I discovered that it was entirely comprised of in-jokes directed at anime fans, from characters eating Pocky (the popular Japanese chocolate-coated wafer snack) as though chain smoking, to placing floating English subtitles



above characters who spoke Japanese, to using clever turns of phrase calling back to anime series that viewers might recognize (eg., the Maiden Abyss where the protagonists discover hostages is named to sound like *Made in Abyss*, a 2017 anime that received the Anime of the Year award from Crunchyroll itself in their annual Anime Awards show, which mirrors the Academy Awards). Naming each of these realizations takes time, however as I experienced them, they were all woven together within my understanding of anime fandom. The series offered a staggering number of crossovers between franchises, fan sentiments, and fan practices that I was personally familiar with. The connections that began to play out as soon as I saw Internet personalities act within anime contexts struck me as entirely unique. I had seen media that addressed anime in terms of its style and its tropes, but never something that had spoken so directly to anime fandom as a frame of reference for an original story. Unlike my experiences researching *Pop Team Epic*, this series did not only market itself towards anime fans, but it integrated anime fan *experiences* into how characters behaved, and how plot points were introduced and resolved. Even more importantly, this was not a Japanese series. It was produced in North American contexts, using North American perspectives and the fan experiences that come with investing in overseas media – in particular, anime.

I was surprised that Crunchyroll had a series in its catalogue that was not an anime, and which featured live actors in English-speaking roles. Additionally, I was intrigued by how the series fit into Crunchyroll's platform through its approach to anime fan culture, and the lengths it went to include fan experience as part of the series' core plot. The immediately apparent entanglements represented by various fan discourses and practices in a single work left me with a strong impression of the series, and this continued to linger over the next few months as I interrogated how *Anime Crimes Division* had intricately tied together the views and experiences of an expansive fan community. The series stuck out to me among other fan parodies or Internet memes I had seen elsewhere in online circles. This one was legitimized through production, displayed alongside the very media form that its audience enjoys, while simultaneously creating a new way of expressing fan culture. It did not merely recycle anime's tropes or style, but *actively* used what the fan knows to drive its narrative in original ways.

My encounter with *Anime Crimes Division* was later brought to mind when I watched *Neo Yokio*, a 2017-2018 anime available on Netflix, created by Ezra Koenig of the rock band

Vampire Weekend. I had discovered the series through popular anime YouTuber Gigguk's review and critique of the series, in a video entitled "Neo Yokio: The Final Form of Anime." The title of the video was itself a very bold statement, and I was curious about what another form of anime (especially the "final form") might look like. I began watching it when Netflix's rotating suggestions featured it on my home page, having spent much of my time on the service watching anime already. As I watched *Neo Yokio*, I was surprised to discover its roster of Hollywood actors and other well-known figures in popular culture providing production and voice credits alongside subpar production quality – a rare combination outside of the star-studded English voice casts consistently seen when dubbing an anime into English for a localized theatrical release. *Neo Yokio* brought anime fans forth in a different light, this time placing more emphasis on North American cultural understanding in its political jabs, brand savvy, and obtuse casting decisions, even within its anime style and inclusion of anime jokes and references. Furthermore, unlike *Anime Crimes Division*, *Neo Yokio* places North American culture at the core of anime parody, imbuing the series with a pointed consideration of the dramatized American culture which exists around North American viewers in their daily lives, whether that be a cynical or genuine understanding of North American experiences (two interpretations which the series blends often).

Encountering these two series led to several questions that resulted this thesis. What is the difference between media that draw inspiration from anime, and series like *Anime Crimes Division* or *Neo Yokio*? Are anime fans *outside of Japan* – and North American anime fans in particular – becoming their own demographic, separate from the fan dynamic they already experience with Japanese anime? What could series like these tell us about the shifting roles in production and consumption? What can they tell us about how we perceive fans? Where and to what degree can fandom be experienced? And perhaps more broadly, what do *Anime Crimes Division* and *Neo Yokio* tell us about media practices and the digital culture we currently navigate? In order to explore these questions further, I have placed these two series alongside each other in an effort to investigate their properties, and analyze how they think of and assemble themselves around anime fandom.

### **Arguing for the Anime Fan-Oriented Work**

*Anime Crimes Division* and *Neo Yokio* create a subgenre that I term here as “anime fan-oriented works.” These can be either live action or animated, as these selections clearly demonstrate. The crucial element of these works is that they depend on bodies of knowledge gleaned from watching anime – and thus presume the anime fan as its main viewership, or, as in the case of *Neo Yokio*, one of their viewerships. As the term suggests, media bearing these traits are necessarily oriented *towards* anime fans, meaning they exhibit characteristics which are designed to appeal to those with frames of reference that interact with or are directly connected to anime fan culture and its contents. They interpolate the viewer as an anime fan; they use filming or animation techniques that recall anime aesthetics in general; they use particular shots or sequences that refer to particular anime shots or sequences (Fig. 1); they refer to character names or tropes common in anime or common knowledge within anime fandom. In exploring this generic and conceptual frame of the anime fan-oriented work I refer to North American fandom in general – though this genre’s purview can be much wider than that, depending on what the object of fandom is or where that fandom might lie. In developing this subgenre, I hope to provide a new rubric for analyzing works that refer to anime fan knowledge or fandom. They are what Ōtsuka would call “secondary production” – production of media objects by fans – but this time aimed at an ironic positioning that makes them about fandom itself.



Fig. 1. In *Neo Yokio*, Kaz’s magic powers reference the *Ki Blast* in *Dragon Ball Z*, a series which introduced many anime fans to the form when it aired on children’s television networks in North America.

A key aspect of the anime fan-oriented work is that its use of anime fan knowledge does not stop at simply recreating an iconic moment in anime for those who “get it,” nor does it use the anime style solely to pay homage to or draw inspiration from anime. Since the anime fan-

oriented work is constructed around the fan, the inclusion of anime and its accompanying styles, themes, or familiar scenes must *always* contribute to how the viewer can incorporate their fan knowledge into the legibility of the series. This distinction does not simply point to in-jokes directed at fans, but also points to the activation of fan knowledge and participation throughout the actual narrative of the work. Jokes about anime fan habits are not simply meant for laughs, but point to anime fan culture at large in a way that helps the anime fan viewer align themselves with the experiences of the characters onscreen. For this reason, the anime fan-oriented work distinguishes itself from media which might use anime as inspiration for character design, plot, or setting, such as how many swordfights in *Steven Universe* (Cartoon Network 2013-2019) reference the 1997 anime *Revolutionary Girl Utena* (J.C. Staff), or how *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (Nickelodeon, 2005-2008) cites the space western anime *Cowboy Bebop* (Sunrise, 1998) through the design of various characters. Rather, they are media in which anime fan knowledge becomes an active part of the viewing experience, where characters are as much fans and enact fan behaviours as those watching.

Anime fan-oriented works do not exist as anime in and of themselves; they are not anime in the sense that they are not originally produced for Japanese audiences and then distributed abroad, nor are they treated with the same interest among anime fans. Rather, they are intended for audiences who enjoy anime. In other words, the anime fan-oriented work is focused on catering to those who enjoy the text by providing entertainment via *context*. The work is oriented towards fan experiences, and is therefore viciously metatextual; it is not concerned with the text's content, but with the overall role that the particular text might play in the minds of the viewers when compared with similar texts. Anime fan-oriented works point to a developing formal media practice of anime fan culture, with the focus of commenting on and enriching the experience of the North American anime fan as a separate demographic. Not only do these works explore what it means to be an anime fan, they also explore what it means to grow up in American contexts. As a result, anime fan-oriented works will often touch on feelings of not belonging to larger culture, seeking out community and like-mindedness, etc.

The decision to explore anime fan-oriented work from North America in this thesis is not arbitrary, nor is it a wishful projection of the direction anime fan culture is taking. My goal in discussing anime fan-oriented work in this thesis is to examine the ways in which North

American anime fans are becoming a separate entertainment market, aided by large-scale financial investments that circulate anime and its industry. While anime itself is not yet considered a popular medium among larger American audiences, its prevalence and proliferation through the rise of fan culture in America with series such as *Game of Thrones* (HBO 2011-2019), *Breaking Bad* (Sony Pictures 2008-2013), *The Wire* (HBO 2002-2008), and other important installments in the rise of prestige television culture provides important context and space for the market to become available to anime content.

### **Developing a Media Framework**

This thesis draws on a wide variety of scholarship in an effort to locate its theoretical position among past research into fan, media, product, and the technical and interpersonal threads which emerge as each of these interacts with each other. Underpinning my discussion of the anime fan-oriented work lies first and foremost in media studies scholarship, notably in Henry Jenkins' *Convergence Culture* (2006) and Lawrence Lessig's *Remix* (2008). Jenkins' use of the term 'convergence' refers to the phenomenon as one "where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways" (2). According to Jenkins, convergence ushers in a shift in the media logic between producer and consumer (15-16), a sentiment which he carries throughout his explorations of various case studies demonstrating conflicting or misplaced understandings of media flows over the course of the massive switch to digital media. Touting phrases such as "zappers, casuals and loyals" (74) and borrowing Pierre L  vy's description of "collective intelligence" (4), Jenkins is concerned with the degree of interaction between consumers and producers, and how these interactions shape the entertainment industry as they adapt to technological developments. As an important through line, Jenkins notes that fan culture is becoming more economically driven as companies find how fan loyalty yields profits (62). Similarly, Lessig invites discussion into the legality of digital creativity by demonstrating the increasingly professional and monitored approach to entertainment (29), emphasizing the 'remixing' of content by amateurs in a transaction of goods and services which he defines as read/write (RW) and read-only (RO), two different economies which define the social and legal outcomes of sharing media or limiting it both in professional and amateur contexts. Lessig's advocacy for the Creative Commons in particular is crucial for

understanding the sentiments and behaviours of anime fandom as proprietary titles become more of a problem for anime fans.

In this sense, anime fan-oriented works function as a logical next step of Jenkins' and Lessig's approaches to the interactions between producer and consumer; they are intricately connected to anime's success as an industry export to North America, and exemplify the rise to industry that fan culture invites through remixed merchandise, creative expression through fan video, visual art, fan fiction, or even cosplay (costume play). Anime fan-oriented works are distinct for their professional production credits – their integration with larger companies is precisely what makes them unique, and it is this relationship to the production aspect of these works mingling with fan interests which so clearly differentiates them. As an overview of media at the time, Jenkins' work invites the opportunity for further research into how consumers interact with their media, which this thesis eagerly provides. However, these authors do not account for the sort of narrativity that anime fan-oriented work expresses, nor do they consider how fan content might become self-reflexive as its popularity increases.

I draw upon Jonathan Gray's work on paratexts in his book, *Show Sold Separately* (2010) in order to understand the interwoven connections to other pieces of media integral to the anime fan-oriented work. Paratexts, or texts which run parallel to a main text as trailers, ancillary material, merchandise, or even fan creations, form an important part of this thesis for how they make visible the links fans form between pieces of media, experiences, and practices. According to Gray, "paratexts are not simply add-ons, spinoffs, and also-rans: they create texts, they manage them, and they fill them with many of the meanings that we associate with them" (6). Keeping convergence in mind as part of the foundations of early digital culture, the paratext has become even more important as the possibility for connections to appear between media have exponentially increased alongside the digital habits of viewers. Anime fan-oriented works are predicated on this interweaving of the text with its paratext, often to the point where a paratext *becomes* the viewer's text. This process, which Gray describes as sediment (125), bolsters Jenkins' discussion of fan engagement in television (24), where the level a viewer might experience a piece of media is dependent upon what sort of relationship they have with the work's surrounding contexts. For this reason, the anime fan-oriented work operates under such

sedimentary conditions, since it prioritizes a complete knowledge of anime fandom among its viewers, but is still legible to those who do not have the same paratextual background.

I also draw on Ōtsuka Eiji's "World and Variation: The Reproduction and Consumption of Narrative" (2010), which discusses the narrative implications of media practice and form, drawing connections between the world a franchise creates and the products by which that world comes into being. As the core text for my work on *Pop Team Epic*, Ōtsuka's understanding of narrative world forms a key part of this thesis in how it maps out the functions of various franchises in the narratives of both *Anime Crimes Division* and *Neo Yokio*. He argues:

The grand narrative (or worldview) found in the background has been, much like the video game program, an essentially invisible existence and not an attribute seen by the eyes of the game's consumers. However, the anime otaku (*mania*), using information outside that found in the drama of each individual episode as a clue, has tried to dig out the worldview hidden in the background. (108)

The information surrounding any given narrative is what creates cohesion for its world. As Ōtsuka notes here, the role of the otaku (a Japanese term denoting obsessive fan, used in English to denote an anime fan) becomes a frenzy of connections, one which can fill in the gaps between installments in a narrative world. This model is frequently used in anime, and aligns closely with Jenkin's understanding of transmedia, where media is connected across multiple forms and platforms to create one overall experience. Marc Steinberg's work on character franchising (2012) also provides insight here, for the interwoven and recognizable trademarks franchises provide. Once again, the anime fan-oriented work develops this concept further by replacing the pieces of the narrative with entire franchises that exist separately from the series featuring them. Rather than tie a worldview together through an original character or a video game, an entirely unrelated series is called on to support the anime fan-oriented work's world. As such, paratext becomes the narrative worldview in a work directed at anime fans, since the paratext holds the possibility to instantly connect complex notions of media literacy with simple visual language.

### **Developing a Fan Framework**

As a subgenre which addresses and critiques anime fan practices, fan studies becomes a crucial reference point for this thesis. Using scholars such as Matt Hills and Paul Booth for their work on cult and digital fandom respectively enabled me to root *Anime Crimes Division* and *Neo Yokio* in their unique mutation of fandom by understanding how the field of fan studies is often researched and written about. From a more methodological standpoint, Hills' cautionary descriptions of the scholar's position within fandom and the fan's position within scholarship is worth noting here for how it acknowledges the integration of fannish ideas into scholarly work (18) – something this thesis wholeheartedly encourages, similar to Paul Booth's emphasis on a "philosophy of playfulness" (8). Essentially, by approaching *Anime Crimes Division* and *Neo Yokio*, I employ fan studies as a theoretical positioning for how the two series are able to speak to anime fans in media languages they recognize, myself included.

Along with an appeal to personal experience, anime fan-oriented works are wrapped up in discussions of location and demographic as well as their fan identity. Here, a significant reference point is Sandra Annett's *Anime Fan Communities: Transcultural Flows and Frictions* (2014), which crucially interrogates the clear line so frequently drawn between American and Japanese fan cultures. Annett's consideration of global fan communities is essential for the larger context of anime fandom, and makes room for its transnational and transcultural interpretations. She argues that transcultural fandom is "lateral and rhizomatic, as various media platforms allow for the circulation or blockage of visual texts and human desires" (5). Annett's account complicates the cross-cultural exchanges of anime to anime fans earlier in its rise to prominence in America. Similarly, Lori Morimoto argues for an attention to transcultural fandom as a way to unite fans across borders other than their nationalities (99). Interestingly, the anime fan-oriented work contests the dampening of national importance in fandom for how it specifically addresses the North American anime fan experience, using geography, language, and popular culture to position itself as a plausible reality for fans. Neo Otaku City and Neo Yokio – the locations of *Anime Crimes Division* and *Neo Yokio*, respectively – are only successful in the anime fan-oriented work insofar as they are related to North American lifestyles, especially in comparison to depictions of such lifestyles in prestige television.

Specifically investigating anime fan culture in Japan, Hiroki Azuma's *Otaku: Database Animals* (2001) follows Ōtsuka's thoughts on the connectivity of anime's narrative worlds,



placing emphasis on the otaku as the one to navigate the space of the database, comprised of parts and patterns rather than a cohesive story. Azuma's assessment of the otaku as a creature of the database speaks particularly to the digital culture that North American anime fans immerse themselves in, whether due to the content of anime they watch or the circumstances through which anime is accessed. Additionally, such works create a database completely separate from anime proper through its multitude of paratexts, wherein a Pocky stick hearkens back to film noir. In his observations of anime through anthropology, Ian Condry (2013) pays particular attention to how it operates as a case study for the passion involved in making, distributing watching, and participating in media. He notes that "...the soul of anime points to this social energy that arises from our collective engagements through media, and as such, it gives us an alternative way to think about what is of value in media" (2). This investment can often cause what Condry terms "dark energy," an invisible push and pull in fans that elicits engagement, even in the form of illegal downloads. Indeed, anime fan-oriented works offer an extension of Condry's musings on anime's soul by creating an entirely different mode of expression that aims to embrace fan sentiments and reflect them back to viewers.

Finally, my literature on fan studies includes Sean Leonard's work on North American anime fandom's history of bootlegs and amateur subtitling (fansubbing). Leonard follows Lessig's discussion of the Creative Commons with the "proselytization commons" (282), a content sharing form which operates based on word of mouth. In spreading from person to person (semi-evangelically), Leonard introduces an especially useful term for my purposes: the "cultural sink" (299). This phenomenon describes the rise of industry only after amateur interest has taken hold of a particular premature market. In Leonard's "Progress against the law: Anime and fandom, with the key to the globalization of culture", he discusses 1980s American anime fandom and how it led to the creation of a legitimized localization industry through the investment of fans overtime. The cultural sink aptly describes what anime fan-oriented work is currently doing for online content creators and social media users, a topic I delve into later in my discussion of celebrity. Much like fansubs and campus societies paved the way for distribution companies in America, anime fan-oriented works have the capability to influence the creation of an American anime fan entertainment market, one which blends anime fan knowledge with American perspectives on a larger and more accessible scale.

I find it important to specify that in discussing anime fan-oriented work here, I focus mainly on the role of *Anime Crimes Division* and *Neo Yokio* as texts which anticipate their audiences in their production and distribution. While fans play an important part in the existence of anime fan-oriented works on principle, these series do not themselves carry the same weight as that of the anime text from which much of their cast, crew, and even comedic moments and editing decisions rely on. This is another key aspect where anime fan-oriented works differ from those which simply reference style or content of other anime. The anime fan's experiences are reflected back onto them through narrative, and thus even with an escapist fantasy of legitimacy, the anime fan is never far from their real-world surroundings.

### **Developing a Celebrity Studies and Platform Studies Framework**

The larger questions anime fan-oriented works pose can be summarized through their business practices and directorial decisions that create the final product fans see. In order to understand how *Anime Crimes Division* and *Neo Yokio* navigate fan experiences, I use celebrity studies, platform studies, and animation studies in conjunction with the scholars discussed above. Celebrity studies as a discipline largely focuses on megastars, and thus currently has less to say on the state of stardom in smaller online circles such as anime content creators (which comprise the majority of anime fan content made at present). Celebrity intersects with multiple functions in anime fan-oriented works. Celebrity plays a large role in paratexts, for example, since familiar actors add to the experience a viewer will have when encountering a piece of media (Gray 133). Celebrity also blurs the lines in production and consumption, creating what I've termed the "prosumer celebrity", employing Axel Brun's term for this unique blend between one who enjoys content and one who creates it. Celebrity also clashes with stylistic decisions through audience recognition, typecasting, and even the reputation of the actor or actress. P. David Marshall's work on celebrity persona (2010) provided groundwork for understanding the Hollywood influence that the anime fan-oriented work absorbs. By way of animation, I employ Thomas Lamarre's theories of animation demonstrated in *The Anime Machine* (2009), as well as his perspectives on anime fandom seen in "Otaku Movement" (2006). Lamarre integrates animation with otaku behaviour, imbuing the anime style with its audience. His attention to otaku lifestyle closely mirrors Azuma, Ōtsuka, and Steinberg, with attention to the more technical side of animation. Despite *Anime Crimes Division*'s live action style, animation

remains a deeply embedded part of its identity as an anime fan-oriented work, and this is achieved through careful editing to remind the viewer of the series' roots.

The final body of literature I refer to in this thesis is that of platform studies. Formal discussions of platform on which this thesis draws include Ramon Lobato's *Netflix Nations* (2019), and Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vondreau's *The YouTube Reader* (2009), both of which collect data, investigate formal properties, assess cultural impact, explore geographic tendencies, and spearhead further research into Netflix and YouTube as they continue to evolve. Accompanying my resources on specific platforms, Tarleton Gillespie's "The politics of 'platforms'" (2010) provides important groundwork for platform's terminology and behaviours. Anime fan-oriented work, as this thesis aims to demonstrate, is deeply rooted in its industry ties, and as such, the business of platform and the user experience on these platforms is crucial to the implications of creating content for anime fans.

### **Methodology**

Anime fan-oriented works are a fairly recent development, and as such, assembling the means of researching them required a great deal of formal analysis, paying much more attention to my primary texts. *Anime Crimes Division* and *Neo Yokio* both incorporate the anime fan-oriented work in different, often contrasting ways. Therefore, to effectively analyze both I investigated how each manifested the anime fan experience, whether that be through actors, art style, the various properties (i.e., other anime) referenced, or the forms of online interactions each contributed to or overlapped with. Using the definition of anime fan-oriented work as a guideline allowed for my close analysis of each series to remain centred on how they negotiate anime fandom within themselves. I have been careful not to overwhelm my analysis of *Anime Crimes Division* and *Neo Yokio* with a simple enumeration of their various appeals to anime fandom, due to the sheer amount of intricately woven references and paratexts which appear constantly across every one of their episodes. Rather, this thesis aims to focus a few key examples of these and interrogate their place within fan, media, celebrity, platform, television, and animation studies. Additionally, this thesis employs thematic and generic analysis in order to negotiate where these series fit in their media landscape and through what lens they explore fandom. *Anime Crimes Division* invites a comparison to the series' roots in detective fiction,

while *Neo Yokio* explores a genre more akin to the dystopian action comedy, particularly in its use of Neo Yokio as an alternative New York.

Moving beyond the content of each series, I also analyzed the platforms where each series is available. While researching, I paid particular attention to website layout, the presentation of media titles on home pages, preview windows, etc. Observing how ‘favourites’ menus operated in the form of ‘My List’ on Netflix and ‘Queue’ on Crunchyroll and how these lists presented and organized themselves was also helpful in determining each platform’s expectations. Ultimately, close analysis of the platforms’ functions was conducted in order to assess where the anime fan is positioned. As an anime fan-oriented work, the demographic is presumed by its creators, and thus occupies a particular space online. Through these methodologies, I was equipped to combine both the physical actions of anime fandom (searching, clicking, viewing) and the narrativized anime fan experiences witnessed in *Anime Crimes Division* and *Neo Yokio*.

## Chapters

Each chapter is constructed as a separate case study for *Anime Crimes Division* and *Neo Yokio*, negotiating the anime fan-oriented work definition through their individual circumstances. Chapter 1, “Fandom Detectives: *Anime Crimes Division* and the Anime Fan-Oriented Narrative Experience” discusses the series through its distinct use of detective characters, tasked with using anime fan knowledge to solve crimes. This activation of fandom within the text combines Gray’s paratexts with Ōtsuka’s narrative world in a way that frames the rest of the series through the firsthand experience of characters who act as guides around the less desirable and bleak elements of anime fandom, a particular elitism that divides the series’ location, Neo Otaku City. Chapter 1 first analyzes *Anime Crimes Division*’s live action stylistic choices, noting its integration of animetic style (Lamarre 5), and its attention to hallmarks of anime editing, despite its clear position as a live action series with live actors. After setting up the stylistic choices made in the series, I move to discussing *Anime Crimes Division*’s use of fandom detectives to create an environment wherein anime fan knowledge is actively pursued and encouraged. Drawing on literature theory of detective fiction, as well as Hills’ description of fan studies research as detective work, I draw parallels between fan participation and the police detective roles of series

protagonists Joe Furuya and Diesel. The fandom detective shapes the rest of the chapter as *Anime Crimes Division*'s primary trait which connects it to the concept of the anime fan-oriented work.

With the fandom detective established, I then investigate the implications of activating fan knowledge, specifically through Gray's paratexts and Ōtsuka's notion of the narrative world. Here, my goal is to clearly link the two concepts together through the centrality of anime fandom, where paratextuality informs the effectiveness of *Anime Crimes Division*'s narrative world. The role of character becomes important here, as they are responsible for pulling in franchises that are not directly attached to the series unless they are interacting with them. Condry and Steinberg's understanding of the anime character as a vessel and signifier of a larger narrative world bolsters Ōtsuka's argument here, and enables *Anime Crimes Division*'s narrative world to exist solely through means of anime references. This is not to say that the series lacks an original story; simply that the story is navigated through fan knowledge of properties outside of the series' original story. After providing examples of anime fan knowledge, I move to *Anime Crimes Division*'s use of narrative world to create a physical mapping of fan practices. Here, the series uses physical locations within Neo Otaku City to illustrate the various areas of anime fandom defined by activity or belief system. This section in particular notes the anime fan-oriented demographic in how it uses physical space to address the various ideologies present in anime fandom. Additionally, a sense of belonging in Neo Otaku City is investigated as a form of legal status, where anime fandom is the pinnacle of model citizenship. The clear geographic ties demonstrated in this section give the anime fan-oriented work a sense of real-world weight.

As a joint analysis of both content and form, I proceed to investigate the use of celebrity in *Anime Crimes Division* through Internet personalities, brand collaborators, and independent filmmakers in what I term the "prosumer celebrity." These celebrities differ from the standard Hollywood use of the term in that they are responsible for creating *and* enjoying their content and its community. Prime examples of this are the plethora of YouTube anime critics, comedians, and voice actors that permeate Neo Otaku City in everything from lead roles to cameos. Aside from their content, these creators are also involved professionally with their contributor, Crunchyroll which sponsors videos, hires voice talent, and even, in the case of *Anime Crimes Division*, funds web projects. In this section, I discuss Axel Bruns' definition of the prosumer in conjunction with Jenkins' discussion of production and consumption and Gray's

paratextual understanding of casting actors. Each of these theories arrives back at the anime fan-oriented work's prioritizing of fan connections and indicates an industry presence within these fan activities. I end my first case study with a platform analysis of YouTube and Crunchyroll, the two websites which host *Anime Crimes Division*. Through Gillespie's platform studies lens, I lay out the properties of each platform, how they are used, how they came to be, and how fan discourse changes from one platform to another. This final analysis contrasts the two platforms in order to point to the importance of fan involvement in locating content, whether through a tailored anime streaming service or a video sharing platform, each one invites anime fan-oriented work in ways that specifically target the strengths of that platform.

Chapter 2 "Alternative Geographies: *Neo Yokio* and the Anime Fan-Oriented Work in North American Contexts" is centred around the possibility of anime fan-oriented work performing in more North American contexts. Unlike *Anime Crimes Division*, *Neo Yokio* is predicated on a deep satire of upper class New York culture. Anime; its style, legacy, and the ability of fans to register the series' comedy based on anime and fan-created anime parodies are integral to the series, yes, however *Neo Yokio* is more concerned with how to integrate anime fan practices into the North American elite. Following a similar structure to Chapter 1, I begin by analyzing the use of animation in *Neo Yokio*. This series demonstrates a continuation of the important connection between Marshall's celebrity and Gray's paratext, however this time it operates through an animated style. The relationship that stardom has to anime among prestige television and film accolades creates a sense of dissociation which conflicts with audience knowledge and necessitates active engagement with the series due to its incomprehensible yet familiar voice and style. *Neo Yokio* both is and is not an anime in the sense that its style and comedy might be, however its context and creation are noticeably influenced by Hollywood.

Following the dissociation of animation in *Neo Yokio*, I then turn to its primary indicator as an anime fan-oriented work; alternate geography. *Neo Yokio*'s alternate geography pulls from multiple sources; New York, Neo-Tokyo, and a universe where the Twin Towers still stand. *Neo Yokio* as an alternate world is particularly interesting for how it uses its audience's knowledge of New York and twists it to create uncanny new monuments and spaces around the city. I draw upon interviews with series creator and lead singer of the band Vampire Weekend, Ezra Koenig, to highlight the collaborative nature of *Neo Yokio*, along with its slightly myopic and bizarre

sense of humour, akin to humour found on social media. Every facet of the series' geography indicates a strange in-betweenness that emphasizes the need for interpretation through North American anime fans, fluent in both the North American cultural signifiers and the anime tropes present throughout. These connections are discussed through my investigation of Condry's dark energy, the unseen motivations surrounding fan activities which remain otherwise concealed. The protagonist, Kaz Kaan, is then analyzed as a potential stand-in for the anime fan, demonstrating his dual citizenship as both a magician and aristocrat, paralleling the dual citizenship that *Neo Yokio* encourages in its viewers through its dual channel paratexts. Here, I bring in Annett and Morimoto's discussions of transcultural and transnational fandom, using these theories to link the anime fan-oriented work to the anime fan experience. The chapter finishes with a platform analysis of Netflix and how its various features such as 'My List' search by actor options, the 'skip intro' button, as well as the platform's recent investment into anime distribution and its competition with domestic Japanese television. Lobato's work on Netflix offers insight to the company's global distribution model, and the ensuing geographic issues that arise through the digital allowances it manages to secure. *Neo Yokio's* very inclusion onto Netflix indicates a shift in anime's popularity, especially on a non-specialist streaming service, opening up the possibility for anime fan-oriented works to become a much more robust aspect of anime fan content and popular entertainment.

## Chapter One

### Fandom Detectives: *Anime Crimes Division* and the Anime Fan-Oriented Narrative Experience

*“In Neo Otaku City, there are two kinds of people: the kind of people who can recite the Sailor Moon theme song from memory in the original Japanese, and the kind who don’t belong here. When someone commits a crime against anime, they don’t call the police. They call the Anime Crimes Division.”*

– *Anime Crimes Division*, Episode 1 “Subs vs. Dubs”

Anime fan-oriented works, first and foremost, exist as a media response to anime fans. With the emergence of a robust English-speaking demographic, headed by North American production and distribution, anime fans and creators within larger online entertainment streaming industries have begun not only distributing anime *to*, but also creating content specifically *for* this demographic. Following Sean Leonard’s notion of the ‘cultural sink,’ by which media arises out of amateur interest and is then turned into a legitimized industry (299), I propose that the North American anime fan-oriented work has surfaced in the in the midst of one such cultural sink, where enough of an anime market exists in specifically North American contexts that entertainment is now created to appeal to the experiences of its viewers. Through increased attention to anime programming in online television streaming services, the use of social media platforms to facilitate the discussions of anime and its fans, and the growing celebrity associations with anime’s popularity in North American entertainment spheres, the anime fan-oriented work has created unique opportunities for anime fan content to branch out from current North American animation, to the point where the pieces of media being created are no longer simply replicating or paying homage to moments of inspiration and iconism in anime among fans, but rather, media is now commenting on and relating to the shared experiences of North American anime fandom.

As a fledgling subgenre of the anime-inspired cartoons of the past decade, such as *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (Nickelodeon 2005-2008), *Steven Universe* (Cartoon Network 2013-2019), and *Samurai Jack* (Cartoon Network 2001-2017), anime fan-oriented work differs in that



it engages more directly with the expectations and experiences of the North American anime fan. Unlike the aforementioned examples, the anime fan-oriented work does not simply focus on the visual likeness to anime; its cel-animated style and character design (seen most notably in the exaggerated ‘anime eyes’), recreating iconic anime sequences for North American audiences, or even more structural observations such as token characters, events, and episodes that occur over a variety of genres. Instead, the anime fan-oriented work is particularly invested in depicting the feelings and histories of anime fans, all while incorporating influences of North American media culture. In essence, the anime fan-oriented work has begun to create entertainment that reflects the experiences of anime fans as they interact with a media climate that is at once more open to the niche culture of anime fans, and yet is still fully incorporated into the North American, more Hollywood entertainment industry. Tying these two ends together, is the anime fan.

In order to investigate the properties and goals of the anime fan-oriented work, this first chapter will focus on the 2017 live action web series, *Anime Crimes Division*, by indie production studio RocketJump, and the San Francisco-based anime streaming service, Crunchyroll. *Anime Crimes Division* offers a uniquely explicit exploration of the anime fan-oriented work, positioning the experiences and knowledge of anime fans at the very core of its narrative. For this reason, this chapter will use the framework of the fandom detective to analyze *Anime Crimes Division* as a case study in the evolving, nebulous landscape of anime-inspired content in North America. This chapter will analyze *Anime Crimes Division*'s role as an anime fan-oriented work through the presentation and form of the series, its exploration of anime franchises, anime fan experiences, the celebrity associations of the English-speaking anime fan community, and lastly, its larger implications through platforms.

### ***Anime Crimes Division* and its Contexts**

*Anime Crimes Division* follows Joe Furuya (Sungwon Cho) and Diesel (Riley Rose Critchlow), two detectives in the fictional anime utopia, Neo Otaku City (*otaku* being the Japanese term for someone with an obsessive interest, used in North America as a term for obsessive fans of Japanese animation). Joe and Diesel work in the Anime Crimes Division of Neo Otaku City's police force, where they are tasked with solving crimes that in any way relate to anime, many of which parallel murders in actual anime series, and others which address the anxieties of anime fans. As the pair solve crimes around the city, they discover an antagonistic

group called T.O.X.I.C. that has infiltrated Neo Otaku City's government and plans on cutting off their anime supply by corrupting the city's recently installed high speed fibre connection. Over the course of the web series, Joe's relationship with anime evolves from betrayal and hate after the loss of a valuable Gundam (model kits of combat robots known as *mecha*), to an overwhelming love of the medium that grants him superpowers to save the city. The series currently has two seasons, with a total of nine episodes, each of which average around a fifteen minute runtime. *Anime Crimes Division* operates under the guise of a buddy cop dramedy, but its tone is built upon a tangled web of franchise connections, fan experiences, and forum savvy that encourages an intricate knowledge of anime fans at its very conception.

Due to its network of paratexts, media theory, and fan practices, *Anime Crimes Division* is a strong example of the anime fan-oriented work, where it prioritizes the opinions, understandings, and experiences of anime fans first and foremost in order to create a series which explores what it might mean to be a North American anime fan through an original storyline. Interestingly, *Anime Crimes Division* is the *only* English-language, live action, North American-produced piece of entertainment on Crunchyroll with a fictional premise. Other North American-produced content on the platform takes the shape of season recaps, behind-the-scenes interviews, or podcasts with the platform's staff, and more recently, a sister project titled *Anime in America* (2020), a podcast breaking down the history of North American anime fandom. *Anime Crimes Division's* fictional narrative is particularly important in this chapter, since the fiction it constructs is one of anime fandom realized as a bustling community, where being an anime fan is synonymous with model citizenship.

At first glance, *Anime Crimes Division* offers little outside of rapid-fire anime references, both in its visuals, and its text. However, hidden under its blatant and unabashed presentation, with live actors conveying a typically two-dimensional style and delivery, the web series reveals a surprisingly complex attempt to intertwine anime fan knowledge, built up over years of the subculture's existence in North America, with an original narrative experience. *Anime Crimes Division* becomes important when defining the anime fan-oriented work because of its powerful connection to anime fans at all levels of its identity as a piece of entertainment and commentary. Not only are anime fans involved in its production, distribution, and reception, but the narrative

itself utilizes the anime fan experience in order to convey plot points and arrive at satisfying conclusions.

### **Anime Aesthetics: 2D Style in 3D Space**

While the centrality of anime in *Anime Crimes Division* positions it as a potentially good candidate for an animated show, one which might reflect back its anime roots, *Anime Crimes Division* is instead a live action series. This apparent disconnect between the anime that inspired the series and its actual presentation brings up the question of form in the anime fan-oriented work; namely that it has the freedom to take on a variety of forms. Unlike animation, live action carries with it the weight of lived experience. Watching actors respond to anime fan experiences gives *Anime Crimes Division* the advantage of feeling more grounded, even if its stakes seem ridiculous on the outset, and this includes the creators' decision to use detectives as protagonists. The consequences and advantages of being an anime fan are so intertwined with the outcome of each criminal investigation that it becomes a desirable skillset.

Because of its live action form, *Anime Crimes Division* has the opportunity to direct its messages towards other like-minded anime fans. The live action filmmaking not only ensures using celebrity prosumers as full-bodied cameos (as opposed to the more common voice over cameos in animation), it also allows the viewer to directly connect with the events happening onscreen. Joe and Diesel are anime fans just like the implied viewer, and therefore they have the capability to express their fandom in a “real” world. Anime fan-oriented works are on the verge of pulling anime into the real world by using the anime fan as the vehicle for connecting paratexts, connecting animated world to real worlds in a way that highlights displacement. The characters in *Anime Crimes Division* are never corrupted or altered into assuming other identities. Despite their entanglement in other worlds, they always remain comfortably distinct.

Conversely, *Anime Crimes Division*'s use of live action provides an ability to consciously choose to pursue “anime styles of editing”, in the words of director Freddie Wong. One particular sequence in the introductory action scene of “Subs vs. Dubs” shows a series of static shots as the criminal drops a remote detonator for nearby explosives. This deliberate “anime style of editing” creates additional implications for the live action nature of *Anime Crimes Division*. In his work defining the properties of animation, Lamarre posits:

The essence of cinematism [movement into space] lies in the use of mobile apparatuses of perception, which serve (1) to give the viewer a sense of standing over and above the world and thus of controlling it, and (2) to collapse the distance between viewer and target, in the manner of the ballistic logic of instant strike or instant hit. (5)

Lamarre emphasizes a sense of rational control and forward motion in cinematic filmmaking, which live action is inherently wont to do. *Anime Crimes Division*, however, uses moments like the remote detonator to subvert this control, momentarily placing the viewer inside an animated world.



Fig. 2. *Anime Crimes Division* employs “anime style editing” to bring anime closer to the viewer.

This blending of styles indicates on a filmmaking level the impact of the anime fan-oriented work, whereby not only the content, but the form of anime is addressed through the medium of live action. Combined with a live action cast and setting, *Anime Crimes Division* suggests that anime is excitingly infectious, both in the world of the series, and in the lived world of the anime fan (Fig. 2). While live action might indicate a lived reality for Neo Otaku City, the filmmaking insists on imbuing anime actions into the daily lives of its residents. Likewise, while the anime fan is called to enjoy their “mutual love of animation,” they are constantly reminded of the live bodies enacting otherwise two-dimensional realities. The anime fan-oriented work is harnessed through the style of *Anime Crimes Division* to visualize the lived experiences of anime fans, demonstrated through how it approaches the properties of live action, and mitigates them with the styles attributed to animated works.

### Fandom Detectives

Using the premise of a crime dramedy may seem an odd choice for anime fan-oriented work, however the genre offers the opportunity for the characters to become investigators. Paul Booth suggests in his book *Digital Fandom 2.0* (2017), that “fans make explicit what we all do implicitly: That is, we actively read and engage with media texts on a daily basis” (20). As detectives, Joe and Diesel are responsible for solving problems with the evidence at their disposal, and this evidence takes the form of engaging with anime texts. Their roles as detectives are important in defining the anime fan-oriented work for how it allows the characters to engage with anime fandom. They are not simply observing or enjoying anime; they put it to use in order to solve crimes. Their position as anime fans is integral to doing their jobs. Applying detective sensibilities to fans is observed and critiqued in Matt Hills’ *Fan Culture* (2002), where he interrogates the current methodologies used in Fan Studies. He touches on the concept of the fan detective during a discussion of fan ethnography done by Camille Bacon-Smith on the Star Trek fandom, where he criticizes the tendency of researchers to position themselves as rational, distanced observers within the discipline. In his anecdote, he observes the following:

[S]he positions herself as a kind of detective, using the conventions of the murder mystery or detective-thriller to frame her account of fandom. She is the seeker of knowledge, the character who will prevail. It is her ‘colder mind’

which is able to circumvent the stalling tactics, distractions and diversions of the fan community. Bacon-Smith's account is one of a world of clues and misdirections, a subcultural fan world charged with meaning. This narrative construction resembles the principles of Sherlock Holmes's 'empirical imagination' where 'the truth is right there to be read on the surface of things, had we the wit to see. Mundane facts become marvels and wonders—clues, evidence, proof.' (41)

Hills approaches detective tendencies from the perspective of a researcher here, however his discussion of using detective-like methods in deciphering the acts of a fandom is nonetheless relevant beyond that of the ethnographic researcher. By likening the methodologies of fan studies to detective work, Hills opens up an important discussion of the role fans play in their own ethnographies, how they are capable of participating in their community. Comparisons between Fan Studies and detective fiction create the possibility of seeing fans as detectives in their fandoms, creating meaning by connecting concepts and 'sleuthing' for answers in a media environment where they are the experts. Similarly, in their breakdown of the detective's use of knowledge in fiction, Keller and Klein propose that:

...fictional detectives possess a rich mental storage accessible at their creator's need for the reconstruction or anticipation of criminal behaviour, for working up plausible scenarios from familiar aspects in the mise-en-scène... Naturally, this internalized knowledge is flexible and must be adaptive; no crime scene can be wholly familiar even to the most case-canny fictional detective. (46)

As fandom detectives, Joe and Diesel are required to utilize their internalized knowledge of crime, but importantly, this knowledge *must* be paired with their understanding of anime fandom. By imbuing Joe and Diesel with the role of detective in the narrative flow of *Anime Crimes Division*, not only are they solving crimes to proceed in the story, they are actively using anime fan knowledge to achieve these ends. As anime fans themselves, Joe and Diesel's encyclopedic knowledge of anime fandom – not only in their media fluency, but also in their understanding of hierarchies and social nuances involved in fandoms and subcultures – become crucial to their positions as point-of-view characters. Joe and Diesel operate as anime fan everymen within *Anime Crimes Division*, and this allows them to lead the viewer through various set pieces filled

with anime references that affect their ability to save lives. As Hühn explains, “[f]rom the perspective of the detective, the traces left by the criminal appear as ‘clues’, possible indicators of the hidden story of the crime” (454). In *Anime Crimes Division*, the story of the crime is committed and solved through anime fan knowledge, and it is this thread that enables Joe and Diesel to arrive at conclusions and arrest culprits. Anime fan knowledge is not merely an abstract media culture with no real-world effects; it is deeply rooted in the structure of the world. Without a deep understanding of their fandom, Joe and Diesel would not be able to perform their roles.

The intertwining of detective and the fan shown in *Anime Crimes Division* highlights an important aspect of the anime fan-oriented work: the point-of-view characters are unable to provide distanced, rational criticism in their investigations because the world they belong to incorporates anime fandom *as an integral part of its structure*. As fandom detectives, Joe and Diesel do not possess a rational and ‘colder mind’, but rather, it is their passion for the fandom to which they belong which enables them to seek out meaning, fill in gaps, and connect clues. In Neo Otaku City, the fandom detective is both an active participant of fan culture and its critic.

To solve ‘anime crimes,’ Joe and Diesel must be able to decode objects and situations associated with anime fandom, steeping the narrative of the web series in anime references which are then equated with real world occurrences. For this reason, Season 1 Episode 3 “The Gundam Killer” features a series of Gundam murders in the same way a real serial murder might be framed. The murdered Gundam is of equal devastation to Neo Otaku City as a murdered human being, since the values of the world deem anime fandom as the quotidian lifestyle. This activation of realized anime fandom brings forth the role of the narrative world in the web series.

### **Narrative Worldview and Paratexts: Activating Fan Knowledge**

A core component of understanding *Anime Crimes Division*’s unique position within anime fan-oriented work is in its handling of narrative worlds, the set of circumstances in which the world of the series can exist. While Hills criticizes how fan-ethnographies construct narrative frameworks to deliver results (41), the anime fan-oriented work delights in building narratives for the purpose of providing the anime fan a world that is specifically designed for them. The fandom detectives of *Anime Crimes Division* operate in a world entirely populated by anime references, and thus the very role of the narrative world requires some unpacking. In his seminal discussion of narrative worlds, Ōtsuka Eiji states:

The grand narrative (or worldview) found in the background has been, much like the video game program, an essentially invisible existence and not an attribute seen by the eyes of the game's consumers. However, the anime otaku (*mania*), using information outside that found in the drama of each individual episode as a clue, has to dig out the worldview hidden in the background. (108)

Here, Ōtsuka discusses the narrative workings of popular Japanese character Bikkuriman, whose collectible stickers each present a small narrative of their own that gradually map onto a larger narrative operating behind the scenes of anything explicitly presented in the stickers; a grand narrative. Discussions of narrative world often refer to this significant trait; the world in question is built up of smaller pieces of information surrounding characters, setting, and story that combine to create an impression of a larger narrative at work. The connections between each separate item appear holistic, and so encourage engagement with that narrative world not only in watching the material, but collecting all of its iterations.

While Ōtsuka's example of Bikkuriman stickers focuses on building a variety of small narratives under one larger worldview, *Anime Crimes Division's* small narratives are comprised of *other* franchises, all connected through the fandom detective, who navigates Neo Otaku City and strings concepts together. As an example, anime series such as *Fullmetal Alchemist* (Bones 2003-2004), *Death Note* (Madhouse 2006-2007), and *Sword Art Online* (A-1 Pictures 2012-present) do not share worlds, characters, or events, yet they are all a part of *Anime Crimes Division's* narrative worldview for their relative acclaim or iconic status in anime fandom. In this way, the small narratives that Ōtsuka discusses become entire franchises in *Anime Crimes Division's* treatment of worldview, where the anime title in question operates as a fragment of that world.

Bringing in other franchises to assemble a narrative worldview by association leads to an equally critical aspect of worldbuilding in *Anime Crimes Division*: the paratext. According to Jonathan Gray, "a 'paratext' is both 'distinct from' and alike – or, [as he argues], intrinsically part of – the text" (6). A paratext most commonly refers to ancillary material such as trailers, DVD extras, or even toys (23); in other words, a paratext is a piece of media that runs parallel to the original source text, furthering the possible connections a person might associate with it. Paratexts will not always lead the viewer to the original source, but can instead facilitate



connections across paratexts, without ever coming into contact with the source. In keeping with the notion of the fandom detective, Gray argues that genres are an important example of paratexts, since they invite conversations about typical structures, actors, editing styles, and advertising techniques that operate as “cultural categories” (51). *Anime Crimes Division*'s focus on detectives solving anime crimes incorporates genres such as the buddy cop dramedy and the crime thriller, while the series' involvement with anime fandom incorporates anime paratexts, such as a stylized minute and a half opening theme song in Japanese, quick editing, exaggerated facial expressions, etc.



Fig. 3. The midpoint of each *Anime Crimes Division* episode includes a visual reference to anime titles through commercial break title cards which occur in many anime episodes. This one mimics the popular superhero anime, *My Hero Academia* (2016), distributed by Crunchyroll.

The implications of the paratext in anime fan-oriented work are staggering. As a piece of media focused on a demographic of anime fans, the entire subgenre is immersed in anime references, from simply mentioning an anime series by name (e.g., “...things are looking happier than the beginning of *Madoka Magica*,”) to commenting on anime language (Fig. 3). Paratexts are not even limited to the content of anime themselves, but extend to the discourse surrounding anime fandom; hierarchies of anime series, the emotional impact of certain well-known scenes on fans, the various fan activities that anime fans will invest in (such as fan art, fan videos), etc. While the breadth of paratexts is difficult to convey, the actual role of the paratext in *Anime Crimes Division* is easier to distill. Paratexts serve as connecting threads that construct the narrative world of the web series. Rather than approaching narrative worlds from the perspective of the Bikkuriman sticker, where individual small narratives are gradually built up to reveal a

vast network under one shared universe, *Anime Crimes Division* uses paratexts to support its narrative worldview by having each franchise or fan practice referenced contribute to the lived experience of those who inhabit said world. The paratexts are not merely references, but realities that are active in the lives of Neo Otaku City residents.

Importantly, drawing on other narrative worlds as paratexts does not mean that *Anime Crimes Division* simply references other works; it also creates new narratives out of these references. When analyzing *Anime Crimes Division*, it is tempting to revert back to laughing at its endless anime references; recreations of popular scenes (such as the lead detective L's untimely demise in *Death Note*, among *many* others), costume choices based on anime characters, and some standout editing which points back to anime source material. However, the use of anime references – the series' existence around other full-fledged media franchises – plays a much more active role. *Anime Crimes Division* does not promote itself as an original narrative world. Instead, it promotes other narrative worlds within itself, and uses these worlds to fill in the gaps of its own. *Anime Crimes Division* employs its references – its paratexts – as a *narrative shorthand* for the viewer, creating a narrative worldview that is not only reliant on other worlds to support it, but one which engages entire franchises as a means to an end. These references are entirely anime fan-oriented, since they encourage a worldview that operates around anime fan knowledge exclusively. Every character in *Anime Crimes Division*, even those who live in the anime-hating Prestige TV City, are only ever connected to the world through how they engage with anime. Entire franchises are necessary to establish Neo Otaku City, where inhabitants are expected to have absurdly detailed knowledge about anime and its paratexts. Neo Otaku City is undoubtedly a world with its own story to tell, but the world of the show is filled with anime fans, and thus requires anime as a facilitator of meaning. In this way, the narrative world of *Anime Crimes Division* can only exist in association with anime. Without such connections, the series loses its purpose. This is the paradox of *Anime Crimes Division*, for while it is an original work, its reliance on references and fan experiences renders it dependent on the viewer's ability to understand vast networks of paratexts in order to glean any meaning that goes beyond its basic premise. In researching the response to the series, I found there to be very little discussion or speculation on the original world that *Anime Crimes Division* offered –instead, the overwhelming majority of reviews or comments remained limited to recognizing the anime

references the series contained, and none of them engaged with the web series as a commentary on anime fandom as a whole.

In relying on its anime references, *Anime Crimes Division* makes one other important distinction in its narrative world; it does not change or play with the content of each franchise it includes. As an anime fan-oriented work, *Anime Crimes Division*'s use of narrative shorthand through paratext is not concerned with altering or commenting on individual anime franchises. Rather, it uses the whole work as a touchstone for other paratextual conversations. For example, in Season 2 Episode 1, "The Case Promised in Our Early Days," Joe's childhood friend is murdered in a fashion that mirrors a well-known anime death: Maes Hughes from the *Fullmetal Alchemist* franchise is shot in a phonebooth while holding a photograph of his family (*Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood* Episode 10, "Separate Destinations"). *Anime Crimes Division* does not entertain the possibility of Hughes surviving, nor does it subvert the messages of that particular death in the anime. Instead, the death is meant to reference the importance of the *Fullmetal Alchemist* franchise to anime fans, and the relationship Joe has with his murdered friend. This goes on to become a lead in Joe and Diesel's investigation, which rewards knowledge of *Fullmetal Alchemist* as an active way of solving a murder case. Here, the fandom detective facilitates links between other franchises without entangling them in the series' original narrative. Following Ōtsuka's understanding of narrative worldview, Marc Steinberg points out in his book, *Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan* (2012), the importance of the anime character in connecting disparate materials and narratives. He claims, "...we should think of the character as something defined not only by its visual characteristics and name but also by its im/material attributes: a concrete thing and an abstract something that travels between things, holding converging and diverging series together" (194). The fandom detectives in *Anime Crimes Division* personify this exchange by pointing to any number of paratexts at once as they navigate the web series' narrative worldview; one which prioritizes connecting a myriad of anime series, tropes, and fan behaviours together as paratexts within an original story based in the basic mechanics of solving mysteries. Similarly, Ian Condry places importance on the role of character in his book *The Soul of Anime*. He posits that:

[c]haracters offer a way to think about anime as a 'generative platform,' especially in the sense that they can exist somewhat independently of the

storytelling to follow. This is important because in the case of anime, it is seldom narrative coherence – the story – that provides the link across media.

Rather, the characters and the worlds provide that link. (58)

Condry's observation of character offers valuable insight into the workings of *Anime Crimes Division's* narrative worldview. For while the character is responsible for linking media together, (as is also suggested by Steinberg), characters like Joe and Diesel seem to only link worlds outside of their own. These worlds surface as the daily lives of those in *Anime Crimes Division*, and are ultimately wielded as powerful tools by the detectives in the Anime Crimes Division of the police. They are responsible for connecting the dots and tracking down the villains that appear throughout the show not only to satisfy the vast network of anime fan knowledge, but to save people. I emphasize *Anime Crimes Division's* reliance on references here because the way they are employed hints at more than simple worldbuilding. Viewers only interact with Neo Otaku City from the perspective of those who are anime fans. Relying on a viewer's knowledge of an entire franchise without explicitly referring to why it might be included as a plot point indicates that *Anime Crimes Division* is designed to appeal to a specific type of viewer: the anime fan.

### **Narrative Worlds: Mapping Fan Practices**

Each episode of *Anime Crimes Division* explores some facet of anime subcultures, treating them as different social groups or geographies within Neo Otaku City. Season 1 Episode 1, "Subs vs. Dubs" dramatizes the debate between anime fans on whether or not to watch an anime title in the original Japanese with English subtitles, or a version dubbed over in English, presenting it as a gang war. Season 2 Episode 2, "ACD\_AMV.wmv" explores AMV Alley, a location in Neo Otaku City where anime fans create and distribute AMVs (anime music videos, a form of fan creation which edits clips of an anime, usually with a popular song added to interpret the events of the series or the feelings of characters), likening it to a sort of tangible black market. As I established in the previous sections, *Anime Crimes Division* uses anime paratexts in order to construct a narrative worldview that places the anime fan at its centre. The notion of the fandom detective becomes the point-of-view character and anime fan which frames the entire web series as an example of anime fan-oriented work. Throughout the breakdown of these various activations of fan culture in anime-specific contexts, the concept of geographies has

consistently lingered. AMV Alley, as well as the Subber and Dubber gangs, represent a mapping of anime fandom onto physical space, the ultimate payoff for the use of paratexts and fandom detectives. First and foremost, *Anime Crimes Division* places its protagonists in specific roles and walks of life that enable a particular worldview: the fandom detective. Through the lens of a detective, the web series maps anime fan behaviours onto realistic settings, and it is up to Joe and Diesel to show the viewer around (Fig. 4). With their guidance, not only are various in-group controversies and activities revealed, the viewer is also privy to the way that anime fans tend to regard these particularities as a whole.



Fig. 4. Joe's old AMV exemplifies the editing style common in fan-made AMV's – a format that is often seen as cringey and naïve in hindsight.

Joe and Diesel's detective work is important to mention here because of how such a role changes their relationship to their environment. In each episode, the pair infiltrate, chase, and investigate the world of *Anime Crimes Division*. They are not merely observers or average citizens, but instead they explore the various levels of anime fan involvement from to the auction houses bidding millions for a rare Yu-Gi-Oh card to the seedy underground gangs that illegally play for keeps with said Yu-Gi-Oh card (Season 1 Episode 2 "Playing for Keeps"). In his book, *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins analyzes media consumption through the terms 'zappers', 'casuals,' and 'loyals,' which seek to categorize the varied levels of investment that a viewer might have to any particular television program. He asserts that:

going in deep has to remain an option...and not the only way to derive pleasure from media franchises...More and more consumers are enjoying participating in

online knowledge cultures and discovering what it is like to expand one's comprehension by tapping the combined expertise of these grassroots communities. Yet, sometimes, we simply want to watch. And as long as that remains the case, many franchises may remain big and dumb and noisy. But don't be too surprised if around the edges there are clues that something else is also going on or that the media companies will offer us the chance to buy into new kinds of experiences with those characters and those worlds. (134)

Much like Jenkins' explanation of the levels of engagement seen in franchises, anime fan-oriented works are also subject to variation in the depth of their associations with anime fan culture. While *Anime Crimes Division* is aimed at anime fans first and foremost, not all anime fans will understand every one of the series' moving pieces. Strangely, the many anime references that punctuate the series are only a small part of the puzzle. Not only are specific franchises focused on to demonstrate their iconic status, but the way in which they are regarded indicates something about the fan culture that exists around anime. Joe and Diesel are not merely guides in a world where anime is like a currency or a language—they are active fans themselves, and each carries with them a set of likes and dislikes, embarrassing pasts and guilty pleasures. Their presence in *Anime Crimes Division* allows the viewer to enter the world of the series at the level of an expert without needing to be one in real life, accessing the locales of Neo Otaku City on whatever level they can.

Returning to Gray's work on paratexts, he explains that these levels of immersion, "can work as sedimentary layers, yet these viewers' responses demand that we not limit our analysis of any text to its topmost, freshest layer. Rather an 'underground' layer may prove to be considerably more important to any given audience member, serving as bedrock to any new layer of silt, text to an adaptation's paratext"(125). Gray's geological comparisons to the layers of paratextuality that occur in a piece of media are important for the mapping of anime fandom in *Anime Crimes Division*. The notion of 'sediment' creates a physical approach to the abstract experiences of encountering media in a crossover state, and is particularly fruitful for investigating how *Anime Crimes Division* constructs its episodes; not merely as buddy cop or detective thrillers, but with an additional rhetoric constantly running in the background—that of anime fandom. Within the world of *Anime Crimes Division*, Joe and Diesel are just as much "an

interactor whose pursuit of the potential depths that traverse the anime/manga/game world make of him (or her) a cooperator in the production and promotion of the expanding world” (Lamarre 153), as the anime fan that the series aims to engage with. *Anime Crimes Division* is therefore unique for how it offers a glimpse into the rhetoric surrounding fan discussions of anime, and runs this rhetoric through very literally by having the detective protagonists experience and contest with it in spaces that physically manifest the attitudes of anime fans. Joe and Diesel navigate and empathize with the rhetoric of anime fandom, its specific vocabulary and position in media cultures, but the series is designed to call attention to a more metacritical lens of the anime knowledge community in all its layers. For example, Joe’s hatred of anime after the death of his Gundam in Season 1 leads to his corruption by the villainous organization T.O.X.I.C., who declares that he is a fake anime fan, implying a level of commitment, knowledge, and contribution to anime fandom that he might lack (Fig. 5). The constant through line of who might count as an anime fan in *Anime Crimes Division* leads to the main takeaway of the series: anime is for everyone. Such a discussion does not appear in the anime franchises used as paratexts, but in forums, comments, and other anime fan activities and interactions, where the status of fan is always defined by action, and therefore creates hierarchies, stratifying the various levels of anime fandom. Jenkins terminology of ‘zapper,’ ‘casual,’ and ‘loyal,’ are equally applicable to the world of anime fandom, however Neo Otaku City specifically privileges the otaku, the *mania*, as Ōtsuka puts it (108).



Fig. 5. The criminal investigation of murdered Gundams maps real-world procedures onto objects of anime fandom, legitimizing a fiction that encourages anime fans to imagine their fandom as a real place.

The metacritical commentary of *Anime Crimes Division* is undoubtedly what the viewer will find when they dig all the way down in the series. As the series progresses and T.O.X.I.C. begins to take hold of Neo Otaku City, who constitutes a ‘true anime fan’ and who might be a fake begins to manifest as physical acts of violence, whether through serial murders or corruption from within the police force, aiming to rid the world of anime and its fans. The concept of true versus fake anime fans is interrogated with the stand-in for the newcomer anime fan, Diesel. Throughout the series, she is constantly shunned by a much more knowledgeable Joe for her poor taste in anime, her meager amount of anime knowledge, and her general ignorance of Japanese pronunciation, anime fan social mores, etc. Diesel is important for how the anime fandom is mapped out in *Anime Crimes Division* since she comes from Prestige TV City and grew up being ridiculed for her interest in anime, a sentiment that is often felt by anime fans in a media landscape dominated by American television (the examples of prestige TV provided in *Anime Crimes Division* includes *Game of Thrones* [HBO 2011-2019], *Breaking Bad* [Sony Pictures 2008-2013], and *The Wire* [HBO 2002-2008]). Season 2 Episode 2 “Silence of the Fireflies,” features Diesel’s shameful past as a “Prestige TV City princess” revealed by the traitorous former Chief of the Anime Crimes Division, in which he calls attention to the isolation she experienced growing up in a city that did not accept her interests. While she has moved to Neo Otaku City, she does not yet fit in, and her surface level understanding of anime fandom highlights her differences even further. *Anime Crimes Division* approaches Neo Otaku City and Prestige TV City as geographies which determine the resident’s ability to participate in anime fan culture, here acting as a very literal form of gatekeeping, where Neo Otaku City, in its worst moments, will not tolerate ‘fake’ fans. The struggle to find community among other anime fans that Diesel represents provides a mapping of fan hierarchies onto physical space that take *Anime Crimes Division* from a web series interested in navel-gazing its own status as a savvy work of anime references and paratexts to an anime fan-oriented work that aims to provide a metacritique of the state of the anime fandom as it now stands.

### **The Prosumer Celebrity**

The celebrity is incredibly important to anime fan-oriented works due to their paratextual potentials in the eyes of fans. Within the anime fan community, a creator, actor, or anime enthusiast can become well known on social media, online forums, and indie films simply for



stating or demonstrating their interest in anime and its associated fan culture. In Gray's discussion of paratexts, he suggests that "the casting and the hiring of production personnel is a deeply intertextual act, as producers bring together a whole host of intertexts through the stars' personae and histories. Many of us create images of a film and its potential based solely on our knowledge of its cast and their former roles" (133). Participating in a production designed for anime fans therefore associates the cast and crew with that media form, which then encourages paratextual associations to be drawn between those involved in making the anime fan-oriented work, and those who engage with the anime fan community. This extends to the anime streaming service, Crunchyroll, and their involvement with the sponsoring and hosting of the web series, which I will detail later in this chapter.

A large part *Anime Crimes Division's* cast comes from a group of Internet personalities and content creators who share interests in anime, video games, and amateur comedy skits. Sungwon Cho, better known by his username ProZD, for example, has built a career in acting and voice acting through producing relatable skits for anime fans (notably on the now defunct video-sharing platform, Vine), though his more professional work involves providing voice talent for television series and video games (the latter of which include many English dubs of imported Japanese video games) (IMDB). Cho's career is not guaranteed to be well-known among anime fans, however his involvement in *Anime Crimes Division* as Joe Furuya, attaches him to other creators whether onscreen or behind the camera. Similar stories exist across *Anime Crimes Division's* cast and crew, including but not limited to: Twitch League of Legends video game streamer Lily Ki, known by her username as LilyPichu, YouTube anime reviewer and commentator, Geoff Thew, known by his username Mother's Basement, and of course, RocketJump's staff who not only produced the web series, but also had cameos throughout (Fig. 6). RocketJump has amassed a considerable reputation for their high quality, subculture-driven miniseries such as *Video Game High School* (2012-2014), which showcases the studio's previous experience in creating literal representations of fan experiences, as well as their extensive library of instructional videos for aspiring filmmakers on how to perform stunts or VFX, available on their YouTube channel.

The various professional and fan histories that each member of *Anime Crimes Division's* cast and crew brings to the series also attracts their fans, which bring additional paratexts into the

fold. Hills describes this phenomenon as “‘fan social capital’ (the network of fan friends and acquaintances that a fan possesses, as well as their access to media producers and professional personnel linked with the object of fandom)” (30). Hills’ concept of fan social capital indicates that there is a form of star power at work in fan culture that goes beyond the relationships set up between the producer and consumer. There seem to be levels of fame that can go right to the object of fandom, yes, however the network of fan friends that he draws attention to at the beginning of his definition is particularly important for how the anime fan-oriented work understands celebrity. Almost as a form of currency, much like the activation of anime knowledge at the level of narrative, the activation of a variety of paratextual fandoms becomes valuable to the anime fan-oriented work for how it is able to frame the identities of anime fans, through their associations with like-minded celebrities, big or small. With such a network in place, fans of Sungwon Cho will connect his voice acting in video games, his comedy skits directed towards the anime fandom, and his association with RocketJump to *Anime Crimes Division*, much like they would connect Geoff Thew’s cameo in Season 2 Episode 3 “Silence of the Fireflies,” to his anime reviews, breakdowns, and opinions on the medium, in addition to his frequent sponsorship deals with Crunchyroll. The exponential possibilities of paratexts seen in *Anime Crimes Division* exemplifies the anime fan-oriented work’s treatment of anime fandom, since the subgenre will aim to address not only specific anime franchises, but also anime fan chatter more broadly, using it as a paratext to support its narrative worldview.



Fig. 6. Anime YouTuber Geoff Thew aka Mother’s Basement cameos as a news anchor for *Anime Crimes Division*, bringing the paratexts of online anime content creators into discussions of the web series.

In his introduction to *The Anime Machine*, Thomas Lamarre observes that “anime tend to unfurl anime worlds or anime cultures that blur the boundary between production and reception, with fans participating enthusiastically in the dissemination of products and in the transformation of media and narrative worlds” (xiv). Perhaps with the arrival of the anime fan-oriented work, the blurring between the producer and consumer, what Alvin Toffler terms the “prosumer” (43), is heightened to an even more indiscernible degree. Such works encourage an increase in media made for fans that have already demonstrated loyalty to a particular media form, and as such, the move to include those already embarking on forming careers out of anime fan culture is both a key ingredient in continuing the production of anime fan-oriented works, and a way for anime fans, commentators, and personalities to create a new cycle of production and consumption which focuses specifically on the North American context, removed from Japan save but for the original anime texts that both parties still heavily consume. In his elaboration on prosumer theory, Axel Bruns develops the concept of produsage, which:

describes the participants in such phenomena as a new ‘Generation C’, whose creative engagement in content development will lead to a ‘casual collapse’: ‘the ongoing demise of many beliefs, rituals, formal requirements and laws modern societies have held dear’ – including, we might add, a good part of the traditional content production industries. This is already evident in the crises experienced by industries as diverse as software, journalism, music, and broadcast, each of which have struggled to hold on to existing markets while finding it difficult to attract new consumers especially in younger age groups.  
(8)

Bruns’ observations of content creation’s ‘casual collapse’ indicates the rise of more scattered, less stabilized forms of entertainment that pair quite well with discussions of the anime fan-oriented work. The celebrity prosumer begins to emerge here; in most circumstances, a self-made personality engaged with their fanbase across multiple projects and platforms. The prosumer celebrity does not only contribute to content creation, they are a part of a larger cycle of production in which they are as much a fan of the content they respond to as they are active innovators of the form arising from their efforts. Celebrity Studies scholar P. David Marshall suggests that “[c]elebrity taught generations how to engage and use consumer culture to ‘make’

oneself. In a number of treatises on advertising and consumer culture, cultural critics have identified how the individual had to be taught how to consume and to recognise the value of consumption for their own benefit...” (36). The changing roles of the celebrity prosumer are indicated in how they conceive of, engage with, and profit from content that they themselves are also entertained by. As Jenkins notes, “Entertainment content isn’t the only thing that flows across multiple media platforms. Our lives, relationships, memories, fantasies, desires also flow across media channels” (17). *Anime Crimes Division*’s rich and entangled paratexts point not only to the connections available to those that produced the series, but to the role of anime fans in engaging with the series. The celebrity prosumer becomes applicable to the fandom detective once again, as the paratextual connections between Internet personalities, anime fans, and anime fan-oriented works have the potential to lead viewers into projects that each member of the cast or crew took part in. As such, it becomes clear that there are no assumptions in *Anime Crimes Division*’s target audience; the availability of the web series, the history of its production, and the approaches it chooses to take when reflecting on anime fans in its own narrative ensure that it is watched primarily by anime fans.

### **Platform: Crunchyroll, YouTube, and Demographic**

Tarleton Gillespie’s article “The politics of platforms” (2010), investigates the term platform, concluding that “‘platform’ emerges not simply as indicating a functional shape: it suggests a progressive and egalitarian arrangement, promising to support those who stand upon it” (4). He later indicates that, “[t]he material platform for physical industry becomes a metaphysical one for opportunity, action, and insight” (4). These two observations of platforms are key for understanding how *Anime Crimes Division*’s role as an anime fan-oriented work is framed when it is uploaded to the two platforms that currently host it: Crunchyroll, and YouTube. In Gillespie’s first observation, the ethics of who is involved in benefiting comes into question. In the second, the platform’s construction seems to offer an intangible future of opportunity.

The first platform distributing *Anime Crimes Division* is the anime streaming service, Crunchyroll. Crunchyroll’s history as a streaming service began in 2006, where its users uploaded anime episodes with amateur English subtitling (fansubs). Anime scholar Jaqueline Ristola has contributed to studies on Crunchyroll in her article on their early identity as a piracy

website, noting how “Crunchyroll paved the way for anime streaming, but largely because it got its head start by exploiting digital labour and copyrighted content. The site’s founders built their success from the grand pool of unpaid labourers contributing to the site, from the original animators, to the fan translators, to the users uploading the translated content to Crunchyroll” (Ristola 21). This complex and somewhat muddled history set the stage for Crunchyroll’s future as the leading online provider in anime streaming, evolving into a legal service in 2009 after acquiring the rights to stream *Naruto Shippuden*. Crunchyroll currently offers professionally subtitled anime episodes (the marketing hook lying in each episode’s availability one hour after they air in Japan), as well as fan forums, an online store, podcasts and behind the scenes staff content, and a news page providing highlights and updates on anticipated anime series, announcements from anime directors, writers, and various North American involvements in the anime market, such as license acquirements. The service was popularized in 2015 and continues to be a leading provider in the anime streaming industry. Crunchyroll is unique for devoting its catalogue to anime, manga, and East Asian dramas exclusively. As a result, *Anime Crimes Division* is one of – if not the *only* – English language, live action, fictional series available to watch on the service. Crunchyroll’s platform is incredibly important in discussing *Anime Crimes Division* for how it is set up to service, and essentially create a market out of, anime fans. Crunchyroll is notable for its North American origins, a service set up with the intention of providing a space online for English-speaking fans to access anime at a time when Internet streaming was just beginning to take off. In this particular hub of anime fandom, *Anime Crimes Division*’s outlier status creates a space to interrogate its role as an anime fan-oriented work within the larger anime fandom. The web series feels out of place among its more popular, considerably more corporate source texts. Here, *Anime Crimes Division* is placed in the same ring as its references; the outcome of this battle is inevitable failure.

*Anime Crimes Division*’s saving grace is its company ties to the Crunchyroll brand. Many of the actors have been sponsored by Crunchyroll in the past, offering subscription discount codes and creating videos that align with Crunchyroll’s current interests as a business. These same collaborators have also been invited to present at Crunchyroll’s annual Anime Awards, a version of the Oscars that the platform developed specifically for anime, many of which are available on their service. In addition, an overwhelming number of anime franchises referenced within *Anime Crimes Division* are offered by Crunchyroll, as if the web series operates (if only

slightly) as an advertisement for the anime available on Crunchyroll’s streaming service. Once again, Gillespie indicates that a platform is able to operate “not necessarily because they allow code to be written or run, but because they afford an opportunity to communicate, interact, or sell” (5). As a platform, Crunchyroll offers the ability to branch out from simply streaming anime, being capable of securing partnerships with the very creators that bring traffic to their site. *Anime Crimes Division*, in partnering with Crunchyroll, opens a new pathway between the series and anime fans that ensures its viewership contains anime fans primarily, which in turn, ensures that viewers will be able to easily connect the content of the series to their own experiences using Crunchyroll and engaging in the anime fan community contained therein (Fig. 7). This appeal to the anime fan experience is once again at the forefront of the anime fan-oriented work, which prioritizes how anime impacts its fans in daily life.



Fig. 7. “The Beach Episode” confronts prestige television by incorporating the Netflix ‘skip intro’ button – something that Crunchyroll and YouTube do not offer, differentiating the way they interact with anime fan-oriented works on the level of platform.

*Anime Crimes Division*’s second platform is RocketJump’s YouTube channel. YouTube was started in 2006 by co-founders Chad Hurley, Steve Chen, and Jawed Karim. Their first video, “Me at the zoo,” was uploaded by Karim to their new online video sharing platform which grew to become one of the largest video sharing platforms in the world (Snickars and Vonderau 9). YouTube’s slogan: “Broadcast Yourself,” points to an early desire to engage with audiences, and provide a platform through which they could share their experiences with others through the medium of online video. The emphasis on community offers an equally accessible way in which *Anime Crimes Division* can engage with anime fan-oriented works.

RocketJump's YouTube channel hosts their previous projects such as *Video Game High School*, comedy skits, as well as their filmmaking tutorials. Perhaps most applicable to *Anime Crimes Division*, however, is their behind the scenes videos, giving viewers insight into how they pulled off stunts, lighting, and direction. YouTube offers a much different approach to platform than Crunchyroll – namely in that “[a]s a web-based host of content with a visible brand presence for users, YouTube may in fact be the exception in the world of online video. Many more intermediaries, rather than setting up sites of their own, instead provide the less visible back-end for streaming video that appears to come directly from the artists, producers, studios, or broadcasters” (Gillespie 8). RocketJump is no different in this definition of the YouTube model. While RocketJump is a production company, they have uploaded their content to YouTube *as well as* Crunchyroll's subscription service, in addition to behind the scenes videos that Crunchyroll does not have available to stream. This particular division of content frames YouTube as a more viewer-integrated platform, one which encourages interaction and transparency. Though YouTube relies heavily on ads from third-party sites (Crunchyroll included), the actual content that RocketJump uploads does not lie behind a paywall. In Ristola's analysis of Crunchyroll, she compares the platform to YouTube, stating that, “[u]nlike YouTube, a site that capitalized on user-uploaded content legal and illegal alike, Crunchyroll's focus from the beginning was illegally uploaded anime and other Japanese media related content. And much like YouTube, the site shifted to legality and larger profitability once it received large investments” (10). The juxtaposition of YouTube with Crunchyroll highlights the former's widely-thrown net, relying on the connections established within *Anime Crimes Division's* celebrity prosumers to bring the web series to its viewers through paratexts and fandom detective sleuthing, rather than on Crunchyroll, where the associations are already contained within the framework of an anime streaming platform.

In a YouTube video of *Anime Crimes Division's* Season 2 debut, “The Case Promised In Our Early Days,” uploaded to RocketJump's YouTube channel, director and creator Freddie Wong signs off, saying:

If you enjoyed this episode, please hit the like button and leave a comment –  
ugh! I think that's the first time I've ever said that in a YouTube video –why?  
Because, I think YouTube prioritizes videos with higher engagement when

they're populating people's subscription feeds, so if you do that, it actually helps people get a chance –and our subscribers get a chance –to, you know, see this thing that we worked really hard on. And I think it's pretty good! And, if you didn't like it, don't do any of those things; no one's forcing you. Anyway, I'm going to be in the comments, responding to people, answering questions...roasting you fools!

Wong's transparent encouragement of audience interaction surrounding the series points to the power of interaction and community building that populates YouTube's comments section. By emphasizing his availability to viewers and fans, Wong harnesses YouTube to engage with *Anime Crimes Division* in a way that is not possible to Crunchyroll. Through YouTube, Wong and his team at RocketJump have the ability to "broadcast themselves" and potentially broadcast to groups that would not ordinarily have heard of them. Gray suggests:

paratexts often construct some of the wider audience's scant encounters with the text, and thus while the show might be a niche or fan property, many of its paratexts (such as trailers, movie posters, hype, reviews, and audience commentary) are not only quintessentially mainstream, but also the mediators of niche and fan entities to both fans and the wider audience. (17)

RocketJump's work on *Anime Crimes Division*, as seen on Crunchyroll and YouTube, connects the series to different audiences, with different sets of search terms, spheres of interest, and levels of engagement. The anime fan-oriented work operates differently in turn; for Crunchyroll, *Anime Crimes Division* is an anime fan-oriented work among other, more popular titles, with little to draw attention its way other than the names behind its production; for YouTube, it is equally outnumbered, but by a much broader sea of content. In both instances, it is up to fandom detectives to follow the trail left by paratexts to locate and engage with the series. The anime fan-oriented work, therefore, operates as a signal tower within the platforms in which it might find itself in order to spur the creation of new connections, and a new cycle of associations, leading to a new form.

### **Conclusion: The Metacritical Fan Narrative**



*Anime Crimes Division*, through its seemingly infinite ties to contemporary media scholarship, offers itself as a sort of master class on media theory. Its discussions of fan studies, paratexts, media studies that have branched from Jenkins' *Convergence Culture*, celebrity studies, platforms, style, and its overall attention to narrative and the relationship a fan will develop with their fandom make RocketJump's web series an ideal starting point for setting out to define anime fan-oriented works. As I have illustrated throughout this chapter, the anime fan-oriented work negotiates the role of the North American anime fan with the state of the fandom to which they belong, providing a metacritique of the ecosystem that surrounds the threads that connect anime fans to anime in the first place, while also building on these connections to create new forms of content that appeal to these same fans. *Anime Crimes Division* is not popular enough to shape consumption patterns, but it does not need to be. Its value lies in its narrativization of consumption patterns and the sentiments from within anime fan culture. It is not in itself an addition to the anime world, but instead an in-joke created by those at the forefront of spreading analyses, commentaries, and reactions on the constantly developing body of work comprising anime since the style's popularization across the United States in the 1980s (Leonard 2). For the reasons that *Anime Crimes Division* focuses on narrativizing the experiences of the anime fan through detective characters, bringing attention to the emotional and communal impact of anime fandom, the web series is an anime fan-oriented work which operates on the most explicit end of the spectrum, making its association to anime fandom exceedingly obvious, while burying it in enough anime fan-specific language and behaviours that it becomes obscure enough to masquerade as an unsuspecting series of anime jokes.

## Chapter Two

### Alternative Geographies: *Neo Yokio* and the Anime Fan-Oriented Work in North American Contexts

*“I am Neo Yokio’s most eligible bachelor. I am the proud scion of a storied and powerful family. This is my city, and I’m sworn to protect it. Yes, my girlfriend broke up with me to take a finance job in San Francisco, but I am still here, in the greatest city in the world. Tomorrow, the cherry blossoms will bloom, the sun will shine. It is springtime in Neo Yokio and life is worth living.”*

-Neo Yokio, *Episode 1, “The Sea Beneath 14<sup>th</sup> Street”*

A pivotal factor in defining the North American anime fan-oriented work is undoubtedly the work’s localization efforts, building a demographic from the already-existent North American anime fan groups that have their own distinct roots within fan cultures. As I discussed in Chapter 1, the anime fan-oriented work largely puts this already-existent demographic to use through its appeal to anime fan sentiments, familiar experiences felt when investing in anime and its surrounding creative outlets such as cosplay (costume play), fan art, parodies, etc. It also engages with critiques and discussions that take on their own fan community in the form of professional content creators, such as anime reviewers, analysts, critics and essayists, as well as podcasters or original content creators who align themselves with anime fan aesthetics or trends. *Anime Crimes Division*’s starting point in the definition of an anime fan-oriented work is particularly crucial to laying the groundwork for this chapter, wherein I will discuss the possibilities of such works to exist outside of the activated anime fan knowledge that Chapter 1 outlined.

The anime fan-oriented work is not only characterized by its explicit acknowledgement of anime fans, though this does make up a large part of its identity. Looking towards the experience of the anime fan, works belonging to this subgenre also work to address the anime fandom in explicitly North American contexts, approaching the viewer first as one who understands North American cultural nuances, and second as one who understands anime fan culture and its contexts. As such, while *Anime Crimes Division* draws attention to the involvement of the fan as a fully functional detective operating in a world which is formed around them, there exist other works whose identities are framed primarily as entertainment

directed at North American experiences, including anime fan knowledge as part of a business strategy in larger demographic circles.

Demonstrating the North American focus of anime fan-oriented work is the 6-episode 2017-2018 animated Netflix series, *Neo Yokio*, created by Ezra Koenig, lead singer of the rock band Vampire Weekend, and animated by Studio Deen and Production I.G., two Japanese animation studios, as well as MOI Animation, a Korean animation studio. As both a contrast and continuation of the anime fan-oriented work discussed with *Anime Crimes Division*, *Neo Yokio* offers an examination of the cultural contexts surrounding media that aims to position itself first within North American media culture, and second, to demonstrate its ability to incorporate the anime fan into these North American contexts. As an example of both anime fan knowledge and North American media culture, *Neo Yokio* demonstrates the aesthetic, geographic, and demographic implications of inserting anime fan knowledge into real-world contexts; rather than creating real scenarios for fictional locations as is the case in *Anime Crimes Division*, *Neo Yokio* creates fictional scenarios for real locations, creating what I shall term here ‘alternative geography.’

This chapter will discuss *Neo Yokio* as an anime fan-oriented work, paying specific attention to its more explicit connections to North American media practices and commentary on American lifestyles. I will begin by outlining the stylistic choices that set *Neo Yokio* apart as an anime fan-oriented work, calling particular attention to the use of anime aesthetics alongside Hollywood talent. This will lead to a discussion of *Neo Yokio*’s alternative geography, analyzing the series’ use of shaping and reframing existing landmarks within its original namesake, New York, and the implications of refocusing existing culture around that of anime fan knowledge. After investigating *Neo Yokio*’s unique refocusing of geography, I will discuss the paratextual and intertextual ties that tether *Neo Yokio* to anime fandom, while also stretching the series across the Hollywood model of celebrity more commonly found in North American media culture. Following this, I will examine Netflix’s role in the anime fan-oriented work, as a considerable investor in streaming and acquiring anime titles as ‘Netflix Originals,’ as well as the possibility for *Neo Yokio* to be marketed as ‘Anime Inspired’ under their category-based recommendation system. Particularly important for Netflix here is its identity as a non-specialist,

or variety content streaming service, the opposite of Crunchyroll's audience specificity and pre-existent loyalty to distributing anime.

### *Neo Yokio* and its Contexts

*Neo Yokio* explores an alternative New York through protagonist Kaz Kaan (voiced by Jaden Smith), a member of high society and a magistocrat (a portmanteau of 'magician-aristocrat'), a group of exorcists and demon hunters who protect the city from the remnants of a demon/human war waged centuries ago, in exchange for wealth and status. Each episode averages around 22 minutes, and follows Kaz, a melodramatic, egotistic, and strait-laced young adult, as he reluctantly takes part in his magistocratic duties while his high society hobbies, and social status as a working member of Neo Yokio strain how he sees himself. Helping him at every turn is his faithful *mecha* (robot) butler, Charles (voiced by Jude Law). Over the course of the series, he butts heads with his Bachelor Board rival, Arcangelo Corelli (Jason Schwartzman), as the two navigate their opposing upbringings. Another lead character, Kaz's fashion blogger friend, Helena (Tavi Gevinson), becomes a radical thinker and sheds her materialistic ways after Kaz exorcised her possessed custom Chanel suit. She becomes entangled in a terrorist plot that coincides with the climatic event of the series, the Grand Prix Formula 1 racing event, alienating Kaz from his previously held opinions of the city, namely its rampant capitalism and consumerist mentality. At the end of the series, clues as to Neo Yokio's much more sinister and demon-ridden nature are laid for future installments.

*Neo Yokio* is quite nonsensical and absurdist; its creative and directional decisions are nonlinear, its dialogue often feels at odds with its animation, and its messages are heavy-handed. Summarizing the events of the show give them perhaps more coherence than is experienced by the viewer, and there are multiple recurring aspects of the series which make it increasingly hard to decipher; consistent product placement of luxury brands including Toblerone and Gucci, out-of-place comedic timing, and lastly, verbatim references to anime both in scene recreations and dialogue choices. Perhaps the most notable aspect of *Neo Yokio*'s quality is its voice cast, which is filled with A-list Hollywood actors and celebrities such as Jude Law, Susan Sarandon, Stephen Fry, Steve Buscemi, and Jaden Smith. The series attempts political commentary while simultaneously providing enough levity that such commentary does little to alter the series' comedic character. The very existence of the series is at once impossible yet meaningful, since it

provides fruitful analysis as an anime fan-oriented work for its unique infusion of exaggerated North American values with the anime form, leading to the possibility of more diverse viewership in its distribution circles.

### **Animation and Hollywood Stardom**

*Neo Yokio*'s relationship with celebrity is its most marketable attribute. The series boasts a considerable number of Hollywood celebrities offering voice talent and production credits, many of whom have previously gathered considerable prestige. Choosing to cast A-list celebrities indicates an important shift in how the series operates as an anime fan-oriented work, namely in how it approaches the media climate of its demographic. As an anime fan-oriented work, the series should aim to relate to anime fans through targeting their experiences and anime fan knowledge, which might involve casting voice actors associated with the anime distribution and localization industry – dubbing anime into English. However, this is not the route that *Neo Yokio* takes. Instead, the series uses actors and actresses who are widely known in English-speaking stardom *outside* of anime, inserting them into anime fan-oriented explorations of an alternate world where status is everything. While Susan Sarandon or Jude Law have prestige in live action circles, and have even participated in a few animated projects (Sarandon has provided voice talent for the Tim Burton 1996 film *James and the Giant Peach* among others, while Law has voiced for the 2012 DreamWorks film *Rise of the Guardians*), attaching their names to *Neo Yokio*'s more niche content creates a certain dissonance. The actors are inhabiting unusual spaces through their association with *Neo Yokio*, and the collision of worlds that occurs through the paratextuality of hearing a familiar actor's voice in an anime is likewise jarring. This shift in focus highlights how the anime fan-oriented work can operate once it is marketed at a wider audience, specifically pointing to North American cultural contexts. As P. David Marshall states, “[c]elebrity taught generations how to engage and use consumer culture to ‘make’ oneself. In a number of treatises on advertising and consumer culture, cultural critics have identified how the individual had to be taught how to consume and recognise the value of consumption for their own benefit” (36). Seeing how celebrity and consumer culture forms the backbone of society in *Neo Yokio*, an understanding of the cast's significance in North American media culture, and, more specifically, of how it blends into the Hollywood accreditation of fame, is key to understanding how audiences may understand *Neo Yokio*'s more North American mode of

address. In other words, the series utilizes its celebrity voice and production talents in order to connect anime fans to specifically North American contexts, forming a bridge between seemingly separated industries, however surface-level this bridge may appear to be.

The impact of celebrity culture visible in *Neo Yokio* extends to the series' creator Ezra Koenig, whose more well-known career as the lead singer for Vampire Weekend creates unexpected pathways to open between his work, and anime fans. Koenig's forays into film and television are virtually non-existent, save for an unreleased vacation film that became Vampire Weekend's namesake. His Apple Music internet radio show, *Time Crisis*, started airing in 2015, and connects in vague strands the various voice acting talents, general themes, and personal backgrounds that are seen in *Neo Yokio*, such as Koenig's Upper West Side upbringing and his interviews with The Kid Mero (Lexy in *Neo Yokio*) and Desus Nice (Gottlieb in *Neo Yokio*). Koenig's connections to A-list Hollywood and popular music would be ordinarily seen as separate from the production circles that encompass anime's localization and distribution to English-speaking fans, however *Neo Yokio* provides an opportunity for these two different media pipelines to converge, somewhat messily, and become associated with each other.

*Neo Yokio's* inclusion of celebrities also draws attention to how it treats the phenomenon of media celebrity within its own text. As a member of the elite, Kaz mingles with high-profile actors, influencers, and athletes, many of whom parody real celebrities (Fig. 8). In interviews, Koenig has mentioned how the character Sailor Pellegrino was a combination of pop stars such as Miley Cyrus, Katy Perry, and Taylor Swift, with emphasis on southern roots and the rise to stardom through record-breaking music sales (Pitchfork). Kaz himself is a parody of both Koenig's upbringing and Jaden Smith's social media presence, namely his Twitter account where he has posted cryptic, peculiar, and obtuse tweets to his millions of followers including statements such as "Most Trees Are Blue" (2013). Smith's activity on Twitter, largely performative and illustrating Marshall's notion of the public persona (290), is a substantial contributor to the style of line delivery in *Neo Yokio*, which features equally existential and disjointed thoughts such as "[w]ho cares what time it is when the future's an interminable abyss of wackness?" (Episode 1, "The Sea Beneath 14<sup>TH</sup> Street"). Whether the cast and crew are aware of it or not, the series operates through the parody of celebrity culture.

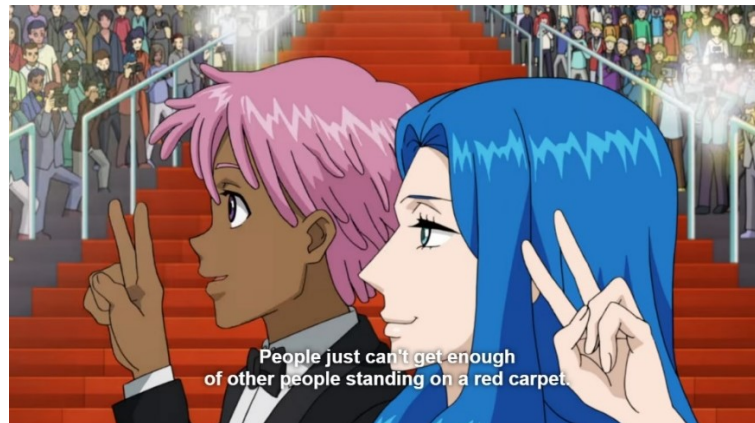


Fig. 8. Kaz provides savvy commentary on celebrity culture as he and Sailor Pellegrino arrive at the Black and White Ball in Episode 2, “A Pop Star of Infinite Elegance.”

Perhaps the most intriguing implication of casting Hollywood celebrities in *Neo Yokio* is how this inclusion of stars not usually associated with anime production contributes to perceptions and representations of *Neo Yokio* itself. The stylistic components of *Neo Yokio* offer an opportunity for anime fan-oriented knowledge to spring up between the celebrities involved in the project, and the final look of the series. *Neo Yokio*'s animated veil obscures the normally identifiable faces of its Hollywood cast, giving them new identities in a world governed by an otherwise similar structure of high society, substituting it with an animated, and specifically very *anime-style* visual reference. This obscuring results in an abstraction of Hollywood and North American celebrity culture more broadly, such that fan knowledge is necessary in order to decipher it. The viewer is encouraged to interact with the fan-oriented work, and exercise their paratextual understandings of the series. Because the voice actor's celebrity status remains present throughout *Neo Yokio*, only dissociated through its bizarre concept, the viewer must navigate the series paratextually in order to understand it. As voice actors, the cast's recognizable qualities are stripped through voicing their animated characters which then creates enough of a distance for disbelief and reassociation with their voices to animation – specifically animation that is directed at audiences familiar with the obscure communication styles seen in online forums or on social media that frequently overlaps with anime viewership and the fan activities that branch from this.

While *Neo Yokio* is an animated series, and might therefore be considered a more apt definition of an anime fan-oriented work since its animation was made by Japanese animation

studios, its form suggests a more complicated relationship to anime fans. *Neo Yokio*'s animation production was carried out by Studio Deen and Production I.G., both based in Japan, and in partnership with Korea-based MOI Animation. Founded in 1975, Studio Deen has contributed to and led production of an extensive roster of anime that spans across all genres and target audiences, though notable works include *Ranma ½* (1989), *Ruroni Kenshin* (1997-98), and *Fruits Basket* (2001). Production I.G. was founded in 1987 and has garnered a reputation for their involvement in science fiction anime, notably *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), and *Guilty Crown* (2011-2012), as well as the animated sequences in *Kill Bill* (2003). Production I.G. has also been heavily involved in sports-focused anime, with notable works being *Haikyū!* (2014-present), and *Kuroko no Basuke* (2012-15). MOI Animation, founded in 1998, works on 2D animation projects, many of which are television shows connected to DC Comics' *Justice League* franchises, as well as work on *Avatar: the Last Airbender* (2005-2008), *The Boondocks* (2005), and more recently, *Castlevania* (2016), as a Netflix Original.

*Neo Yokio*'s association with this trio of animation studios, all of whom have considerable ties not only to the evolution of anime and its eventual success overseas (in the case of *Ghost in the Shell* and *Ranma ½*), but also to titles which have spurred discussions of the use of anime aesthetics and style in North American content (*Avatar*, *The Boondocks*), places the series in a similar discussion of audience, inspiration, and potential for stylistic experimentation within American cartoons. *Neo Yokio*'s style is experienced as “anime-like” first and foremost for its attention to large eyes, brightly coloured hair, flat cel animation and minimal movement. *Neo Yokio* includes a few sequences showcasing high quality animation whenever Kaz unleashes his demon-fighting powers, however the animation for the most part is uninterested and reserved. *Neo Yokio* often fails to sync the dialogue to the lip flaps animated to accommodate for the actor's lines, and this is emblematic of a larger problem with dubbing anime into English, where vocal inflections are often lost due to differing production techniques. While American animation will tend to sync lip flaps after dialogue recording, Japanese animation animates lip flaps in advance and lays dialogue tracks over the moments when character appear to speak. Importantly, *Neo Yokio* is originally voiced in English, and therefore is not altered in the same way that an anime might need to be when it is localized. Such a distinction indicates that *Neo Yokio* possesses the traits of an anime fan-oriented work at the level of production, where the



effect of English dubbing an anime is visible despite the series not encountering the same distribution channels.

In *The Anime Machine* (2009), Thomas Lamarre has described how animation quality is not an indicator of a work's meaning, and he particularly advocates against dismissing work based on its degree of animation (as is the tendency to do in classic animation scholarship that places the most value on full animation). While discussing limited animation (where animation is accomplished through reusing frames), he suggests that the technique “speaks to contemporary questions of technologies in ways unimaginable in full animation...limited animation becomes crucial in imagining how it is possible to live in a world in which the modern technological condition is both irrevocable and indefensible” (183). Lamarre's insight is particularly helpful to understanding *Neo Yokio*'s approach to animation, since it allows the series to be unpolished and yet fully able to be looked at meaningfully. Through limited animation, *Neo Yokio* can exist in a space where the titular city is both free from, and yet suffocated by the constraints placed upon it, both in terms of its animation as well as the roles of the celebrity characters within. As a manifestation of this identity crisis, Kaz spends the entire series caught between competing definitions of his lifestyle, the magistocrat label ensuring his status while still placing him below the other heirs he surrounds himself with.

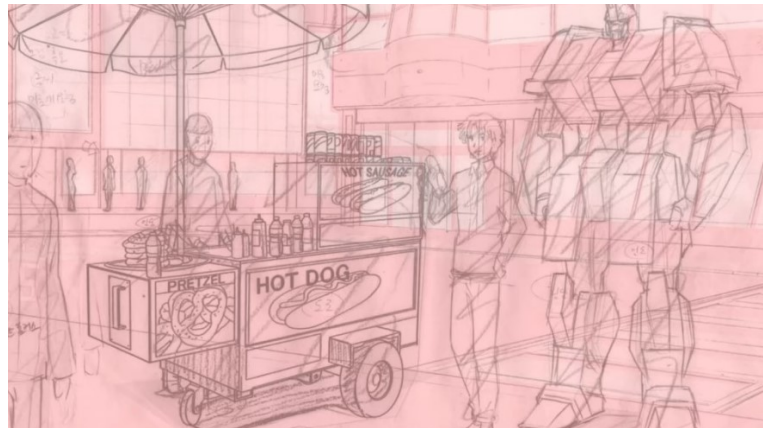




Fig. 9. In the conclusion of Episode 1, various still frames depicting life in Neo Yokio are slowly polished from part of a storyboard to a fully finished, pink-toned frame.

The separation of layers, as Lamarre also discusses as an indication of movement (105), is put into practice politically here, since Kaz's identity as the 1% places him on a different level of his animated, alternative New York (Fig. 9). This is also visible in the eerie emptiness of Neo Yokio, presumably due to the series' animation budget, but also an insightful visual for Kaz's alienation. While he is animated, Kaz also embodies a reality that connects him to his voice actor, and creator. The disconnect between the world of *Neo Yokio* and the reality of its production techniques becomes apparent in how the city of Neo Yokio presents itself, incorporating two-dimensionality to its previously 3D inspiration, New York City.

### **“The Inverted Reality of this City”: *Neo Yokio*'s Alternative Geography**

With a fresh understanding of the roles celebrity and animation play in *Neo Yokio*, it then becomes necessary to understand the setting in which these roles are able to coexist. This section will discuss how the anime fan-oriented work becomes visible in *Neo Yokio*'s city as a more abstract example of the subgenre, with an emphasis on its North American contexts as opposed to its ties to anime fans. While *Anime Crimes Division*'s manifestation of the anime fan-oriented work came in the form of the fandom detective, characters who activate their fan knowledge to progress through the series' narrative beats and likewise reward viewers for their fan knowledge, *Neo Yokio* manifests a distinctly anime fan-oriented approach through its treatment of geographies. Unlike *Anime Crimes Division*'s Neo Otaku City (also bearing a nomenclature which emphasizes a new geopolitical orientation), the city of Neo Yokio is not a nondescript

replacement for any generic city, nor does it aim to visualize the various corners of anime fandom into specific districts. Neo Yokio is instead an alternate version of New York City. In keeping with the anime fan-oriented nature of the series, Neo Yokio is also indicative of a hybrid name that nods to an older romanization of Tokyo as Tokio, creating a nuanced understanding of the relationship Neo Yokio has to both cities.

*Neo Yokio's* alternate New York is complete with recognizable landmarks and the high society within. However, each recognizable aspect of New York is altered somewhat; Times Square is home to the Bachelor Board (Fig. 10), where Neo Yokio's top ten most eligible bachelors are ranked for the whole city to see. The Guggenheim Museum becomes one leg in a city-wide racetrack in the final episode. An entire district of Neo Yokio explored in Episode 1, "The Sea Beneath 14<sup>th</sup> Street," is entirely underwater. While *Anime Crimes Division* demonstrates the anime fan-oriented work through its creation of a space where anime fandom is a lifestyle, currency, and hierarchy, *Neo Yokio* demonstrates the anime fan-oriented work through placing the real world seemingly at odds with the anime it aims to pay homage to. More specifically, *Neo Yokio* encourages knowledge, fan or otherwise, of New York, its position as a cultural juggernaut of the United States, and its iconic place within film and television more generally. Here, emphasis is placed on the location and potential background of the viewer as a North American first and foremost, which is a notable departure from the anime-specific language of *Anime Crimes Division*. This juxtaposition of seemingly opposite results across these two series demonstrates two differing approaches to the anime fan-oriented work and draws attention to how using localized experiences becomes one of the most important, if not *the* most important element of such works. For Neo Yokio, its alternate history, along with its inclusion of magistocrats as a fictional high society exception to the highlighted upper-class culture creates a sense of the uncanny. While Neo Yokio is clearly a stand-in for the real New York City, the absurd handling of its various changes creates a disconnected and chaotic viewing experience, reminiscent of a futuristic, potentially post-apocalyptic presentation of Tokyo and New York City alike, extending to disaster movies which highlight their respective destruction, something which *Neo Yokio* also offers in its latent demon war which Kaz is responsible for keeping at bay. Alternatively, Neo Yokio is reminiscent of Neo-Tokyo, the dystopian future Tokyo portrayed in *Akira* (1988), taken further by the series when Kaz declares in his final line

that “Neo Yokio is about to explode,” echoing the marketing tagline for the cyberpunk film upon its release which read “Neo-Tokyo is about to E.X.P.L.O.D.E.”



Fig. 10. Neo Yokio replaces or alters iconic New York City landmarks, creating an uncanny yet fully fictional world that borrows from anime in its execution of background art as much as in its futuristic, potentially dystopian reading of the altered city.

In an interview with Evan Pricco for the arts and culture magazine, *Juxtapoz*, Koenig stated:

I wanted the show to be an anime because I loved the idea of making it a cross-cultural collaboration. It really helps the idea of creating an alternate-universe vision of reality because you have collaborators free from the biases and neuroses of the New Yorkers on the team. (*Neo Yokio*: Ezra Koenig’s Fabulous Adventure into Anime)

Koenig’s understanding of *Neo Yokio*’s significance as an alternate universe indicates that at some level, the series was not designed to perfectly replicate the experiences of the real New York, however infusing these experiences with anime elements such as animation style, references to iconic anime scenes, and even the attitudes and reaction times of the characters creates an unease that permeates the façade of the real. Indeed, while *Anime Crimes Division*’s use of live action was meant to transport viewers to a place where anime fandom was a common lifestyle, *Neo Yokio* uses its animation, paired with recognizable actors and actresses, to destabilize the world of the show. Instead of realism, *Neo Yokio* twists recognizable landmarks and media forms in order to transport the viewer to a state of dissociation. Neo Yokio both is not

New York and yet also *is* New York, imbued with elements of Tokyo in its conception through dystopia, and yet still approached in a distinctly American way. The America pictured in the series may uphold many similar structures to the America that viewers understand to be true, however these structures are undermined by the false New York and Neo-Tokyo that take centre stage.

*Neo Yokio*'s alternative geography also takes on implications that extend beyond New York City proper. During the final two episodes which focus on the Formula 1 racing event, *Neo Yokio* introduces fictional countries which combine real-world national identities and political sentiments to pose as rivals such as Giappone (a cross between Japan and Italy), French Canada (France and Canada, with a particular satire on the driver being Quebecois), and the Soviet Union (rather than the contemporaneous Russia). Here, the alternative geography is brought back into the narrative. *Neo Yokio*'s uncanny appearance becomes even more pronounced in its mixing of various other nations, with potentially charged global commentary, and in contrast to *Neo Yokio*'s replacement New York's elements with absurd alternative uses, other countries are instead mixed and matched until their defining traits are no longer recognizable. The geography that *Neo Yokio* proposes is entirely imagined, (Annett 171) and yet draws from very pertinent political conflicts, hearkening specifically to post-World War II contexts surrounding capitalist economic models and preserving alliances and identities of that time period. Episode 6, "I'm Starting to Think Neo Yokio Isn't the Greatest City in the World," finally draws attention to the false pretences that exist to uphold the high society lifestyle that Kaz holds so close. While the series has not yet completed this aspect of the story, emphasis is placed on Kaz's magistocratic lineage as a potential original sin for the city, extending far deeper than any political structure.

### **Paratexts, Bedrock, Dark Energy: Nebulous Expressions of Anime Fan Knowledge**

In Jonathan Gray's work on paratexts, he highlights how despite their role as parallel or accompanying texts to the main work (eg., the relationship a trailer might have to its film), the experience of viewing that film, for many, may end at seeing the trailer. There is no guarantee that, in a media landscape with multiple avenues available for engaging with content, that all paths will be pursued. As a result, the experience of the trailer may be only one piece of a much larger bedrock upon which a piece of media constructs itself and may be identified. However, for someone who has only ever seen the trailer, this paratext instead becomes the bedrock upon

which understanding might be built (Gray 17). In other words, one person's paratext becomes another person's text. The paratext, then, is relative to the experience that any given person has with whatever piece of media they are interacting with. For *Neo Yokio*, Gray's understanding of paratexts becomes crucial in light of its nebulous and far-reaching chains of association, many of which rely on the actors and actresses who bring their filmography to the experience of watching the series. *Neo Yokio's* utilization of paratextual bedrock becomes particularly important when discussing it as an anime fan-oriented work for how it uses its alternative geography to tie multiple frames of reference together. *Neo Yokio* holds the potential to be a paratext for any number of anime it showcases. The anime fan-oriented work can just as easily be a means of introducing another text to an anime fan as it can be a means of introducing fans of certain celebrities such as Ezra Koenig and Jaden Smith to anime. In this regard, *Neo Yokio* showcases its collaborative roots that Koenig addresses in his *Juxtapoz* interview (quoted above), to the point where it is entirely possible to watch the series without explicit knowledge of anime and its context due to its overlap into other areas of media culture.

Despite the use of anime style, story, or even deliberate anime references planted in the text, *Neo Yokio* proliferates too many paratexts at once for it to form any cohesive meaning or make itself understood even to those who *do* understand some of its layers. Here it is worth returning to Lamarre's analysis of what he calls "otaku perception," since this bears on the type of viewing practice generally associated with anime:

...otaku perception entails a form of connoisseurship, which demands a new kind of literacy or competency in reading images....demands an attention to production details as so much 'data' about the animation...which has the effect of flattening the image into a distributive field of elements. (144-145)

Accompanying *Neo Yokio's* flat style then, is its paratextual language, and how it can be mined by viewers for possible connections to familiar discussions of celebrity, animation, anime, Internet, and social media culture – even extending to *Vampire Weekend* – political leanings and sentiments towards late capitalist culture, and attached to this, brand recognition. *Neo Yokio's* audience is rarely going to connect deeply to every singly element in the series, however the overlap across multiple paratexts can enable various access points to the story. These become

surprisingly complex due to the literacy that is possible when combining niche overseas media with homegrown, excessively documented popular culture, provided the viewer is well-versed enough in both.



Fig. 11. Iconic elements of Tuxedo Mask, the mysterious hero in *Sailor Moon*, are incorporated into Lexy and Gottlieb’s ensembles for the Black and White ball in Episode 2, “A Pop Star of Infinite Elegance.” Here, there is a direct visual reference to *Sailor Moon*, although Sailor Moon herself is absent.

The shaky ground of *Neo Yokio* as a narrative is stabilized by attention to its paratextuality. According to Gray, “...beyond the simple and obvious intertexts lie a vast realm of other intertexts that any given viewer can reference, and it is paratexts that quite often manage this realm. Intertextuality can play a determinative role in textual reception, and paratexts frequently conjure up and summon intertexts” (141). The importance of paratexts to *Neo Yokio* cannot be overstated. The series is saturated in paratexts from two very different media traditions, Hollywood’s cycle of production and celebrity, and the cycle of production that anime undergoes upon its entry into North America. The ability of one paratext to aid in the recollection of a potential intertext is the lifeblood that *Neo Yokio* subsists on (Fig. 11). Due to its tendency to reference anime iconism within recognizable English-speaking voice talents, and the more noticeable North American contexts that permeate the series, the constant crossfire of North American culture and Japanese anime becomes overwhelming and destabilizing, while simultaneously carving out a place in media circulation for a possible future in combining these media forms in order to create additions to the anime fan-oriented work. The additional offbeat humour and Twitter-inspired line delivery adds another level of engagement to *Neo Yokio* that also must account for the cast and crew’s engagement on social media. A notable example of this

is *Neo Yokio*'s official Twitter account, which consists mostly of lines from the series (Fig. 12). The social media branding of *Neo Yokio* is particularly noteworthy here for how each quote used in a tweet seems to work independent of its existence as dialogue in the series, and does not necessarily need to point to more in order to be seen as a complete statement in the context of social media interactions. However, despite the ability for *Neo Yokio*'s tweets to remain separate and amusing pieces of obscure thoughts, the tweets do ultimately tie to a larger context, and can thus act as the text or paratext to those who interact with them online.



Fig. 12. *Neo Yokio*'s Twitter-like script becomes the content for the series' official Twitter page.

*Neo Yokio*'s relationship to its paratexts, its lack of visible, or even simple relationships between its various components, and its resulting identity as an anime fan-oriented work is treated rather like a narrative foil; in order to be understood, the parts that make up the work much be contrasted against each other in order to discern what they accomplish for the series. For example, Kaz's obsession with high society and the eventual transformation of his opinions towards upper class values takes on additional value when viewing it next to the real capitalist anxieties of young adults in America. Kaz's trip to visit his future grave in Episode 1, and the conversation he has with an old man about using Babylon N°5 on his wife's grave fits discussions of trends and youth culture, however this is disrupted when Charles offers to manufacture other perfumes on the spot and flies off shortly afterwards with Kaz. This reminds the viewers of the more futuristic implications of a mecha-butler, and of the mecha genre in anime including the *Gundam* series, a mecha franchise dating back to 1979, and *Eureka Seven*



(2005) (particularly in its colour scheme). This episode also recalls Jude Law and Jaden Smith's respective filmographies, branding, and online presences. *Neo Yokio*, in incorporating so many different paratexts, creates a seemingly infinite array of potential readings, which involve both anime fan culture and North American culture in both critical and entertaining ways. Often, these pieces are better understood in conjunction with one another, since the amount of potential paratextual readings is too great for each to properly hold their own. Koenig explained in an interview, “[w]e have an entire episode that’s a tribute to *Ranma ½* and *Gossip Girl* [Episode 4, “Hamptons Water Magic”]. I was thinking about that the other day. How many people in the world deeply f\*ck with *Ranma ½* and *Gossip Girl*? How big is the middle of that Venn diagram? Who knows? Maybe bigger than I think” (*Complex*). This quote demonstrates the strange, and perhaps unlikely intersection between North American media culture and anime fandom that *Neo Yokio* creates.

As an anime fan-oriented work, *Neo Yokio* does much of its paratextual and fan-oriented work in the margins of the happenings in its episodes. This summoning of something not immediately visible is reminiscent of Ian Condry’s allusion to ‘dark energy’, where he defines it as:

...a reference to the hidden cosmological force pushing apart the galaxies of our universe; the effects are observable, but the source is poorly explained by our current theory. Similarly, the dark energy of fandom is measurable but poorly explained by theories of economic motivation. We might think of fandom’s dark energy as a collection of social forces that enlivens the connections between content and desire, which in turn helps drive the circulation of media products. (163)

Similar to discussions of Leonard’s cultural sink in Chapter 1, dark energy is an evocative framework through which non-tangible media phenomena can be approached and analyzed, such as the intersection of social media communication practices with anime aesthetics, commonplace in *Neo Yokio*. Dark energy, “evokes the larger, flowing system, not just the element that can be packaged and sold” (164). Here, Condry’s observations apply in particular to the energy visible in fan involvement, something that becomes invaluable to understanding *Neo Yokio*’s impact on its viewers. For *Neo Yokio*, engaging in and anticipating anime fan involvement is a crucial part

of connecting the series to the larger media landscape around it; the connection that *Neo Yokio* has to its various potential audiences plays out through paratext. Paul Booth likewise suggests the existence of a narrative database, which “forms from the complex interaction of the audience within the serial narrative, not via an external narrator, but through the connections made by members of the fan community” (93). This dark energy permeates the structure of *Neo Yokio*, so much so that the series would become indecipherable if it were not for the obscure product placement, the occasional familiar voice, or direct references to anime such as *Sailor Moon*, *Ranma ½*, *Akira*, *Ghost in the Shell*, etc. Fans’ dark energy of interpretation (to expand on Condry’s formulation) is essential to the enjoyment of the show. This means that understanding dark energy in relation to *Neo Yokio* and its implicit handling of anime fan knowledge and practices becomes crucial to pinpointing the essence of the series, including its otherwise disappointing line delivery, editing, and visual humour.

On a narrative level, the dark energy in *Neo Yokio* appears in the form of the magistocratic struggle to hunt down and exorcise the demons that slink around the city. Described as surfacing from “origins unknown” (Episode 1, “The Sea Beneath 14<sup>th</sup> Street”), the existence of demons in *Neo Yokio*’s world colours all of Kaz’s exchanges and relationships with those around him. From rivals to his mecha-butler, Kaz’s magistocratic lineage keeps him connected to a dark energy which both allows him to exist, and yet condemns his desires. This push and pull hints at further developments within Kaz. Invisible, save for the moment when they inhabit a person or object, the demons in *Neo Yokio* can only be fought once their surroundings have exposed them even for the slightest moment. They hint at an entirely separate layer to the world of *Neo Yokio* that aims to narrativize the particularities of American life, however, they also serve as a direct connection to Kaz and his magistocratic anxieties. The symbiotic relationship he has with the demons infesting Neo Yokio map a narrative purpose onto the paratextual threads that dark energy exposes through its joining of disparate source material, brought together by the fan, but equally at odds with itself because of those same fans.

### **The Magistocrat as Fan**

Alternative geographies shape the role of the anime fan in *Neo Yokio* first and foremost by location-based experiences, and this in turn influences the position of the viewer during the events of the series. While *Anime Crimes Division*’s fan identity lies in aligning the viewer as a

participant in anime fandom and its various subcultures, *Neo Yokio*'s fan identity is tied to the tensions that arise once the familiar, real locations exhibited in the series come into conflict with the imaginative logic systems that occur in fantasy or science fiction anime. This means that the fan identity *Neo Yokio*'s iteration of anime fan-oriented work proposes is tied to the geographic roots of both its creators and viewers, a position which steers the orientation of the anime fan towards their culture of origin, simultaneously inflecting the work with paratextual understandings of anime and its fan culture. The issue of geography, on the level of individual nations as well as less rigid fan communities, is put into conflict. This highlights what Sandra Annett describes as the "flows and frictions" which arise out of a transcultural approach found in media produced in the digital age. This also complicates understandings of production cycles, methods of engagement, and the connections formed between media (Annett 3). At the eye of the anime fan-oriented storm lies the anime fan.

*Neo Yokio* does not easily point to the fan's place in its narrative, however, nor does it give specific instructions to the viewer in its many paratexts for how to go about relating to it. The role of the viewer here is split between two sets of references: to anime fan culture and to the more popular Hollywood culture. *Neo Yokio*'s viewers are caught between two different paths and media formations. They are expected to perform a balancing act between catching references to anime and catching references to Hollywood or North American popular culture, throughout the series' run. Viewers must therefore learn to occupy a form of dual citizenship or a transnational viewer position, between Hollywood and anime fandom. They navigate the two positions via identification with the series protagonist, Kaz.

*Neo Yokio* exhibits the push and pull of its various fan identities through the eyes of Kaz, specifically in the negotiations of his magistocratic status. It is in the role of the magistocrat, rather than the fandom detective of Chapter 1, that *Neo Yokio* finds its footing and makes room for its viewer. As a magistocrat, Kaz's lineage and ancestry, as well as the consequences the title has upon the societal structure of his present, weighs heavily on him. He is neither here nor there, and spends the majority of the series in ideological limbo, at odds with Helena and Aunt Agatha specifically for their firm sociopolitical beliefs. Kaz' magistocracy walks a fine line between the Hollywood popular culture and anime fan culture that make up *Neo Yokio*'s alternative history, and through drawing on these cultures, Kaz has the opportunity to mingle in groups that he might

not otherwise be able to interact with. It is for this reason that through *Neo Yokio*, the anime fan might be seen as a magistocrat themselves. The fan position seen through *Neo Yokio* depicts anime fans as both belonging to, and yet very distinctly separate from American culture. However, as much as an anime fan might not be wholly connected to American culture and its media production cycle, they may have nonetheless grown up with various deep-rooted exposures to the tendencies and practices of American culture. Echoing this split sense of belonging, *Neo Yokio* is able to cater to and market itself as anime, however this particular skillset is not enough to get the viewer through the series in all its complexities. Additional knowledge must be obtained in order to make sense of *Neo Yokio*, a sometimes challenging feat. Likewise, Kaz' high society social circles and hobbies provide him access to the wider pleasures of Neo Yokio, however his exorcist profession leads to conflict in how he is able to view the circumstances around him. In Episode 2, "A Pop Star of Infinite Elegance," Kaz attends the Black and White Ball not as a guest, as he originally had hoped, but as a security detail to protect guests against potential demon activity.



Fig. 13. Kaz demonstrates transcultural fandom through his magistocratic status, bringing together two alternative viewpoints to interpret his identity.

As he is forced to watch his own social circle enjoy their evening, his position as an outsider is visualized by means of his balcony lookout as he peers through binoculars at his friends enjoying the evening without him (Fig. 13). Kaz is at odds with himself for how his magistocratic status provides a rare alternative view of high society pleasure, while also limiting how he can interact with his own interests. Kaz therefore demonstrates a straddling of two completely different sets of cultural literacy. Indeed, the very word 'magistocrat,' a hybrid of

‘magician’ and ‘aristocrat,’ points to frictions at its inception, made clear in the series’ understanding of magicians as outcasts. In this way, Kaz’s fan identity can be seen as crossing and flowing over borders, while also adhering closely to his homegrown worldview. Two terms best describe these approaches: transnational and transcultural fandom.

Recent scholarship has questioned the distinction between transnational and transcultural fandom as methodologies within Fan Studies. Transnational fandom operates on geographic points of entry into various forms of media, such as the example of American anime fans. Transnational fandom tends to emphasize the role of borders and their crossings, identifying people groups based on location (Annett 9). Transcultural fandom on the other hand emphasizes connections among people groups which do not relate or are less restricted by national identity. In her work on transcultural fandom, Lori Morimoto suggests the following definition:

[transcultural fandom] frees fandom from the constraints of national belonging, reinforcing our contention that fans become fans of border-crossing texts or objects not necessarily because of where they are produced, but because they may recognise a subjective moment of affinity regardless of origin. This is not to say that the nation is unimportant, but rather that it is but one of a constellation of possible points of affinity upon which transcultural fandom may be predicated. Nation-based differences or similarities may well appeal to people across borders; but so, too, might affective investments in characters, stories, and even fan subjectivities that exceed any national orientation. (99)

As the fan surrogate, Kaz identifies with others through his interests in fashion and luxury food, implying a transcultural attitude seen in anime fans. However, he is likewise unable to connect to those who do not have the same value system as he does, the primary example in the series being his admiration of Neo Yokio. As he comes into conflict with the more radical Helena, Kaz’s worldview and how he interacts with others is thrown out of balance. I mention transcultural and transnational fandom here because of its oddly equal split not only in how the series approaches its influences and production, but also its equal split in Kaz’s own character motivations. There exists in Kaz, a friction between his two identities which is similarly mapped onto the anime fan. While the series is certainly transcultural, drawing from a multitude of online communities perhaps more so than in-person people groups, it also exhibits the aforementioned unique

relationship with the concept of nationhood through its alternative geography. These tensions between the location of culture and the location of demographic are large contributors to the anime fan-oriented work.

Lastly, it is important to mention here that *Neo Yokio* demonstrates, in its straddling of two very different landscapes of paratext, that there exists the possibility of joining North American lifestyles to that of anime fan culture. As an anime fan-oriented work, *Neo Yokio* creates an attainable approach to combining Hollywood and anime styles while separating such attempts from previous anime-inspired content (which responds to anime in its style, but not in its address of the fandom surrounding it). After all, the North American anime fan-oriented work can only exist through creating media narratives that address experiences, lifestyles, humour, and cultural referents that appeal to the realities of anime fans whose cultural contexts arise from North American media. Turning once again to Condry's understanding of dark energy, the emergence of fan positions through friction enables the fan to make visible otherwise invisible flows that enable anime fan-oriented works to occupy space within less anime-specific contexts, and instead speak to North American audiences with their cultural background in mind. This "social energy" (184) is precisely what makes *Neo Yokio* enigmatic insofar as it is meant for anime fans that happen to cooperate with its similarly fannish sentiments towards Hollywood, New York, and the production responsible for creating it.

### **Netflix Audiences and Digital Geographies**

Kaz's role as someone both within American culture and yet decidedly separated from it through his magistocracy points to the position of North American anime fans as those who also navigate two different media landscapes. Such landscapes are not only addressed in the question of demographics and fan culture, but surface in literal ways through *Neo Yokio*'s distributor, Netflix. The online video rental mailing service turned largest film and television streaming service hit its stride streaming content in 2007, challenging, then overturning the video rental industry which had dominated home access to video until the 2010s. While *Anime Crimes Division* was distributed on Crunchyroll, an anime-specific online streaming service, *Neo Yokio* is exclusively streamed on Netflix. This difference marks an important shift in how an anime fan-oriented work can take shape, and how its availability can impact its fringe status as related to or pointing towards anime from within American contexts. While *Anime Crimes Division* is

clearly labeled as for *anime fans* first, and North Americans second, *Neo Yokio* approaches its audience as *North Americans* first, anime fans second. These demographic leanings are largely indicated by the platforms where both works appear, and the contexts that each bring into play once a series is hosted there.

*Neo Yokio* offers a rare midpoint between the increase in Netflix's anime catalogue, including series made with the 'Netflix Original' label, to which *Neo Yokio* belongs, and the heavier focus on American content seen in Netflix's catalogue at large. Analyzing *Neo Yokio*'s place on Netflix illustrates how the series is framed within its streaming distributor, as well as its potential to reevaluate the role anime plays on Netflix in its global expansion strategies. As a platform, Netflix creates opportunities for anime fans to discover new content and continues the distributive landscape overseas. As a media presence, Netflix brings to light the geographic tensions within digital streaming, something that Ramon Lobato discusses at length in his book *Netflix Nations* (2019). Ultimately, the question of where *Neo Yokio* is located, its alternative geographies, extend well past the fictional city of Neo Yokio, and into the real world implications of where the series is hosted and what this might mean for the demographics who can access it.

*Neo Yokio*'s origins prior to Netflix's acquisition are worth considering in its presence on the platform, since the series' reach is greatly impacted by how it is framed by the content around it and the userbase that it entails. When discussing *Neo Yokio*'s early stages, Koenig stated, "when we first made it, I thought it was going to be coming out one episode at a time in the middle of the night on cable. I never imagined it would be coming out all at once for an audience as broad as Netflix's" (*Juxtapoz*). Koenig's observation points towards the all-important question of target audiences, as well as the contexts that begin to populate around a series by association. Popular late-night cable shows, such as Adult Swim, which started in 2001 as a late night network operating under Cartoon Network, is notable for its focus on fringe, risqué content targeted at older audiences compared to its daytime television programming. The demographic is set aside both in content and in the time frame, and this focuses the audience considerably. In assuming *Neo Yokio* might have been picked up by a late night cable network, Koenig provides valuable information about the series' intended audience, as well as an important distinction of such programming blocks compared to Netflix.

As a non-specialist, borderline global streaming service, Netflix allows content for all demographics, in all forms of genres, and without the same types of time blocking typical of cable television. Netflix exists as an ‘always-on’ form of television provider, with features such as ‘My List’ and algorithm-based collections of suggestions for its users (Fig. 14). Lobato has suggested that, “Internet television does not replace legacy television in a straightforward way; instead, it adds new complexity to the existing geography of distribution” (5). As much as *Neo Yokio* might be suited for late night cable networks, this is not where the series landed, and its presence on Netflix is indicative of the types of geographies that are represented and catered to on the service. Series such as *Neo Yokio* belonging to the Netflix catalogue creates possibility for users unfamiliar with anime to encounter the series without the context of a channel or demographic, and this mixing of viewership gives rise to another way of observing the North American anime fan-oriented work; one which allows the consumption of Hollywood movies and ‘Netflix Original’ anime on a single platform, encouraging a mingling of demographics within one user’s account. This variety content system contrasts Crunchyroll, which is devoted exclusively to East Asian media (the majority of which is anime) and draws attention to consumer patterns between how the two host anime. Crunchyroll will air anime on a weekly basis, to keep up with the similar release schedule in Japan, while Netflix will generally not release any episodes of an acquired anime until that show has finished airing and can be released onto the site all at once, fitting their binge-watch distribution model. This particular practice shows a blending of consumer styles within Netflix’s platform, but it also points to Netflix’s contribution to the anime consumer market in North America and globally.

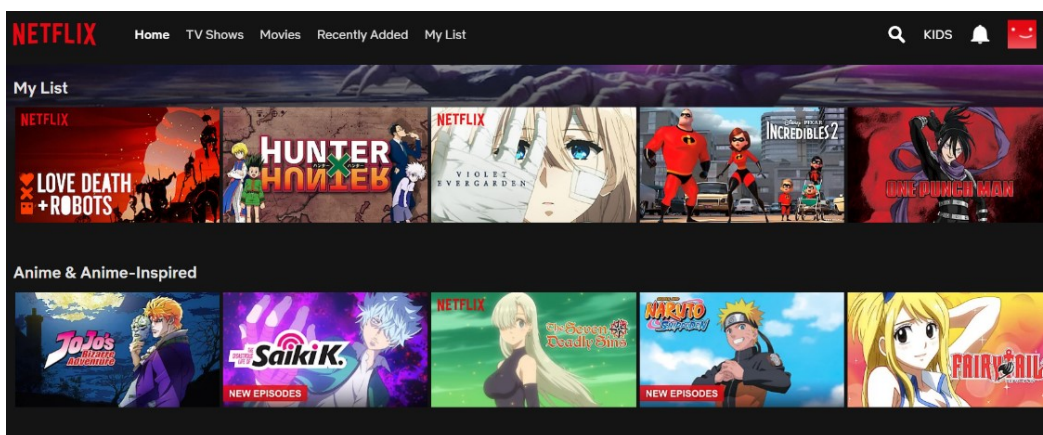




Fig. 14. Two forms of accessing anime on Netflix: the ‘My List’ organizer, and algorithmic groupings of like content.

Netflix’s emphasis on distribution on a more global scale creates an opening in its demographics for anime fans, who are already familiar with the difficulty of acquiring anime legally due to frequent delays in English dubbing, subtitling, and in the case of films – theatre release restrictions. With so many new anime titles being added to Netflix in recent years, and with Netflix specifically acquiring anime that are then labeled as ‘Netflix Originals’ (where Netflix holds the rights to exclusively stream anime content outside of Japan) the recognition of a particular consumer base is inevitable. *Neo Yokio* combines the Netflix Original label with a series that points out the pitfalls of American capitalism while incorporating the aesthetic, textual, and historical aspects of Netflix’s involvement in anime internationally.

Being a juggernaut in online streaming services, Netflix’s interest in anime signifies much more than simply opening doors for collaborations with Japan and its branch of Netflix in efforts to localize. As Lobato notes:

[i]n addition to claiming that these new investments [releasing original Japanese series onto Netflix Japan] would help them compete in the market, Netflix executives have also been talking up Netflix’s ability to help these quintessentially Japanese shows reach an international audience. ‘Just as there are fans of Hollywood in Japan, there are die-hard anime fans in France, Brazil, the U.S. and all over the world,’ stated Greg Peters, president of Netflix Japan... ‘There’s this tremendous potential in Japan; so many stories—the manga, the novels—and now we have the opportunity to unlock this potential in a way that hasn’t been able to be done before.’ (129)

Anime, according to Peters, is not only a way to reach local audiences in Japan, but simultaneously becomes a huge export for the service outside of Japan, and as a whole. Netflix’s catalogue of anime offers the possibility of using the site specifically for its anime streaming. The service’s push to acquire more anime titles since even 2017 has led to it becoming a main category in the drop-down genre menu for television shows, boosting its visibility on the platform both for those searching for it, and those who know nothing about it.

The distribution of anime on Netflix has notably led to some controversy within North American anime fan communities. In July 2019, *Neon Genesis Evangelion* was acquired by Netflix and the title series, as well as its ancillary films, *Evangelion: Death and Rebirth* and *The End of Evangelion* were released onto the platform. This acquisition symbolized a turning point in Netflix's approach to distributing anime, since the series had previously been subject to astronomically high price listings online and had been virtually impossible to buy in stores state-side after the closure of the American distributor, AVD Films (*Polygon* 2019). The acquisition and subsequent release of *Evangelion* onto Netflix in the summer of 2019 indicated an unprecedented move for the availability of an anime which up until that point had been treated as a mythic power within anime fandom for its scarcity and unmistakable impact on the state of anime fandom since its airing in 1995-96 (Azuma 7). Suddenly, the media conversation around *Evangelion* changed, with new sources calling the series "Netflix's *Evangelion*" (*Vulture* 2019), resurfacing coverage of why *Evangelion* was creating such a stir among audiences on Netflix, and then later for the series to fade to the background amid the sea of anime options hosted on Netflix. This particular case indicates how Netflix's distribution platform fundamentally altered the perception of *Evangelion* among its fans, and furthermore, gives it the ability to move towards those who know nothing about it through algorithm.

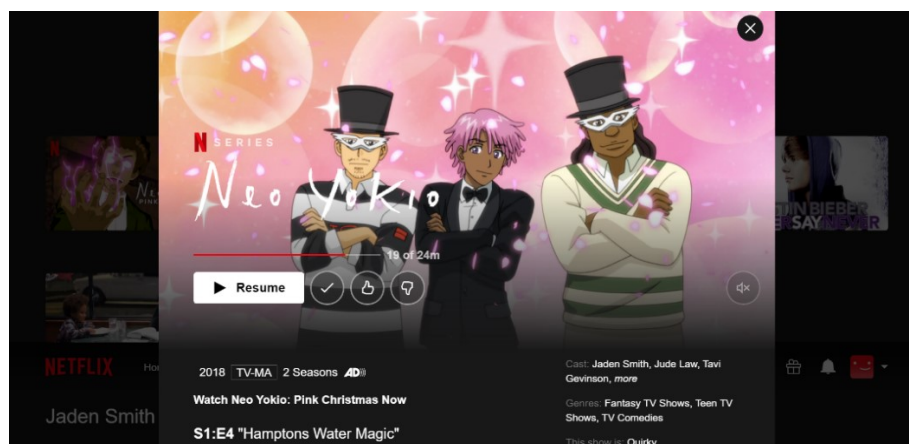


Fig. 15. *Neo Yokio*'s information page on Netflix notably does not categorize the show as anime. It also lists its cast, providing links to their filmography available on the platform.

Bringing *Neo Yokio* back to the fore, the series once again begins to straddle two wildly different histories in its existence on Netflix. *Neo Yokio* is loosely attached to Netflix's involvement in anime streaming, since Studio Deen, Production I.G., and Moi Animation have

all worked not only on anime, but also on Netflix Original content. *Neo Yokio*'s cast and crew appear in various other films and television shows available on the service, and cast members in particular can be searched on the platform for a list of other works where they star (Fig. 15). With *Neo Yokio*'s short runtime and its lacking discussion, the series essentially survives through Netflix's algorithmic navigation and recommendations. *Neo Yokio*'s approach to alternative geography surfaces in how it inhabits the spaces between outright searches and listings. On a platform that releases its content all at once, *Neo Yokio* attaches itself to these conversations in order to stay afloat. Indeed, it becomes a touchpoint in debates around what 'anime' means on Netflix (*Wired*). *Neo Yokio*'s paratextual relationship to the works surrounding it once again points to its role as an anime fan-oriented work for how it blends a variety of styles, locations, viewing habits, and media cultures into one series. As a series available on Netflix, *Neo Yokio* surrounds itself with the North American-led streaming service while simultaneously appealing to anime fans and the digital cultures demonstrated through this association. The series creates a very tangible example of the potential for anime fan-oriented works, both in how they present themselves, and how their distributors can manifest their reputation through association.

### **Conclusion: Anime's "Final Form"**

Popular anime content creator, Gigguk, described *Neo Yokio* as "...an abridged series for an anime that only exists in Jaden Smith's mind" ("Neo Yokio: the Final Form of Anime"), pointing to how the series' comedic timing and dialogue feels reminiscent of edited fan videos, rather than the product of various talents on the part of its American cast and Japanese animation studios. Indeed, *Neo Yokio* carries with it a sense of deep-seated parody that even in its most genuine moments is hard to dismiss. The series' complex weaving together of American worldviews mixed with its literalization of iconic anime moments creates a series catered towards the demographic that can understand both of its sources of inspiration wrapped into one: the North American anime fan. The myriad of references at even the most superficial levels in *Neo Yokio*—its anime visuals, its celebrity cast, its uncanny approach to real-world locations and sociopolitical contexts, as well as its tightly bound paratextual conversations and platform history— all point to how the series can serve as an anime fan-oriented work for how it addresses viewers first through North American contexts, and second, as an anime fan, familiar with the media practices that come with both identities.

The inclusion of *Neo Yokio* on Netflix in particular opens up the potential for anime fan-oriented works to reach those beyond previous anime fan contexts, and creates exciting possibilities for anime fan-oriented work to explicitly address North American realities. *Neo Yokio* then offers a precursory glance at how North American anime fan culture has essentially blossomed into a separate market, with services and shorthand that all operate adjacent to larger media enterprises. The existence of a series such as *Neo Yokio* points to not merely a cultural or identity-driven emergence of anime fan-oriented work, but also a more business-driven, market push to bring more viewers into Netflix's anime offerings. Throughout this chapter, I have continued to return to how *Neo Yokio* explores alternative geography, the process through which it defamiliarizes that which its audiences should find familiar through its cryptic, adjacent contents. Ultimately, the anime fan-oriented work becomes something of an alternative geography in itself, where it inhabits a space that is not quite belonging in one media practice or another, and instead becomes something entirely new through borrowing various topographies present in its inspirations, collaborations, and placement in new platform landscapes.

## Conclusion

### Anime Fan-Oriented Work as a Future Industry

Both *Anime Crimes Division* and *Neo Yokio* are focused on how the media directed towards anime fans perceives the fan cultures of their viewers. They anticipate a particular audience, one which understands anime references, and sympathizes with the displacement felt by immersing oneself in a media form outside of your geographic position. Tied to this understanding of geography, the two series place themselves specifically in North American contexts, providing replacement American cities directed towards anime fans with deep-rooted understandings of North American lifestyles. They reward fan activity by placing such activity in the very content of the series' plots. This translating of anime fandom into a piece of entertainment requires some level of understanding across a multitude of media languages; anime (and all of its associated activities and expressions of fandom), online personalities and their platforms, Internet streaming culture, social media, and fan culture at large. As expressed in *Anime Crimes Division* and *Neo Yokio*, these media languages are all interpreted from a strictly English-speaking lens, looking in on anime as an object of fandom. The result of such a metatextual address becomes anime fan-oriented work; a piece of media which is oriented *towards* the anime fan.

This thesis aims to open up discussion for the splintering of fan content and professional content past its initial producer/consumer cycle, past even the combination of the two with the rise of digital media and remix (Jenkins 11, Lessig 69). Ultimately, this thesis is aimed at discussions of how fan culture and its contents can be made into marketable material of itself, reflecting realities back onto fans and essentially creating its own market. Anime, as an already quite insular and well-documented instance of fan culture in America, offers an ideal case study for this sort of “fan-oriented work” through its narrative activation of fan knowledge and experiences, its geographic specificity, and its socioeconomic developments through platform, celebrity, and industry. In these areas, anime fan-oriented works become superb case studies for their integration of fan culture within industry that goes beyond textual references, instead demonstrating metatextual understanding of the fandom culture in which they are created.

I would like to close out this thesis by drawing attention to a few recent developments in North American anime fan culture. They are worth examining here for their importance to my

notion of anime fan-oriented works. They hold the potential to dramatically shift the anime industry as it exists in North America from primarily receiving and disseminating anime to the fan-oriented notion of creating content *for* fans of anime, specific to their cultural context as the receiving end of the media form. While *Anime Crimes Division* and *Neo Yokio* both exemplify this subgenre of fan content and animation alike, their narrativity through fiction indicates a much larger trend in the current anime distribution landscape.

The first development in anime fan-oriented work is the purchase of Crunchyroll by Sony Pictures Entertainment, specifically by their anime distribution and localization company, Funimation, on December 9th, 2020. Crunchyroll was purchased from its former owners at AT&T for \$1.175 billion USD, joining the two anime streaming services under one corporation. Earlier that same year, Crunchyroll introduced tiered subscription options that included offline downloads on mobile devices and up to 4 multiple concurrent streams for \$9.99/month under their Mega Fan subscription option. Their Ultimate Fan subscription runs at \$14.99/month and includes all perks in addition to an annual exclusive merchandise prize for those in the United States (Crunchyroll). The increased investment visible in the subscription tiers, as well as this high profile purchase, indicates quite plainly that anime and its audiences abroad have outgrown the grassroots associations that Leonard outlines (286) when describing early anime fan practices in America. Following his notion of the cultural sink, Crunchyroll is now forming a new model around this next industry demand; anime fan presence in North America and its audience potentials, with a substantial growth in legitimized industry practices.

The anime industry has swelled with the rise of streaming services, virtual private networks (VPN) and the combined effect of future creators growing alongside anime's slow push into popular culture. Funimation, with its own history of acquisition under Sony as an anime distribution and localization company for American audiences, had previously worked with Crunchyroll on several anime merchandise campaigns, as well as sharing distribution rights for various series – a history which frames anime's American distribution as more economy-driven (Jenkins 92), framed within the creative soul of the media form that Condry points to in his observations of anime fandom (2). Crunchyroll's anime subscription service has proven effective and valuable in bolstering anime fan engagement, aiding in a much more robust anime distribution industry than ever before. As Lobato mentions when discussing anime's global reach

outside of Japanese television audiences for Netflix (128), the acquisition of a platform and its contents creates major ripples throughout the media landscape to which it belongs, holding the potential to dramatically alter its fan experiences through changes in accessibility, popularity, and the digital culture that surfaces in its wake.

The second development pointing to the impact of anime fan-oriented work in North America is the *Anime in America* podcast, briefly mentioned in Chapter 1. *Anime in America* is a sister project produced by Crunchyroll, running in 2020 from July 28 to September 8. Hosted by comedian Yedoye Travis, the podcast chronicles the origins and changes of anime's presence in America, featuring episodes such as Episode 1, "In the Beginning There Was Fansubs" and Episode 7 "Raised By TV." Each episode collects histories from older generations of anime fans and consults news stories and anecdotes concerning anime's stateside growth in a format that appeals to general audiences. Crunchyroll is promoted at the end of each episode as a destination to watch the various series discussed throughout the podcast and is even framed through the various industry shifts from illegal streaming site to legitimate distribution company which Ristola discusses in her research on the media labour involved at Crunchyroll's very inception (14). *Anime in America* makes clear the economic push and pull that propelled anime to its current position among streaming services and a fast-paced distribution industry. As Travis points out in Episode 1, "...there is an entire history that stands to be lost if no efforts are made to preserve the medium and fracturing licenses can present a real obstacle toward that task" (*Anime in America*). The incredibly corporate development of anime's life outside of Japan creates a media landscape where access becomes of the utmost importance, and these collective ebbs and flows felt across anime fandom as series are licensed, dropped, picked up again, or canceled becomes a form of digital arms race both for the streaming websites aiming to acquire the rights to certain anime, and the anime fan's collection of subscription services, which also account for the entertainment they consume outside of anime. The anime fan, in other words, becomes increasingly aware of the industry through news feeds, social media, and word of mouth.

*Anime in America* is substantially valuable to the anime fan-oriented work for how it talks to anime fans *about* anime fandom. Its metatextual approach forms a sort of crash course in anime fan history, informing new fans who may be unaware of the shifts made in the industry

that enable them to participate in anime fandom, as well as validating older fans who may be unaware of the current shifts that are continuing to change the North American anime industry. As a subgenre which emphasizes its demographic as its content, anime fan-oriented work aims to create media that accurately reflects its audience. While my thesis approaches anime fan-oriented work through an academic lens, drawing upon fields of study that range from television and film to fan and celebrity, media such as *Anime in America* affirm the combination of the scholar and the fan (Hills 35) by reflecting fan experiences back onto their listeners. With the growing number of anime fans in North America, as well as (and for all intents and purposes, *because of*) the increasing number of anime acquisitions by online streaming sites for global circulation, anime fan-oriented work becomes a crucial stepping stone not only in reflecting North American fan experiences, but in historicizing and documenting current anime fan culture for future generations. Even as licenses change hands, the framing of anime around Crunchyroll seen in *Anime in America* or on a more fictional level in *Anime Crimes Division*, indicates a particular economic history that is deeply entangled with the location and accessibility of anime properties, with emphasis on their digital geography. As Travis observes, the license and contemporary technology available to anime fans shapes the direction of its cultural flows, and even, to return to Annett, its frictions.

Finally, I will briefly discuss a current Netflix project which draws heavily on the platform and audience research I have outlined throughout my thesis. On September 1, 2020, Netflix created a YouTube channel titled “Netflix Anime” with the channel description reading, “[a]nime isn’t just what we like, it’s who we are.” The channel features a variety of highlights from various anime available to stream on their service, as well as collaborative videos created with anime voice actors (*seiyuu*) and anime YouTube personalities. The channel also consists of creative projects such as stop motion animation, AMVs, live performances of anime opening and ending songs by their original artists, and coverage of anime promotional events hosted by Netflix (Fig. 16). The Netflix Anime YouTube channel marks a shift in its attitude towards its acquisition and distribution of anime titles, emphasizing engagement and discussion through another platform.



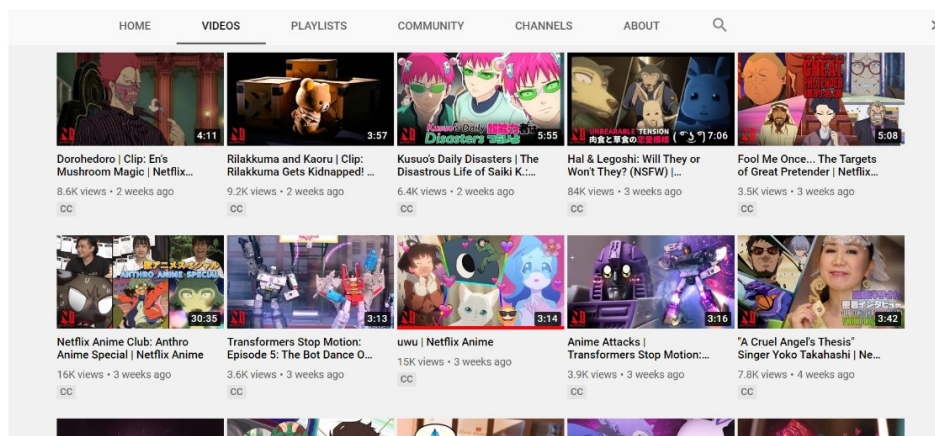


Fig. 16. Netflix Anime's YouTube channel mixes corporate promotional material with industry interviews and fan-made content.

I would like to emphasize here that the Netflix Anime YouTube Channel demonstrates anime fan practices on a professional scale, where their uploaded videos do not only contain remixed proprietary content, but also other popular fan activities such as reaction videos, compilation videos, etc. Netflix Anime's presence on YouTube also points to two important implications: first, that anime is large and specialized enough of a media form that creating a separate promotional YouTube channel was necessary, and second, that Netflix's presence on YouTube specifically engaging in anime content encourages anime fan practices to appear on the channel in a specifically fan-oriented context. In other words, Netflix Anime's YouTube channel is anime fan-oriented for how it acts upon anime fan practices, and for how it specifies anime fans as a demographic unto themselves, unlike other Netflix promotional YouTube channels such as Netflix UK & Ireland or Netflix Latinoamérica, which are created based on geographic regions and their Netflix catalogue availability, in addition to language preferences.

The influence of anime fan-oriented work notably reaches well beyond that of narrative fiction, however it is through this format where fan-oriented work can truly act as both entertainment and a primary text for academic study. By examining *Anime Crimes Division* and *Neo Yokio*, I have explored their use of anime fandom as seen through North American contexts, their activation of anime fan knowledge to connect viewers to larger forms of subculture discourse, and their ability to bridge entirely separate aspects of digital culture through their references to media literacies that extend beyond the immediate relationship between anime and its fans. The existence of such series, as well as their integration of anime fan culture practices

amid North American social mores, ultimately points towards the potential for future North American-focused anime fan markets, separate from the current production and distribution cycles which largely follow the Japan-world dispersal of content across media channels.

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