15 Beyond immersion

Gin Tama and palimpsestuous reception

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In “Blue and Red Ecstasy” (2011), episode 224 of the *Gin Tama* anime series (2006–2018), the protagonists get ahold of a Blu-Ray player with a disc stuck in it. When they accidentally play it, the disc shows a grainy sequence of a well and a ghostly female figure that climbs out of it, reminiscent of the horror film *Ring* (1998). They understand that the disc is cursed and begin to panic when the figure tries to get out of the television and into their living room, but she is prevented from doing so because she is carrying a *kotatsu*¹ that is too big for the television frame. After having discussed whether they should help her get out or not, the ghost, who is called Bluerayko, clarifies that she does not want to do them any harm. In fact, she is an angel, and she asks them if they can spare her one channel of their TV to spend the night.

Gin Tama is often described in terms of transgression and disruption (Jones 2013; Lee 2011; Pusztai 2015; Unser-Schutz 2015). This short sequence thematizes some of its most typical humorous mechanisms, juxtaposing modes (comic and horror), ontological realms (diegetic and nondiegetic from within the story), gender tropes (the men want to destroy the television, the woman wants to help), times (the modern Blu-Ray and the old-fashioned *kotatsu*), and even our cultural expectations about media formats (VHS and Blu-Ray). With its mix of genres and styles, its acute intertextuality, and its metalepses in the form of regular breaches of the fourth wall, the *Gin Tama* universe would seem a prime candidate for a low sense of immersion as audiences struggle to make sense of the many disparate elements. However, *Gin Tama* audiences report high levels of engagement and enthusiasm for a world they experience as consistent and engrossing. But can fragmentation and immersion really coexist?

The concept of immersion in relation to new media practices has been popularized specially through Janet Murray’s definition as “the physical experience of being submerged in water [...] the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality [...] that takes over all our attention” (1998, 98). This idea of a text claiming our absolute attention is of course not exclusive to audiovisual or digital works, and we can certainly recognize it in relation to other activities, such as being engrossed in a novel, or even a more performative experience, such as playing a musical instrument. This

perspective implies that distractive elements pull us out of the immersion. Consequently, the concept of immersion is very much opposed to that of metalepsis, defined by Werner Wolf as “a usually intentional paradoxical transgression of, or confusion between, (onto)logically distinct (sub)worlds and/or levels that exist, or are referred to, within representations of possible worlds” (2005, 91). That is, when metalepsis appears, it destroys immersion (Wolf 2005, 103).²

This is why academic discourses around metalepsis in contemporary media, including my own, have concentrated on its effect as a disruptive trope from a textual perspective (Carrasco Yelmo and Tosca 2016). However, this chapter argues that the ideal of seamless immersion cannot explain our current transmedial reception practices, which are fragmented yet allow for intense engagement. Indeed, the *Gin Tama* reception experience is a prime example of the kind of heightened meta-interpretive activity that audiences perform in their encounters with transmedial texts (Tosca and Klastруп 2016). This activity, far from being alienating, is experienced as agglutinating by the fans, as the analysis will show.

In sum, this chapter wants to frame transmedial reception practices in a different way. What if instead of talking about breaches and disruptions, we thought of juxtapositions as additions? What if audiences were able to sum instead of subtract, unite instead of separate? In this chapter, I read *Gin Tama* as an example of a complex (trans)text where juxtapositions are exacerbated and therefore become extremely visible. The aesthetic analysis is here supplemented with an audience’s reception perspective based on a qualitative empirical collection method. Briefly, I have monitored and selected fan commentary from sites such as *YouTube*, *Reddit*, *Crunchyroll*, *MangaKakalot* and have followed fan sites and social media tags like #gintama, #gintamamovie, #yorozuya. Moreover, as part of a research project about anime nostalgia, four *Gin Tama* fans were interviewed in 2017. Building on the analysis, I will finally propose the concept of *palimpsestuous reception* to describe the audience activity related to the interpretation and appropriation of such a text. I argue that this concept contributes to illuminating an interesting aspect of the aesthetic potential of transmedial reception in general.

Gin Tama’s transgressions

Gin Tama, created by Hideaki Sorachi in 2003, is a typical example of a media mix (Steinberg 2012), as transmedial universes are known in Japan. At its core there is a long-running manga series (2003–) that has given birth to several other connected media instantiations. These include the abovementioned anime series as well as films, videogames, a live-action movie, music CDs, light novels, guidebooks, and all sorts of merchandise. The manga series is extremely popular, both in Japan and abroad through its English translation (Valdez 2018). The other *Gin Tama* media products have

also enjoyed both critical and audience acclaim, with the probable exception of the videogames, which have been criticized as less innovative and merely exploitative of the other products' success.³

The story features a lazy samurai called Gintoki Sakata, who lives in an alternative version of Edo-period⁴ Japan where aliens (here called Amanto) have conquered the earth. The shōgun government, controlled by the invaders, has banned samurais and their weapons. Gintoki survives by doing “odd jobs” for whomever cares to hire him and his associates, a young aspiring samurai called Shinpachi, and Kagura, a supernaturally strong alien girl. Together they form the Yorozuya,⁵ a failing business where they often struggle to make ends meet. Their missions are both adventurous and prosaic, as they are hired to find lost pets, rescue kidnapped people, fight terrorists, recover stolen items, or protect eccentric individuals, all while avoiding their angry landlady. The story is organized in narrative arcs of uneven length, with a string of a few episodes continuing the same plot, but also with plenty of “loose” stand-alone episodes. The *Gin Tama* universe includes parodic versions of many historical figures, like the shōgunate police force of the Shinsengumi (with legendary swordsmen Kondō, Hijikata, or Okita), or the revolutionaries Katsura and Takasugi, who here fight both the aliens and the corrupt Bakufu government. Gintoki and his associates often get mixed up with both the shōgunate and its terrorist enemies in a complicated series of confrontations and unlikely alliances.

From its inception, creator Hideaki Sorachi has positioned the *Gin Tama* transmedial universe within the comic mode, with a steady mix of parody and satire, as well as scatological and surreal humor. Comedy is notoriously difficult to define, due to its wide range of forms and its shape-shifting nature. I find Roston's idea of identifying it as a “mode” compelling because it allows for a lot of flexibility and variation across media and within the same work, even though his focus is on literary texts (Roston 2011, 1–36). For Roston, the essence of the comic mode is the “deflating of human pretensions” (2011, 8), which is attained through three major strategies: superiority, incongruity, and relief, all of which are very active in *Gin Tama*. To begin with, its very title demolishes any pretension of it taking itself seriously. *Gin Tama* means “silver soul,” but it sounds dangerously close to *kintama*, or “golden balls,” a slang word for testicles.⁶ This bawdy wordplay sets the mood for a transgressive story romp that has charmed others beyond the original male teenage target audience,⁷ including a significant female following (Lee 2011, 173). Linguistic puns abound because the number of phonemes of Japanese is small, and so there is a large amount of homonyms that can be confused and tossed against each other for comic effect (Jones 2013, 65). In fact, “much of the humour arises from repeated incongruities through script opposition—the juxtaposition of two or more concepts which, when combined, are humorous in their contradiction” (Jones 2013, 63). Jones detects it very clearly in the way that *Gin Tama*'s female characters are portrayed. Women make fun of men and are superior

to them in all confrontations. Even in comedy situations, women play the straight man role (*tsukkomi*) and men the idiot (*boke*), which is a subversion of typical gender roles. The strong women of *Gin Tama* deviate from the modest and polite speech expected of Japanese women and don instead “rough, aggressive, ‘masculine’ speech” (Jones 2013, 67).

An abundance of incongruities like these is consistent with classic approaches to comedy as “a divided and double experience” (Stott 2005, 9), for when situations are changed and subverted, they do not disappear from the stage. “Even though comedy often seems to be suspending, inverting, or abandoning dominant norms, these inversions are produced in relation to the cultural orthodoxies from which they must always begin” (Stott 2005, 8). As an illustration of this, Gintoki’s lazy attitude and love of sweets is funny because it evokes our schemata of what a heroic samurai should be like (brave, hard-working, stoic). This simultaneity, the normal and the deviant appearing together in our mind, is key to laughter. Humorous texts are about multiplicity, and they create in the spectator “a continual awareness of the possibility of reading a scenario in two different ways” (Stott 2005, 9). In *Gin Tama*, the humorous duplicity operates on many different levels, from the linguistic puns and gender roles mentioned above to overarching genre tropes, well-known plot devices, historical interpretations, and visual forms. In particular, the titles of the different episodes act as a strong framing device, pointing to the absurdities and contradictions of everyday life, often disguised in the lapidary style of ancient proverbs that imbues them with a sense of truth and carnival at the same time⁸:

- “You Always Remember the Things That Matter the Least”
- “Life Moves On Like a Conveyor Belt”
- “Mom’s Busy, Too, So Quit Complaining about What’s for Dinner”
- “Stress Makes You Bald, but It’s Stressful to Avoid Stress, So You End Up Stressed Out Anyway, So, in the End, There’s Nothing You Can Do”
- “People Who Give Good First Impressions Usually Suck”
- “So in the Second Season of Prison Break, They’ve Already Broken Out of Prison, but the Name Works Once You Realize That Society Is a Prison”
- “Life and Video Games Are Full of Bugs”
- “People Almost Always Fight on Trips”

Previous academic consideration of *Gin Tama* has identified its comic aspect as its most central characteristic, paying attention to the disruptiveness of the series in various ways, be it aesthetic, historical, social, or in relation to media mix industry practices (Jones 2013; Lee 2011; Pusztai, 2015; Unser-Schutz 2015). Both scholars and audiences point to the abundant breaches of the fourth wall as the most salient characteristic of the *Gin Tama* universe. Its attachment to metalepsis, understood as the transgression of boundaries within the fictional world (Kukkonen 2011, 3), manifests itself in different

ways according to each platform and its specific affordances. In the manga, characters refer to the length of panel sequences, to how scenes or other characters are drawn, to sound effects, or to how many pages something has been going on for. Once in a while, they become aware of being fictional characters appearing in a weekly magazine, of the identity of their author, and of the fact that there is a reader looking at them, only to slip back into the fiction immediately after. There are also many intertextual references, with allusions to media personalities of contemporary Japan who might also appear directly as characters, or mentions of other media texts, like *One Piece* (1997–), *Dragon Ball* (1984–1995), Hayao Miyazaki’s films, or other popular culture products that the *Gin Tama* characters know and to which they sometimes compare themselves.

In the anime series, there is less aesthetic play with its form as an animated movie, but it establishes more allusions to intertextuality, with some interesting self-reflection about its own nature as an adaptation, as noted by Beáta Pusztai (2015, 141). The films (both animated and live action) have a tradition of addressing the spectator, especially at the beginning, as a sort of frame for the story. For instance, the second of the live action films, *Gintama 2: Okite wa yaburu tame ni koso aru* (2018), starts with the characters talking about how the first film did and the fact that neither film or main actor won any awards, before warning each other that the audience is listening in on their conversation. The videogames are less keen on metalepses, although there are breaches of the fourth wall in some of them. In general, they are much less disruptive, as if the videogame medium did not lend itself too well to this kind of play. The latest of the games, *Gintama Rumble* (2018), is a rather monotonous hack ‘n’ slash that combines fighting with the reproduction of some of the story arcs from the anime. It follows a heroic structure that is at odds with the parodic vibe of the rest of the transmedia universe, but it incorporates a feature called the “Pachinko Requirement Slot.” This feature activates at certain points and randomly gives players an advantage (like having more attack power), but it can also be disadvantageous, for example pixelating the screen for a while so the player cannot see what she is doing. In this way, the absurd spirit of the *Gin Tama* universe shatters the purposefulness of the ludic form. But how does all this manifest in the actual reception by audiences? How disruptive is *Gin Tama*?

Experiencing *Gin Tama*: “The Monty Python of anime”⁹

Overwhelmingly, audiences praise the unique setting, the original characters, and the crazy stories, as becomes evident in the forum discussions, the *Gin Tama*-related hashtags, Facebook groups, YouTube commentary, and my interviews. As in other fandoms, many *Gin Tama* fans are articulate about what they like and why, and in this case, they are very aware of the different kinds of fragmentation that exist in *Gin Tama*. As an example, here is a fan

trying to argue for why the anime is worth watching, coming up with reasons to counteract a dismissive commentary. I have highlighted the sections of the quote that I will elaborate on below¹⁰:

The fact is, this anime is **more than just a comedy/parody**. Many people drop this show in the early episodes bec it's too slow. It's a character-driven comedy episodic that is also formulaic in the early episodes, but **it has an underlying plot that will be revealed once you know the characters**. The early episodes are build-up to their character relationships and setting introduction. So Gintama has also a plot. The comedy is just there to know more about the characters. Also Gintama has all types of humour: crude like toilet humour, **4th wall breaking**, parody, satire, also some of the jokes are hard to understand because they're too Japanese (like wordplay). or about Jap pop culture. They're **naturally funny especially if you understand the references**. The action of this show is one of the best I've seen in any shonen. About the genre.. that's one of the reasons people love it because it's a masterful mix of comedy, drama, action, etc. **It has every genre in anime you can find**. Mainly it's a samurai historical that's also a sci-fi set in feudal Japan.¹¹

This comment acknowledges the hybrid, chaotic nature of the fictional universe but frames it as a source of pleasure. I would like to use the fan's words as a blueprint to note some of the most appreciated aesthetic traits of this universe, since it encapsulates the most common themes that appeared in my analysis of social media commentary and interviews and also points to the challenges to immersion I mentioned in the introduction. The first trait is the fact that "it is more than just a comedy/parody." Many in the *Gin Tama* audience explicitly note its capacity to turn everything upside down, its carnivalesque strength that not only gives space to the coarse and the forbidden (bodily functions or sexuality) but also makes fun of official structures and points to their inherent contradictions. Structure here refers both to the storytelling tropes typical of the Japanese media mix ("You will find it funnier if you are a regular anime watcher as it likes to make fun of it, especially the cliched shounen tropes"¹²), social conventions ("even if you expect a character to act a certain way they turn it 360 and surprise you. A main plus in my book are the female characters—all strong, badass, self-reliant heroines, and no of the damsel in distress"¹³), or political systems ("so the Japanese government is really controlled by aliens and you can really see how fucked up everything is, just like we cannot do anything without the EU or the NATO or Google and Amazon and Jesus Christ and his mother"¹⁴). Bakhtinian carnival is not just about empty laughs, as Stott points out: "[T]he inversions and suspensions permitted and legitimized by carnival represent substantive challenges to authority, therefore offering the possibility that comedy [...] may also be an expression of popular discontent" (Stott 2005, 34). This is not to say that carnival is a revolutionary

progressive force that can effectuate real changes in society, but its inversions make the underlying system visible, exposing its contradictions and incoherencies, foregrounding “the tensions and desires that are elided parts of the identity of power itself” (Stott 2005, 37). *Gin Tama* audiences are aware of the absurd aspects of contemporary life, especially of their own powerless position. As social media commentary and my interviews with people in their twenties and thirties show, *Gin Tama* masterfully illustrates their own situation, trapped in a string of badly paid precarious jobs despite having completed secondary educations: “Each episode/series of episodes is just them doing random jobs, with no real lasting consequences. It’s kind of like a slice of life in that way.”¹⁵ The fact that Gintoki and his friends are always facing failure and ridicule but that they get up after every fall, no matter how grotesque, is seen as a life lesson by these fans.

The second trait is the heavy intertextuality, “naturally funny especially if you understand the references.” Audiences seem to enjoy the extraordinary effort required to decode the many intertextual jokes, and they often use this as a reason to dismiss criticism: The conclusion seems to be that the people who don’t find *Gin Tama* funny just haven’t understood the jokes. At the same time, newcomers to the universe are often encouraged to relax, as it can also be enjoyed without identifying all the references. Nonetheless, intertextual interpretation is a valued skill in the *Gin Tama* community, with people showing off to each other and sometimes collectively interpreting obscure references to current Japanese media personalities, for example. Fan subbers will also often annotate their work, explaining the references to a Western audience, and there are a few very extensive *Gin Tama* reference compilations.¹⁶ Being skilled at intertextual interpretation is a source of pride and pleasure, and it is obvious that decoding references is not only about being able to *read* a text but also feels like a sort of *writing* in Barthes’s terms, as Capozzi (1989, 418) proposes. Weaving an overarching text together, made of other texts from within and without the franchise, is very much like building a gigantic puzzle that becomes heavy with meaning. Picking another line from the initial fan quote in this section, “It has every genre in anime you can find.” As Umberto Eco said of *Casablanca*, which for him is not only a movie, but “the movies” (Capozzi 1989, 420), *Gin Tama* would not only be a manga or an anime, but “the manga” or “the anime,” its intertextual exuberance including many other works, tropes, and structures that are recognized and actualized in surprising ways. Inside the *Gin Tama* universe, intertextuality is sometimes made fun of, thematized as the proof that something is wrong with the characters. For example, the so-called “Monkey Hunter” arc parodies the *Monster Hunter* series of videogames, ridiculing all sorts of videogame conventions: about gameplay, about the way game characters talk and interact, and about how taking videogame tropes seriously is a sign of immaturity and social awkwardness in general.

Gin Tama audiences are thus teased. On the one hand, their knowledge of popular culture provides them with pleasurable interpretation of

abundant intertextual connections. On the other, they are mocked precisely because they possess extensive transmedial repertoires. In a way, it is as if enjoying the heavy intertextuality was proof of a fail of character, since the expected “normal” reaction would be to be put off by it. Fans tend to be aware of this, and some interpret it in relation to their own lives, embracing Sorachi’s playful teasing: “Gintoki is an adult and he reads *Jump* and all the characters are always going on about other manga and anime, teasing each other about being childish. This is like me and my friends. Actually, it is a bit scary that we can identify all these crazy parodies. It means we have spent too much time fleeing reality. At my age my mother already had a baby and I am fooling around reading manga made for young boys and dressing up for cosplay parties. But it is so much fun!”¹⁷ There is both pride and shame in acknowledgements like this because reception is not just about texts, it is also about us. As Jane Torr (2007) has noted in relation to children’s literature, intertextual pleasures are both related to recognizing other texts (a semiotic pleasure) and to relating the current text to our own lives (an autobiographical pleasure). *Gin Tama*, as this fan quote eloquently demonstrates, offers both. The subjective dimension of the reception process also affects the possibility of immersion, which arises as something contextual, and certainly not universal or absolute, but a process shaped by those who take part in it: the text and the audience.

The *Gin Tama* fans I have studied love to be directly interpellated, even if it is to be made fun of, and to be reminded that they are watching a carefully constructed fiction. They don’t perceive the breaches of the fourth wall as alienating, but as incorporating. An illustration of this can be a short sequence from anime episode 271, “Arriving Late to a Reunion Makes It Hard to Enter,” where Katsura is pointing out to Gintoki how special it is that they are getting together in a touching reunion and how he should be overcome with joy, and Gintoki’s reply is: “Like hell I’d feel any of that. I’ve had enough of seeing your mugs in the openings and endings. You show up every episode, even though you’re irrelevant. I’m sick of it. Nobody needs any more merch of you morons.” As Gintoki is speaking, the image shows figurines and other merchandise made of Katsura. Some fans celebrate this moment as the “killing of the 4th wall,”¹⁸ and clips like this one are circulated and celebrated on fan sites as pleasurable snippets that remind audiences of why they enjoy this universe so much. Perhaps paradoxically, the audiences I have investigated think that *Gin Tama*’s pointing to its own artificiality as an aesthetic device is more honest than the attempts at immersion of other well-known transmedial entertainment universes (“obeying the 4th wall is for the people with no kintama”).¹⁹ They are able to accommodate the regular change of rhythm of a story that makes you “cry of laughter in one moment and in the next second I’m crying my heart out,”²⁰ as it alternates between metalepses and traditional storytelling. In this way, ontological instability becomes normalized and expected.

The popularity of the male characters as attractive men is another prominent aspect of the *Gin Tama* experience in the fan community. Many female fans think that Gintoki, Hijikata, Okita, Katsura, Takasugi, and many others are a pleasure for the eye, and most fan fiction writing revolves around the different kinds of “ships,” or relationships, that can be imagined and written about, as the actual *Gin Tama* universe avoids the depiction of romantic relationships involving the main characters, even though there are plenty of crushes and love stories for secondary characters. There is a sensuality to the manga drawing style (reproduced in the anime and the live-action movies, with their cast of attractive young actors) that again stands in contrast to the predominant comedic mode. Beautiful men and (to a lesser extent) women characters often become ugly and twisted in their confrontations and action scenes, their bodies made fun of as they eat like pigs, pick their noses, are shown defecating, or naked in ridiculous situations.

To conclude this section about the *Gin Tama* experience, I want to reflect on a last aspect mentioned in the fan comment at the beginning of the section: its insistence (twice) that “it has an underlying plot” and that the characters are consistent. That is, no matter how many breaches and transgressions occur at other levels, these fans clearly perceive a stable core that gives the series its emotional appeal beyond the laughs and the outrage. In a transmedial world context, we would speak of a recognizable sense of *worldness*, made of a well-established *mythos*, *topos*, and *ethos* (Klastrup and Tosca 2004) respected across the whole franchise. The topos of the alien-invaded feudal Edo is absurd but memorable, and it provides all sorts of contrasts (for example of modern technology versus ancient customs) that are the source of unique plots and turns of events. The mythos of traditional Japan (in history and in legend) is overwritten with a science-fiction narrative that directly connects to events and conflicts in our own contemporary reality. The ethos of old samurai stories is transformed into a tale of survival and banality, as the main characters offer a philosophy of life that is both laughable and commendable, at times heroic in their insistence of living according to their own principles.

If we look at the *Gin Tama* universe with an exclusively textual interest, we will no doubt be mesmerized by its instability and tempted to classify all the possible ways in which it is a fragmented object. In this section, I instead attempt to adopt an experiential focus based on actual audiences in order to unpack the perceived essential coherence of the aesthetic reception of *Gin Tama*, which fans are able to appropriate and connect to their own lives. Analyzing the audience’s commentary, the semantic realm of *Gin Tama* appears to be comfortably installed in the carnivalesque, the wacky, the chaotic, the infantile, the random. Audiences apparently experience this as liberating. In contrast to other entertainment products, *Gin Tama* does not attempt to hide what it is. On the surface, it appears as a validation of the otaku life, an indulgent romp of internal jokes and low humor. However, audiences point out that for them, it also symbolizes an alternative to heroic

tales and other fictions aimed at anesthetizing us, making us into cogs in the machine. The resistance to narrative immersion exploited across all the media instantiations of the *Gin Tama* universe is perceived as helpful by the fans in order to resist immersion within a social system that is both arbitrary and unfair. Narrative immersion can be a dangerous anesthetic. Like other works in the comedic mode, *Gin Tama* offers “an imaginative exploration of alternative social formulations, and a recognition of lack in the ‘realist structurings of experience’ that usually represent it. Through joking, the joker appears to gain privileged insight beyond the social construct where its meanings are neither exhaustive nor absolute, but are simply choices” (Stott 2005, 11).

The palimpsest as an alternative reception metaphor

A simple conclusion to be extracted from this reading of *Gin Tama* is that the reception activity of keeping track of formal transgressions and semantic disturbances actually makes for an engrossing experience. In other words, while the ontology of the fictional world is disturbed in many different ways, audiences seem to still be immersed while engaging with the *Gin Tama* texts. How is this even possible? To answer this question, we must ask ourselves if immersion is a quality of the object (the text) or something else. As introduced above, Murray’s (1998) definition of immersion as being pleasurably submerged in a fiction, with all our senses engaged (and therefore shutting the world outside), is an idea with a long history.

In her book *Narrative as Virtual Reality* (2001), Marie Laure Ryan traces the appeal of the concept of immersion in Virtual Reality to a series of historical literary concepts all related to the idea of being caught up in a story. Immersion is suspect in postmodern eyes, perhaps because it is taken as a sign of uncritical surrendering to entertainment products. However, the idea of immersion is also present in more phenomenological approaches to reading, taking their departure in Coleridge’s notion of the suspension of disbelief, Walton’s theory of fiction as a game of make-believe, or the area of possible worlds studies, preoccupied with the imaginative effort of recreating a coherent fictional world. Even though all these perspectives varyingly take the reader into account as an active creative subject, I argue that they are still mainly focused on the fictional text itself as the source of the aesthetic illusion that the reader is making an effort to actualize. In this perspective, immersion is about a fiction coherent and interesting enough that it allows us to forget reality for a while as we engage with it: reading novels for hours and skipping meals, binging on TV series, or pulling all-nighters while exploring our favorite multiplayer gameworld.

However, what the analysis of *Gin Tama* demonstrates is that in the process of engaging with the multiple/fragmented text, audiences reach a kind of flow, understood as a state of concentration and absorption in a process (Csíkszentmihályi 1990). So instead of immersion, which is linked to a text,

a product, we should instead find a way to describe this process. In a text like *Gin Tama*, the flow comes from actualizing all the disparate elements, from weaving them together in a *writerly* way, not despite the “interruptions” but because of them. This perspective is also useful to explain processes of transmedial reception, where the immersion perspective falls short because transmedial reception is always multiple by definition, even when we are only engaged with a single instantiation of a transmedial universe (Tosca and Klasttrup 2019). While watching the *Gin Tama* action movie, we cannot keep the manga or the anime out of our consciousness, since it is constantly referring to them, calling them forth in our imagination. We cannot keep the world at bay either, since the characters are talking to us as spectators and reminding us that there are such things as film prizes and festivals, an industrial system of entertainment that produces the fiction with which we are engaging. Immersion in the sense described at the beginning of this chapter seems impossible.

So, let us assume for a moment that we do not care about the immersive quality of the fictional experience. Let us instead adopt Wolfgang Iser’s view on the fictive imagination as “an operational mode of consciousness that makes inroads into existing versions of the world. In this way, the fictive becomes an act of boundary-crossing which, nonetheless, keeps in view what has been overstepped. As a result, the fictive simultaneously disrupts and doubles the referential world” (Iser 1993, xiv–xv). Indeed, connectivity not only occurs from text to text, but also between texts and other aspects of the real world about which audiences know, such as the media system in general, their everyday lives, or even autobiographical topics. If a consciousness of boundary-crossing is not detrimental to our aesthetic experience, other metaphors might heuristically be more helpful than that of being submerged in water and isolated from the world around us. What could express the juxtaposition of several simultaneous levels at the core of a transmedia reception experience?

It is here that I would propose the metaphor of the palimpsest, inspired by the work of Monica Kjellman-Chapin (2006) and Sarah Dillon (2007). A palimpsest is a writing material (for example paper or a scroll) that has been used more than once, and where the current text shows traces of the old writing. The word palimpsest is also sometimes applied to refer to writing in the margins, like the medieval marginalia of illuminated manuscripts. In palimpsests, then, several texts appear side by side, their boundaries clear but at the same time affecting each other. Kjellman-Chapin investigates the aesthetic strategies of collage, assemblage, and pastiche as a “family of palimpsestic modes” (2006, 97). They share the characteristic of allowing different materials or fragments to appear side by side to create a new work, even though they are different in their materiality and techniques. The palimpsest originates in the visual medium but can be expressed in many ways, and I also think that it can be applied to the textual medium, to make intertextuality more visible and inescapable. This is in line with

Dillon, who defines the palimpsest as “an involuted phenomenon where otherwise unrelated texts are involved and entangled, intricately interwoven, interrupting and inhabiting each other” (2007, 4). She proposes the adjective “palimpsestuous” (Dillon 2007, 4) as the result of that process.

I first came to think of a palimpsest in relation to *Gin Tama* while analyzing the audience’s responses, as I organized codes and keywords in neat post-it pairs that always turned up together: feudal-modern, high tech-tradition, samurai-otaku... My double codes reminded me strongly of the paintings of Akira Yamaguchi, where Edo period officials sit inside planes or modern skyscrapers, tradition and modernity side by side, exposing each other’s contradictions. Yamaguchi’s focus is on juxtaposition, on sprawling scenes that give an impression of chaos and order at the same time. In *Gin Tama*, reception is always about multiplicity, about decoding several things at the same time, some in the foreground and others in the background, some intradiegetic and some extradiegetic. Like other transmedia universes, *Gin Tama* is a palimpsest of modes, texts, and media, probably more fragmented than many, which admittedly helps making the parts more visible. And if *Gin Tama* is a palimpsest, then we do not need to forget boundaries and shut the world out when interacting with it. Fiction, as Iser says, simultaneously disrupts and doubles the referential world. We can engage in highly intensive meta-interpretive activities and still be engrossed in a process of flow where unity and coherence are not at the level of the fictional world or the story itself, but at the level of the decoding experience.

The shadow of Bakhtin hovers over this chapter without my having engaged his work directly. Bakhtin pointed out that the perfect polyphonic genre (another form of multiplicity) was the novel, but I would now venture that transmedia universes such as *Gin Tama* are the perfect vehicle for hybridization, palimpsests where “many other texts merge, fuse, collide, intersect, speak to, and illuminate, one another—each with its own language and ‘ideologue’” (Capozzi 1989, 413).

Notes

- 1 A low wooden table covered with a blanket and an attached heat source.
- 2 In later work, Wolf has admitted that certain kinds of works can include metalepses and still be immersive, namely “in cases where the text provides plausible (if physically impossible) explanations for the metalepsis in combination with a strong emotionality and possibly also specific generic frames” (2013, 127). One of his examples is *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985), a Woody Allen film in which a character comes out of the film screen and relates to flesh and blood characters. The metalepsis is thematized and becomes a part of the film’s premise.
- 3 For a fan-made visual history of all the *Gintama* games, see BlaGeEvo 2018. Media and fan reviews often note how the games are derivative and do not bring a lot of new value to the franchise. See for example Husin 2018 for a review of the latest game, *Gintama Rumble*.

- 4 The Edo feudal period in Japan extended from 1603 to 1868. The government was based in the city of Edo (modern Tokyo) with the Tokugawa Shōgunate (also known as Bakufu). The emperor in Kyoto held no real power and was more of a symbolic and religious figure. This era is characterized by isolationist policies and a stable social order.
- 5 It can be translated as “the anything store.”
- 6 These two near homonyms are written very differently, but sound very alike. “Silver soul” is written as 銀魂, and pronounced “gintama”; golden balls is pronounced “kintama” and written as 金玉.
- 7 Gin Tama belongs to the so-called shōnen genre, which caters to young men but is also read by other demographics. The serial magazine where it is published is tellingly called *Shūkan shōnen janpu* (Weekly Boys Jump), by Shueisha.
- 8 This device seems to be particularly appreciated by fans, since it is very extensively imitated in the fan fiction writing that can be found in sites such as *Archive of Our Own*. As one of the fans I talked to pointed out: “[I]t is just like my everyday banal life, and yet it is funnier. I am already laughing aloud when I see the titles.”
- 9 Commentary from *Crunchyroll* forum, by user Felstalker on 9 June 2013: www.crunchyroll.com/forumtopic-819825/what-is-so-great-about-gintama (accessed 31 January 2020).
- 10 Due to the many mistakes in this passage, I refrain from using “[sic]” to indicate each individual mistake. I am citing the passage without any editorial corrections.
- 11 Commentary from *YouTube* discussion to the video “Top 7 Funny Dirty Jokes in Gintama,” by user Hanameko (はなめこ), dated as “1 year ago” on 1 May 2019: www.youtube.com/watch?v=cb50TOXp-a4 (accessed 1 May 2019).
- 12 Commentary from Quora forum, by user Nihar Sawant on 5 June 2017: www.quora.com/Is-Gin-Tama-a-good-anime-series (accessed 31 January 2020).
- 13 Commentary from *Crunchyroll* forum, by user sally55510 on 9 June 2013: www.crunchyroll.com/forumtopic-819825/what-is-so-great-about-gintama (accessed 31 January 2020).
- 14 Quote from an interview with a 32-year-old male Spanish *Gin Tama* fan on 15 November 2017.
- 15 Commentary from *Reddit* thread, by user Speedy_Pineapple identified as “1 year ago” on 1 May 2019: www.reddit.com/r/anime/comments/6d7pj3/is_gintama_really_that_good/ (accessed 1 May 2019).
- 16 See, for instance, <https://gintama.fandom.com/wiki/Parodies> (accessed 31 January 2020), <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/ShoutOut/Gintama> (accessed 31 January 2020), and <https://angry-gorilla.tumblr.com/post/116304934712/all-gintama-references-parodies> (accessed 31 January 2020).
- 17 Quote from an interview with a 28-year-old female Spanish *Gin Tama* fan on 2 December 2017.
- 18 *Reddit* discussion dated as “1 year ago” on 1 May 2019 in: www.reddit.com/r/anime/comments/6r50bf/rip_4th_wall_gintama/ (accessed 1 May 2019).
- 19 *Reddit* discussion dated as “1 year ago” on 1 May 2019 in: www.reddit.com/r/anime/comments/6r50bf/rip_4th_wall_gintama/ (accessed 1 May 2019).
- 20 Commentary from *Crunchy Roll* forum www.crunchyroll.com/forumtopic-819825/what-is-so-great-about-gintama#44289301 (accessed 31 January 2020).

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