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David Höwelkröger

Studio Ghibli Films Have Plot Holes?

Vernacular, Connoisseurial Anime Reviews on YouTube as Database Consumption

ABSTRACT

This paper explores how a specific type of vernacular and connoisseurial fan review of anime operates within the anime fan community on YouTube. On the platform, we see an overly detail- and logic-obsessed as well as sarcastic style of review that can be conceived as belonging to what Hiroki Azuma (2009) terms 'database consumption.' The latter represents a way of engaging with and perceiving a media artefact that compares it with a normative and metaphorical database, based on tropes, plot holes, and clichés, on which the quality of a reviewed anime is evaluated. Additionally, through the use of 'crack videos' that employ viral clips and memes, these reviews also lead to a form of fan engagement with the channel that emphasizes a datafied formation of fan knowledge and connoisseurship in the community around AniTube. By focusing on seven reviews of Studio Ghibli films from the channel Anime Sins, this article first explores how verisimilitude is seen as a norm in the community and how this norm fits database consumption. In a second part, it establishes how elements signaling connoisseurship are contributing to the affective engagement of the channel's audience. The last part then shows the limits of database consumption: one possible reason why Studio Ghibli films do not appear to fit the mode of database consumption is because fans tend to be focused more on grand narratives, opposing this mode of reception.

KEYWORDS

YouTube, database consumption, vernacular review, connoisseurship, fan engagement, Otaku, Anime Sins, Studio Ghibli

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Introduction: Connoisseurial Anime 'Sinning' as Vernacular Reviewing

Tropes, perceived plot holes in character motivation or narrative logic, and clichéd forms of storytelling are just a few of the markers one can use when evaluating and reviewing a film: the cliché of a person tripping while being chased, people talking over the roaring sounds of a plane engine and illogically being still able to understand each other, characters acting benevolently toward people who did not treat them nicely before. These are a couple of the 'sins,' i.e., points of criticism, noted by the UK-based YouTube channel Anime Sins. It adapts the concept from the well-known channel CinemaSins.[1] This style arguably belongs to a specialized form of online vernacular film reviewing, specifically "connoisseurial reviewtainment" (Jaakkola 2022, 195-198). Jaakkola conceptualizes this comedic and less serious form of entertaining review as "draw[ing] on the connoisseurial tradition of a knowledgeable, culturally engaged person who can in his presentation—and, indeed, it is often a male person—draw on his vast competence within the field of coverage" (ibid., 197).[2] In addition, it belongs to a form of 'vernacular internet humor' (cf. Höwelkröger 2025, 36, 41, and 45; Jaakkola 2024, 17). The reviews often-times focus more on the "review personalit[y]" (Jaakkola 2022, 195), rather than the reviewed artwork. As a subset of vernacular reviewing—defined by Jaakkola "as forms of reviewing outside the institutional practices" (ibid., 221)—the "reviewers are mostly organized on the social web that is lacking the hierarchical organizational characteristic of institutional professionalism [...] [but are rather] organized within vernacular online lifestyle communities" (ibid.).

As such, this form of fan review has become an established fan practice over time and across multiple platforms. The vernacular review community, that Anime Sins belongs to, is called AniTube and exclusively focuses on criticizing and reviewing anime through various means (cf. High 2022). This article elaborates on this style of overly detail- and logic-obsessed as well as sarcastic review outlined above.

As I will argue, this mode also fits what Japanese cultural theorist Hiroki Azuma (2009) terms "database consumption" (32). Database consumption has not been applied to nitpicky and connoisseurial YouTube reviews, thus, this article will expand on the concept by analyzing how fan reviews and database consumption might overlap. In addition, it elaborates on the category of 'connoisseurial reviewtainment' and shows how the characteristics of vernacular reviewing apply to Anime Sins. Thus, the

1 Anime Sins has been active since 2012 and currently has 138,000 subscribers with 376 videos and over 22.2 million views in total. CinemaSins currently has 9.19 million subscribers. For an analysis of the latter channel, see Höwelkröger 2025. Next to Anime Sins, there is also Anime Wins by the same creator—in turn based on the preceding channel Cinema Wins—established in 2017, to which 223,000 accounts subscribe.

2 While Jaakkola (2022) briefly draws a connection to both "knowledge communities" (89; cf. Jenkins 2006, 20, 32, and 38) as well as Bourdieu's (1986) different forms of capital, she does not elaborate further on them. This article will at least expand a bit on the latter connection.

article brings Azuma's theory and fan reviews together. This synthesis works on two levels: firstly, the creator of said YouTube channel reviews the film in a nitpicky fashion that prioritizes a normative sense of verisimilitude and presents the perceived 'flaws' as a list, which can be conceived as a non-narrative form of database consumption. The database as an "aggregate of" what Azuma terms "settings," in this case, consists of a normative adherence to logic despite the genre the anime belongs to as well as tropes and perceived clichés or "stereotypical narrative development[s]" (ibid., 55, fig.11b, and 42).[3] Secondly, the reviews rely on an audience that is equally familiar with and knowledgeable about these elements, as the viewers 'read up' on the data that the video presents in list form and—ideally—react in an affected manner, i.e., are entertained by how the creator consumes the anime. Additionally, the 'crack videos' that follow each 'sinning' reinforce the sense that connoisseurial fans are able to create "simulacra" of a work or small narratives that are "infinitely woven together out of the same database" (ibid., 42). However, in this case, the database consists of material for meme creation, i.e., non-narrative elements that—in combination—can cause an equally affective response of recognition and entertainment. While Azuma's work has mainly been applied to the reception of characters through the drawn medial nature of anime (cf. e.g., Kacsuk 2021; Smith 2020; Wilde 2019; Wilde 2018, 119 and 138; Tamaki 2011), little attention has been paid, so far, to how tropes, stereotypical narrative developments, and other categories and schemes that occur in more granular modes of reception fit into what Azuma names *moe*-elements (cf. Azuma 2009, 42).[4] *Moe* has multiple possible meanings and connotations depending on the specific context. In this case, for Azuma, "within otaku jargon," it can refer to "a longing for something in particular. […] '[*M*]*oe*-elements' […] are attributes of the object" (ibid., 128f.; cf. also Gailbrath 2014). Christopher Smith (2020) translates Azuma's Japanese term "*moe yōso*" as "affective elements" (209f.). As Azuma (2009) outlines, "[m]ost of the moe-elements are visual, but there are other kinds of moe-elements, such as […] settings […] [or] stereotypical narrative development[s]" (42), which are for the aims of this article, the most important elements. However, this mode of consumption also has, as I will show, its limits, depending on the work (re)viewers 'consume' the database of. For example, the films by Studio Ghibli are not well-suited to the approach of pointing out tropes, clichés, and perceived plot holes as they cannot be 'read up' well in the form of database consumption, but are rather 'read up' through so-called grand narratives.

The practice of nitpicking as a form of media criticism is not a trend that emerged solely in the online sphere.[5] In 2004, one year prior to the founding of YouTube, Greg Nyilasy (2004) cites books from the 1990s that also enumerate errors in films (cf. 21f.). They are, in his view, examples of what he calls "fandom of the method" nitpicking that he contrasts with "textual fandom," i.e., those who

3 For an explanation of the Japanese term *settei* and its connotations, i.e., "'configurations,' 'preferences,' […] 'properties[…]' [and] 'characteristics,'" see Azuma 2009, 132. Similarly, the viewer is, through the output of the video, not consuming the work either, but reading it up through the 'flaws' of stereotypical narrative development and other data. The videos itself might only be considered "simulacra" (Azuma 2009, 42), according to Azuma's terms. As for the outlined mode of criticism, it is less these visual traits, but "settings […] [and] stereotypical narrative development[s]" (ibid.) that serve as the database.

4 As can be argued, database consumption is not specific to anime fans or Japan, though, through the focus on character design, it offers a well-suited field of application (cf. Schäfer 2017, 190; Manovich 2001).

5 See Kallgren's (2022) exemplary supercut of nitpicking in films and TV shows that ranges from *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) to *The Simpsons* (1989-) (26:35-28:26). In addition, CinemaSins posted an excerpt of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*'s Cheer Section entitled "Things I Do Not Understand in Movies" from 1923. The comedic criticism in this article is similar to the ones referred to in the introduction (cf. @cinemasins, Aug. 16, 2022).

"engage with the text creatively" (ibid., 21). This nitpicky, overly plot- and logic-focused review style also appears to have cross-fandom appeal, in addition to not being limited to a single medium: Hollywood films, television series, commercials, music videos, or anime.[6] This mode can be considered a form of 'riffing,' in the tradition of *Mystery Science Theater 3000* (1989) and similar formats (cf. Höwelkröger 2025, 39-43). Riffing refers to a practice of "responding to specific content within […] [a] film through sarcastic comments, humorous gestures, or informative observations" (Foy/Olson 2024, 14). Overemphasizing logic can also be seen as the audience's vernacular and normative understanding of Philippe Hamon's (1982) idea of 'verisimilitude' that is applied to all works in the same manner despite their genre. Verisimilitude means

> an ideological and rhetorical code common to both the addresser and the addressee, guaranteeing the message's readability by implicit or explicit references to an institutionalized (extratextual) value system representing the 'real.' (Hamon 1982, 128, transl. in Roche 2011, 84f.)

As Maarit Jaakkola (2018) states, "[v]ernacularity allows the development of such conceptions of normativity, which emerge from within the community and differ from the professional normativity of institutionalized reviewing" (13). Through this conception of normativity, there is a basis for the 'settings' that make up the immaterial database. Moreover, as Felix Brinker (2022) notes, reviewing formats like Anime Sins have the potential to engage fans by appealing to fans' knowledge of the properties discussed in the videos, which also applies to the channel analyzed here (cf. 49, 51, 54f., 66, and 113; cf. Höwelkröger 2025, 42-44). On the level of locating these fan reviews, Roy Menari and Lucia Tralli (2016, 141-143) conceptualize them as playful "paratextual engagement" (Gray 2016, 19; cf. also Schäfer 2017, 189). Victoria Berndt (2022) also applies the idea of engaging with paratexts to anime fandom more specifically, as they "are not limited to the content of anime themselves but extend to the discourse surrounding anime fandom […] [and] the various activities that anime fans will invest in (such as […] fan videos […])" (169). The nitpicky method or mode has, so far, only received partial attention in scholarship (cf. Menari/Tralli 2016, 143ff.; Berg/Kiss 2016; Lee 2017, 24:34-29:57; Timonen 2020; Jaakkola 2022, 198; Höwelkröger 2025).

Following this introductory part, I will first outline Azuma's theory of database consumption in the next section and introduce the relevant terms for applying Azuma's theory to the reviews of Anime Sins. The analysis will focus on seven videos that review films by the famous animation house Studio Ghibli. The third section centers on how the videos appeal to and engage fans using the aforementioned 'crack video' sequences. This fan engagement, however, reaches its limits in the review of Ghibli films conducted in the previously described nitpicky style. These videos and the response to them from viewers in the comment section show that database consumption, as used by the channel, does not work with every single anime reviewed due to the films enabling a focus that lies more on consumption of narrative than database consumption.

6 As this mode is flourishing on YouTube specifically—e.g., through the channel CinemaSins and others—most likely due to the combination of directly seeing the films and commenting on the perceived 'flaws' as they happen, there has also been a platform-exclusive backlash to these kinds of formats and approaches in the form of other video essays that criticize them (cf. e.g., Kallgren 2022, bobvids 2017 and 2022).

Database Consumption and Recurring Elements in Anime

Hiroki Azuma published *Dōbutsuka-suru posutomodan: Otaku kara mita nihon shakai* (literal translation: *The Animalizing Postmodern: Japanese Society as Seen Through Otaku*) in 2001, and the work was translated into English in 2009 (cf. also Azuma 2012). As other scholars point out, through the release year and the same terminology, a connection can be established to Lev Manovich's *The Language of New Media* (2001) (cf. Schäfer 2017, 187; Schäfer/Roth 2012; Dahlberg-Dodd 2019). As is already apparent in the translators' introduction to the English edition, *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals* (2009), Azuma draws on "a wide range of critical and cultural theories, most notably postmodern and poststructuralist thinkers of the West," including, most notably Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1984), leading to ideas and jargon being applied in a broader sense (Azuma 2009, xx).

In order to understand what Azuma means with the term 'database consumption,' one needs to understand the premises he builds his arguments on: according to him, a shift has occurred during the 1990s and early 2000s in how *otaku* (fans of anime, manga, and Japanese popular culture) 'consume' the narratives in these media (ibid., xviii, 61, and 74). Building on arguments by media theorist Eiji Ōtsuka (2010), who coined the term 'narrative consumption,' Azuma visualizes this mode of consumption as a "tree-like model" which, according to Ōtsuka, has been persistent in the age of "modernism" and consists of small narratives, that is "fragments of grand narratives, that are sold as surrogate products" (Azuma 2012, 37; see also the figures in Azuma 2009, 32f.), i.e., the works fans are consuming. These are located on an "outer surface layer," or what Azuma terms "interface" (ibid., fig.3a and 80; cf. Schäfer 2017, 191ff.; Manovich 2001, 227). The grand narratives in the tree model, e.g., "the structures and ideologies [...] that used to characterize modern society" (Azuma 2009, xvi), are hidden during modernity and usually not accessible to recipients (cf. Schäfer 2017, 190). Azuma (2009) locates them in a "deep inner layer" (31f.). Grand narratives also determine how the small narratives are perceived by shaping the worldview of people who consume them (ibid. 31). One reason for the aforementioned shift from the tree model to the database model is the transition from modernity to post-modernity since the 1970s (cf. ibid., 25-29). He lists two reasons for this shift: an increase in "derivative works" and "the decline of the grand narrative," drawing on Lyotard (Lyotard 1984, 37f. and 65; Azuma 2009, 25f.). Schäfer (2017, 186ff.) adds that another reason for the decline is what Lev Manovich (2001) describes as the emergence of the medial database logic as "a new symbolic form of a computer age" (219). These three aspects of the database logic and its connection to the works based on it will be relevant to the analysis. Most importantly, what replaces these grand narratives, then, is the so-called "grand non-narrative," a "realm that exists behind small narratives but lacks any form of narrativity" (Azuma 2009, 38). In the case of Anime Sins, this is a sense of verisimilitude that the reviewed anime need to follow. This is what the immaterial database consists of: a "database of characters, settings, and moe-elements" (ibid., 61) that have already been defined above. The videos itself might only be considered simulacra, according to Azuma's terms (ibid., 26ff.). As for the outlined mode of criticism, it is less these visual traits, but "settings [...] [and] stereotypical narrative development[s]" (ibid., 42) that serve as the database for a reception of, in this case, anime since they come the closest to the mode of reception that the YouTube channel Anime Sins exhibits. Non-visual *moe*-elements have received little scholarly attention so far, which this article aims to remedy. Importantly, there is not just one single database, but what database is consumed depends on the

"aggregate of settings" (ibid., 55) and affective elements one chooses to 'read up' the work or small narrative with.[7] Azuma does not explicitly elaborate on how they gain the knowledge of these settings or how to 'read up' the database.

The database, itself located in a deep inner layer, is now accessible to consumers, in contrast to the tree model. Thus, they are able to both recognize and recombine elements from the 'settings' they got from the immaterial database. In order for this model to work, one already needs to assume *moe* literate viewers that are familiar with the data, e.g., settings and stereotypical narrative developments (i.e., tropes) that make up these small narratives (cf. Kacsuk 2016, 277).[8] One has to keep in mind, however, that the settings and *moe*-elements are all immaterial, a metaphorical 'imaginationscape' and—in most cases—non-visual. This is where connoisseurship comes into play again, with viewers forming a 'community of interest' that has a kind of film-field-specific or genre-specific capital they can draw on while 'reading up' the database elements (cf. Weckwerth 2020, 100; see also Schules 2014 and Li 2024 for anime and Höwelkröger 2025 for YouTube reviews). There is also a playfulness associated with the recognition and re-assemblage of these affective elements. On the notion of playfulness, Jordan S. Carrol (2019) adds:

> To successfully treat these [fictional] worlds as playsets, fans must cultivate the ability to summon up entire encyclopedias of details. Some fans prove their mastery over the canon by working like debuggers, systematically confirming each [...] [fictional] world's consistency by searching for plot holes and continuity errors to expose in online venues such as YouTube. (10)

By stressing potential plot holes that go along with a detail-obsessed mode of viewing that reviews on sites like YouTube show, we can already see hints of the kind of database consumption employed by channels such as Anime Sins.

One final effect Azuma outlines is that the narrative itself—in contrast to narrative consumption—becomes secondary in this mode of consumption next to the consumption of characters, which are non-narrative as distinct elements (cf. Azuma 2009, 41; Schäfer 2017, 189; Kadobayashi 2017, 88). The elements from these databases, i.e., the mere information, Azuma claims, are valued more than the individual narratives presented in a medium or the worldview that used to be associated with the grand narrative (cf. Azuma 2009, 33). The "appeal is on the surfaces of affective elements constructed around perceivable tropes and designs" (Wilde 2024, 141; see also Berndt 2016, 173f.). Azuma (2009) concludes:

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7 As the translators note, Azuma (2009) uses the word *yomikomu*, which can also mean "'to load,' as data into a database, but it also means 'to read thoroughly and voraciously,' 'to read into,' or even 'to overinterpret,' as a text" (132). This word also fits the nitpicky review mode.

8 While Azuma does not talk about this example specifically, because it did not exist at the time the book was released in Japan, a literal instance of fans 'reading up' a database would be TVTropes.org, established in 2004, where fans collect narrative tropes and narrative devices that are used as shorthand in a fan wiki (cf. Spearman 2024; Harper/Savat 2016, 149f.; Whitford 2015). Here we also see how database consumption normatively "prioritises the model [of the database] over the experience and attempts to classify and represent every aspect of storytelling," thereby also serving "to further stratify and delineate creativity and consumption" (Harper/Savat 2016, 149). One can also apply Paul Booth's (2009) term of "narractivity" here, which is "the process by which communal interactive action constructs and develops a coherent narrative database" (373). As for how this interactivity fits to the 'diffused intellectuality' that leads to fan engagement cf. also Brinker 2022, 48f., 54, and 106 and Höwelkröger 2025.

> [A]s these databases display various expressions depending on the differing modes of 'reading up' by users, consumers, once they are able to possess the settings, can produce any number of derivative works that differ from the originals. If we think of this situation as occurring only in the surface outer layer, the original product or work can seem swallowed by the chaos of a sea of simulacra. However, in reality, it is better to assume the prior existence of a database (i.e., settings) that enables both an original and the works derived from it, depending on how one 'reads up' the database. That is to say, the otaku consumers, who are extremely sensitive to the double-layer structure of postmodernity, clearly distinguish between *the surface outer layer within which dwell simulacra*, i.e., the works, and *the deep inner layer within which dwells the database*, i.e., settings. (33)

Indeed, for Azuma, the YouTube reviews mentioned in the first section may be considered derivative works or simulacra of the reviewed work that fans "mercilessly parody, cut up, and remix the originals" (ibid., 62). To account for this case in vernacular reviews, we need to posit two modes: first, that the reviewer 'reads up' the database based on verisimilitude and genre tropes as well as clichés and evaluates works based on it, showing an awareness of it. Second, we need to assume that users who watch the video with the individual lists of flaws as data also read it up as such and are equally knowledgeable. They are aware that what they 'read up' from these videos is not the narrative—as the latter convey it in a listed fashion—but the 'flaws'/'sins' of the small narrative or work reviewed in this video. Additionally, the references created in the 'crack video' segments after a review are intended to be recognized by the viewers.

Database Consumption and Vernacular Reviewing in the Reviews of Anime Sins

When applying Azuma's model of database consumption, i.e., how the database is 'read up' by the reviewer of the Anime Sins YouTube channel, each anime serves as a small narrative. Narrative tropes, character consistency, Azuma's "stereotypical narrative development[s]" (ibid., 42) or a certain normative sense of logic or verisimilitude serve as the data with which the reviewer evaluates the work. Each anime is judged "by the quality of the database in the background" (ibid., 33), i.e., how the fragments fit into the data of how logical an anime is or how it exemplifies certain narrative clichés. By using this mode, we can see that these series are watched in a way that does not seek to cultivate a specific "worldview" (ibid., xvi, 31, 34, 38, and 54). Even though the videos are technically reviews, i.e., qualitative evaluations of a work, they are not watched by viewers and subscribers of the channel in order to get an assessment of the 'quality' of the work, but only to see how the work fits into the established parameters of the database (cf. Jaakkola 2022, 216). In this case, this means both criticizing when the narrative becomes too stereotypical—in the mind of the reviewer—and criticizing it when it does not follow a certain 'type' of story, i.e., logically well-told. The reviewer keeps referring to this dataset in all of his reviews despite the anime's different genres, which might influence how verisimilitude is to be perceived by viewers (cf. Neale 1990, 46-49). Thus, the database used for the videos is taken from the sense of verisimilitude as a grand non-narrative.[9] The viewers of the channel

9 Still, since there are values associated with it, like logic, one might consider the principles behind the grand non-narrative to be a grand narrative after all. Verisimilitude certainly gives structure to the reviews as well as serving as an outlook/worldview on media. However, due to the way that the anime and 'sins' are presented in the video, I argue that these are still non-narrative.

are thus consuming the tropes and ideas that constitute a 'logical' story, not the narrative of the anime itself (cf. Azuma 2009, 54).

The videos of Anime Sins always adhere to the same structure (cf. Höwelkröger 2025, 38f.). The title of the film is shown, along with the superimposed words of the video title ("Everything Wrong With: [Anime Title]"), along with a disclaimer about spoilers and that the video is only meant for "comedy purposes."[10] A disembodied voice then enumerates 'flaws' or so-called 'sins' that are shown in subtitles while clips from the anime play.[11] The narration is also shown in subtitles, while a so-called "Sin Counter" in the upper-left corner is counting upwards with every 'sin' found, accompanied by a bell sound.[12] Importantly for this article, it is done in and presented as a form of database consumption at the level of the plot, while appearing in a non-narrative, decontextualized form as a numbered list. As the video titles say, viewers get a query of "Everything Wrong With" a certain anime: "Many consumers [of these videos] […] neither appreciate a complete anime as a work (in the traditional mode of consumption) nor consume a worldview in the background […] (in narrative consumption): from the beginning they need only non-narratives" (Azuma 2009, 38). By this, we see how the videos in their list form serve as simulacra of the original works (cf. ibid., 38, 86, 95, and 105; Schäfer 2017, 189f.). If the reception of the YouTuber is a 'second-order observation,' using Niklas Luhmann's (2000) terminology from Systems Theory, viewers watching these videos participate in a 'third-order observation' (cf. 54-101). Notably, these 'flaws' are normative and highly subjective and do not reflect actual mistakes in production, like drawing or compositing errors, among others. Rather, an ideal setting of logic verisimilitude is posited; and every kind of character action, dialogue, or plot element that does not match this setting is 'sinned.' For example, in the most popular video out of the seven videos on Studio Ghibli films (over 80,000 views), "Everything Wrong With: Howl's Moving Castle," the narrator mostly criticizes character actions, such as failing to see a person that stands right in front of a character (00:56-01:08), or how Sophie, a young woman whom a witch curses to live her life as old lady, has "clothing inside of her room that fits that of a 90-year-old woman" (03:00-03:12). In the end, the film is attributed with 25 'sins.' After the presentation of the list, Anime Sins comments that he feels like the film

> slightly suffered from the ancient disease: notexplainingalotitis [sic]. Now thankfully I did a bunch of Googling during the movie so I'm pretty filled in but I feel like the movie could have done with being an extra 20-30 minutes longer to give it time to explain a lot more things. One of the biggest being the war that rages, how it started and why and what Howl's part in it was meant to be and so on and so forth. (08:28-08:57)

10 It might be argued that the reviewer merely plays a character or a fictionalized version of himself, as the creators of CinemaSins (self-declaredly) do for their channel (cf. Jaakkola 2022, 197; Jaakkola 2024, 45 and 195f. and bobvids 2017, 04:50–08:03). However, this stance also seems to be present when he is briefly commenting on his enjoyment of the film at the end of the lists, which at least appear to be more sincere.

11 Over time, the YouTuber has briefly shown up on-camera in later videos to perform a brief skit.

12 For CinemaSins, video essayist Kyle Kallgren describes this bell as "the most lasting contribution to the discourse around film" (Kallgren 2022, 30:16). He furthermore describes its function as "film crit designed by Ivan Pavlov," as it provides "a signal to stop thinking, have a laugh, and move on […]. The ding creates the ironic distance necessary between the viewer and film to nullify any emotional reaction and release it in a signal to laugh. It is a thought-terminating sound effect. A laugh track. It is a scene transition. An ending punctuation mark" (30:16–31:18).

Through this evaluation, we see that the stance the reviewer takes apparently leaves no room for ambiguity or implicit worldbuilding in films, prioritizing a general sense of verisimilitude with character actions being presented as understandable as possible, ideally through mere statement of intent. The 'sins' presented in the video can then be consumed by the viewers through the literal interface of the YouTube video, as they 'read up' the data presented to them in this form.

Thus, while certainly humorous, this type of review cannot be easily equated to modes of watching that Wendy Geiger, Jon Bruning, and Jake Harwood (2001, 55f.) attribute to Ien Ang's (1985) "ironic viewing attitude" (cf. 96-102 and 107). Though, as mentioned, it can be seen as a form of 'riffing,' too (cf. Höwelkröger 2025, 39-43). Crucially, criticism is reduced to 'mere' data/information in these videos, while other qualitative points of reference like ideology, theme, or meaning, i.e., grand narratives, are overall disregarded and not considered (cf. Kallgren 2022; Höwelkröger 2025). Since these types of criticism are pointed out repeatedly, not just in anime reviews, but also in other YouTube videos adapting the CinemaSins format for different media like video games, commercials, or music videos, this mode of database consumption is not just used by anime fans but is vernacularly prevalent in more online review formats and works for every medium.

Schäfer (2017) describes this practice as a playful oscillation between a reactive consumption and a mode that directly accesses the database (cf. 192): while the video creator accesses the aforementioned 'data' when writing the video script, the mix presenting an anime as small narrative entertains viewers, ideally also moving them emotionally, while they also compare the database of verisimilitude and stereotypical narrative developments in their heads.[13] In this contrast between a desire for small narratives and database consumption, Azuma (2009) sees "a structure that generally characterizes subjectivity in postmodern society" (86). Additionally, one can conceptualize these videos as a derivative of the individual anime, as they recap it in abbreviated form.[14]

These videos fit the label of the vernacular review: critics become "individualized experts in their own reading experience, mediating their intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic ephemeral experience" (Jaakkola 2022, 170). Firstly, they fit into the category of "co-consumption" in amateur spaces, which Jaakkola sees as "[t]he production of cultural consumer expertise […] in the [specific] community and platform-specific practices of multimodal metadiscourse (discourse on the discursively constructed objects, i.e., existing discourses)" (ibid., 215). The multimodal metadiscourse might just as well refer to database consumption in these videos, as they also create discourse about the data 'read up' by the reviewer and presented to the viewers. Motivation for this stems from "the feeling of being part of a reviewing community, and getting inspiration and support" (ibid., 216), in this case, for the approach of nitpicky anime reviews. "Fans learn and internalize these [database] elements during collective watching, situated in the fan-platform, fan-primary text and fan-fan interactions [that can all happen online],

13 Azuma (2009) claims that individuals rarely connect small narratives and grand non-narratives in this mode of consumption (cf. 74-86). This article cannot elaborate on this claim, but it is noticeable that identifying 'flaws' in anime in such a fashion does not diminish the overall enjoyment of the work, as the reviewer also repeatedly states for himself in his reviews at the end of the lists. This might be due to the generally detached and ironic habitus that the reviewer and his viewers have adopted, but that they can also get out of again.

14 Whether or not viewers have actually seen the anime that is 'sinned' here, is not clear, though it can be presumed from most of the comments under the videos that they are already familiar with the anime being discussed. In a video essay, YouTuber bobvids criticized that some comments under Anime Sins' direct inspiration CinemaSins stated that they did not even have to watch the film being 'sinned' in the video, as these videos also served as a plot recap for them (13:47-15:06).

which are re-contextualised and prosumed with new meanings" (Chen 2020, 329). Thus, this specific community "remains segmental in […] [its] organization of knowledge" (ibid.). Michael D. High (2022) also sees co-consumption as a relevant factor for AniTube. However, he does not focus on this format specifically, but rather on more general fannish reviews and video essays.

Secondly, another element of vernacular reviewing, according to Jaakkola (2022), is "[m]e-viewing [which] is performative and affective lifestyle work, typically shared with like-minded users within the cycles of cultural intramediation" (217). Cultural intramediation broadly refers to fans sharing their reception of an artwork and thus maintaining a place in the community that is AniTube. She identifies "three major dimensions in reviewers' labor" (ibid.). These are "the love of culture, self-journaling and life staging" (ibid., 218). The first aspect of love of the (fan)culture is met through the culture of nit-picking and the inclusion of memes, which will be analyzed in-depth in the next section. Self-journaling occurs through the videos themselves, which build an archive (or a database in itself) of what the reviewer has watched. Life staging happens through the YouTube channel itself, as it "manifests concretely by making […] a reviewer account," thus establishing itself "in the reviewsphere" (ibid., 219) on AniTube.

While the views on the Anime Sins channel have declined significantly over the last couple of years, the channel creator has established the much more successful Anime Wins channel in the meantime, which has 222,000 subscribers.[15] When we consider the views of Anime Sins' videos, a clear picture emerges of what kinds of anime appear to be more suited to the premises of database consumption and reviewing based on verisimilitude. Probably owing to the trope-oriented *shōnen* genre (action-oriented series aimed at young boys), it is not surprising that titles like *My Hero Academia* (2016-2025, over a million views), *One Punch Man* (2015-), and *Death Note* (2006-2007, over 500,000 views), as well as *Hunter x Hunter* (2011-2014) and *Sword Art Online* (2012-), both with over 300,000 views, or *Dragon Ball Super* (2015-2018) and *Demon Slayer* (2019-), still with over 140,000 views, appear to be popular.[16] These are also highly 'trope-ified' series with "stereotypical narrative development" (Azuma 2009, 42) and settings also that fit into the mode of database consumption, not just in terms of character design, but also how action scenes are conveyed (cf. Suan 2021a, 185f.; Suan 2021b, 293; Wilde 2024, 140ff.). Noticeably absent are videos about anime from the genres of *shōjo* (aimed at girls, often romance-centered), *josei* (aimed at adult women), or Boys' and Girls' Love (*shōnen ai/yaoi* and *shōjo ai/yuri*, respectively). Not only does this give an indication of the reviewer's own tastes. It also leads to the viewers identifying the creator as 'one of them,' thus contributing to community-building and identity work Jaakkola (2022) identifies as central for vernacular reviewing (cf. 3, 16, 23, 52f., 61, 98, 136, 171, and 213). Conversely, it shows what kind of audience the channel wants to attract, i.e., one that the reviewer is expected to like while being familiar with the genre's tropes.[17] It also shapes how anime is perceived discursively: in

15 This is also evident through the creator's crowdfunding Patreon page which displays the Anime Wins channel on top of the site. At time of writing (Dec. 2025), the creator has 852 paying members and over 3,200 overall, earning over USD 5,700 per month (see www.patreon.com/thehonestgamer/about). The existence of a Patreon page is also the reason why this channel, among others, cannot be qualified as purely "re-creational work" (Jaakkola 2022, 221). While still affective and performatively signifying a belonging to the anime fandom culture, it does not fit with Jaakkola's connotation of re-creational labor, while it arguably functions more as recreational activity for viewers. On the relation between YouTube and Patreon and how the ability to link to it on YouTube is related to platform affordances see High 2022; Rösch 2025, 50.

16 In a similar manner, the Anime Wins channel reviews anime of the same genre. Sandra Annett (2014) also comments on "the masculinist bent" (174) of Azuma's theory more generally.

17 For a more detailed presentation on these aforementioned genres see Shamoon 2024.

English-speaking as well as in European countries—only anime of a certain style and/or target group or genre are considered to be "anime proper," while other types of animation that might not be from Japan, but fit the "anime-esque" style or animation from Japan that is not "anime-esque" enough, does not qualify for the label (Suan 2021b, 72, 135, 139, 148, 159ff., and 194ff.).

A database-like privilege of knowledge mainly engages fans who are similarly focused on an encyclopedic knowledge of media. This is best examined through the 'crack video'-section of the videos that show up before the outro. 'Crack videos' are a

> subgenre of transformative work posted online which emphasizes intertextuality as a mode for random and often nonsensical humor, drawing from Generation Z online meme cultures. […] [They] can be formatted as […] highly segmented videos that combine a main text with one or more intertexts from popular culture (films, television programs, video games, memes, Vines, TikTok sounds, popular music, [viral videos] etc.). (Serafini 2025, 111)

In this case, a series of clips from the anime 'sinned' are combined with certain fitting (sometimes viral or memetic) sounds, quotes, or clips from films, series, or other anime. How these 'crack video' sections also fit into the mode of database consumption and work to establish an audience will be the focus of the next section.

Database Consumption in the Reception of 'Crack Videos' as Memes in Vernacular Reviews

Next to the reviewing and 'sinning' part, the aforementioned 'crack videos' also work in a similar database-fashion: The 'crack videos' transform affective elements like moving images, sounds, and other material from the small narratives of the films and TV series that are reviewed "into the raw materials for remixing, presenting them as fragments without a unified narrative" (Azuma 2009, 38). That database consumption forms a basis for parody, mashups, and remixes of (Japanese) popular culture generally has already been established above (cf. ibid., 62). These fragments also mostly function in a non-narrative fashion, and even when they do tell a small narrative, compared to a "privileged original" work, they do not have a "unified narrative" (ibid., 38) as such. The database drawn on for 'crack videos' here is also immaterial and depends on highly contextual and associative knowledge about media: as an aggregate of settings, i.e., properties and characteristics shown in other works used as 'raw data' and are applied to small narratives in an intertextual manner, once again evoking Jan Weckwerth's (2020) film-field-specific or genre-specific capital (cf. 100) that both creators and consumers need to possess in order to produce and understand 'crack videos.' Thus, similar to internet memes, they also require a certain familiarity with the base texts that are being referenced and their use in the videos signifies that familiarity to an in-group, in this case, other anime fans (cf. Miltner 2014; Watzky 2020; Schäfer 2023, 21).[18]

Felix Brinker (2022, 66) uses Umberto Eco's (1985) term "catalyzers of collective memories" (3) when referring to the fans' socially diffused knowledge that can be, in this case, also applied to anime and

18 At least for the videos about Ghibli films, there are only two that have these kinds of sequences. Most of the individual scenes appear to be mere 'reaction shots,' as characters from other anime, e.g., *Jojo's Bizarre Adventure* (2012-), react to something—comparatively—outlandish happening in the films.

meme knowledge. These catalyzers refer to a distinct intertextual mode that recognizes "archetypical situations, established character types, or clichés" (Brinker, 77) in other works. The use of internet- or anime-related memes is not just limited to 'crack videos' at the end of videos by Anime Sins, but can also occur throughout the videos (cf. e.g., Anime Sins 2020a 02:16-02:39).[19] This form of fan engagement appeals to a connoisseurial audience, making it feel included and 'in the know' in the online community of fans, "developing ways for mutual communication" (Jaakkola 2022, 89) through memes that strengthen the sense of community on the channel. For example, in "Everything Wrong With: Princess Mononoke" (Anime Sins 2018b), we see characters jumping over stones in a river while the jumping sounds from the *Super Mario* video game series (1985-) are being played (08:53-08:57). The standard situation of jumping over obstacles is present as setting, matched in the immaterial database of media knowledge with a similar situation from a Japanese video game. The YouTuber takes the characteristic sound of jumping to create a derivative work of both the film and the game.

Another scene in the 'crack video' resembles Azuma's examples of character design elements more closely: when the so-called Nightwalker approaches a village in the film in his giant blue, gooey form, we hear a phrase from the series *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood* (2009-2010) that is uttered by a character in the series who looks quite similar to the Nightwalker (cf. Anime Sins 2018b, 08:59-09:10). Both are giant towering figures with dark translucent tentacles that kill everyone who comes in contact with them. Through this example, we can see how Azuma's concept of recurring elements in the character design falls together with those "catalyzers of collective memories" (Eco 1985, 3). This form of fan engagement can then lead to, but does not necessarily have to, people liking the video, leaving comments on it, and ultimately, contributing to the channel's Patreon crowdfunding page. Here is where the elements of vernacular connoisseurial reviewtainment, database consumption, and fan engagement converge.

The Limits of Database Consumption in Vernacular Reviews of Studio Ghibli Films

The preceding sections have analyzed how modes of database consumption appear in vernacular video reviews. However, as has been alluded to, this mode also implies that the channel treats the material purely as based on verisimilitude, recurring situations, and logic. This also raises questions of whether this review mode works for every film that has 'sinned,' according to the channel. Comparing the views of the most popular videos from the channel, as outlined above, with the ones reviewing and 'sinning' the films from popular animation studio Ghibli, the latter do rank significantly lower view-wise, despite their global popularity.

Apart from the already mentioned and most popular video, "Everything Wrong With: Howl's Moving Castle (Howl no Ugoku Shiro)" (Anime Sins 2018a), the second-most popular video is "Everything Wrong With: Spirited Away" with over 49,000 views (Anime Sins 2018c). "Everything Wrong With: Princess Mononoke (Mononoke Hime)" (Anime Sins 2018b) still has over 28,000 views, and "Everything Wrong With: The Cat Returns (Neko no Ongaeshi)" counts over 10,000 views (Anime Sins 2020b). Every other Ghibli-related video ("Everything Wrong With: Castle In The Sky" [Anime Sins 2020a], "Everything Wrong With: My Neighbor Totoro (Tonari no Totoro)" [Anime Sins 2020b], and "Everything Wrong With: Porco Rosso" [Anime Sins 2022a]) did not reach the mark of 10,000 views, as of writing, with the latter

19 This scene shows an assemblage of a scene from the series *Workaholics* (2007-2012) and two separate memes from *Jojo's Bizarre Adventure* (mostly on the audio level), remixing these snippets in such a way that they become affectively entertaining for viewers who are familiar with either or both series (cf. Tan 2025, 291).

video having the lowest (1,619) views in total, while the other two at least cleared the 5,000 views mark (8,172 and 7,589 views, respectively). All of them are below the channel's top 50 most popular videos. One possible reason for this might be that the channel has experienced a noticeable decline in views from 2021 onwards. Another might be an observation by Jaqueline Berndt (2018): Miyazaki aims to tell stories that are communicable across geopolitical and subcultural boundaries. Therefore, they function without prior knowledge of specific codes. Most anime, however are based on conventions or database references that are repeated and varied and, precisely because they are common property of fan culture, open up different styles and modes of composition and usages than self-contained narratives—namely, highly contextual and participatory ones (cf. ibid., 57).[20]

When most anime, as Lukas R. A. Wilde (2024) claims, consist of "a series of tropes and discernible elements that are part of the lexicon and repertoire of fans and viewers within the global community" (141), as for example in *shōnen* or other genres, Ghibli's approach to film production aims to be a bit more inclusive. The studio has, over time, developed a brand identity, associated with grand narratives such as environmentalism, pacifism, and vivid high-quality animation (cf. Denison 2015, 125; Hernández-Pérez 2016, 304f.). This more thematic form of narrative consumption plays less of a role in the comparatively more referential anime series and the films' reception through Anime Sins, as evidenced by comments of the video. They repeatedly underline that Ghibli films do not appear to lend themselves to be 'read up' against a database of verisimilitude, logic, and tropes. Commenters even question the standardized video titles, claiming there is 'nothing wrong' with the films. There is a disconnect that Jaakkola (2022) partially attributes to the inherent unseriousness of the connoisseurial review format (cf. 195f. and 198). Comments of the video about *Princess Mononoke* (Anime Sins, 2018b) even justify the issues that have been pointed out as 'flaws' by the video with further contextualization from scenes in the film or explain that certain behaviors stem from Japanese customs. Database consumption, as used by fans, does not account for such cases, as the data they 'read up' often appears to be too granular or not focused on the narrative of a work. This might be another major reason why Ghibli films are not perceived to fit the mode of database consumption: at least in this case, fans appear to feel more inclined to consume these works narratively and internalize the grand narratives or worldviews the films are transporting (cf. Azuma 2009, 30f.).

Despite all this, it would also be untrue to suggest that Ghibli films have no recurring "tropes or discernible elements" (Wilde 2024, 141) at all: for example, Tom Mes and Francis M. Agnoli (2021) propose "a modular genre" when thinking about Studio Ghibli as its own genre with its own characteristics, "recycling not characters or story worlds but instead styles, themes and methods" (215). Regarding character design, Stevie Suan (2021) also identifies recurring elements, while acknowledging that most of them do not appear in other anime (cf. 153f., 170f., and 231f.). Thus, while Ghibli films do not explicitly draw from anime sources other than the Ghibli 'database,' it does not mean that the studio's works are inherently hermetically sealed and to be used in other cultural contexts in a generic or memetic fashion (cf. Morimoto 2018) or that they are entirely original from an intertextual standpoint (cf. Nardi/Fancher 2025).

20 Miyazaki rejects the label of 'anime' for his works, however, especially in Western countries, they are still grouped together with other anime (cf. Miyazaki 2009 [1996], 72, 85, and 21; Berndt 2018, 57). This also ties into notions of what is understood as anime along with the difference between anime as primarily television series and animated films (cf. Berndt 2021, 5f.; Suan 2017, 64f.; Suan 2021b, 72ff.; Lamarre 2020, 310f. and 318ff.).

Conclusion

The model of database consumption provides a helpful framework to understand vernacular and connoisseurial modes of reception and film criticism on YouTube when the database is rooted in evaluating media based on recurring elements—both in the works themselves and in the criteria used for such evaluation. Beyond elements of character design, its application, especially to tropes, has, however, remained rather limited. Scholars such as Azuma (2009) and Manovich (2001) posit a replacement of narratives with a more datafied approach to artworks, from an audience perspective. The metaphor of the database that can be queried for recurring patterns that cause an affective reaction appears to be fitting for engagement with media online (cf. Tohline 2021). Geert Loovink (2008) stated, "We no longer watch films or TV; we watch databases" (9). While he is referring to the interface and infrastructure of YouTube, as has been outlined, this method of nitpicking and the fandom around it originated before YouTube and arguably even before the internet. However, his words can also be applied to the metaphor of database consumption. On the internet, we see a mode of vernacularized and connoisseurial presentation that benefits from commonly shared databases in Azuma's sense. A 'community of interest' is able to form around this review style, with specific forms of communication seen in memes and 'crack videos' and is thus able to have a conversation around the media that is nitpicked, as the YouTube channel of Anime Sins has shown. This practice also affects how the audience perceives both the media consumed and the creators behind the reviews and their (display of) taste: they learn how database consumption works and how one applies it in the context of a database based on normative verisimilitude focused on plot and character logic as "stereotypical narrative development" (Azuma 2009, 42) to criticize. However, database consumption is limited insofar as the works and small narratives under review fit it. As the videos discussing the films by Studio Ghibli and the viewer responses have shown, there are cases in which fans still display an affection for works with grand narratives. Moreover, presenting database consumption in a review format appeals to a communal sense of fan knowledge as well as film-field-specific or genre-specific capital (cf. Weckwerth 2020, 100), amassed by "knowledge communities" (Jenkins 2006, 20, 32, and 38) . While this article could only consider one channel related to anime, further research is necessary: how do audiences learn about the 'settings' in different databases and how does this approach potentially change the concept of database consumption?

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