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Recontextualizing Characters. Media Convergence and Pre-/Meta-Narrative Character Circulation[1]

Abstract

This introduction to the topic of character recontextualization sets out to address a variety of character products that cannot be adequately described as ›narrative‹: Coffee mugs, clothes, office supplies, and other material objects. Fictitious entities such as Hello Kitty or Hatsune Miku have given rise to a veritable wave of literature in Japanese studies outlining a ›pre-narrative character theory‹. Characters without stories, based entirely on highly affective iconographies, often function as hubs, interfaces, or intersections for diverging ›games of make-believe‹ that are in turn often forms of an aesthetic, medial, social, and especially diegetic *recontextualization*. Consequently, every pre-narrative character could also be addressed as a decontextualized, trans-fictional, trans-world, or »meta-narrative nodal point« (AZUMA). Often, these recontextualizations take place within the collaborative networks of participatory culture, highlighting the decontextualized character state as central to what is known as ›media convergence‹ or ›media mix‹. I will situate these discussions within the field of international character theory, arguing that a systematic divide runs through existing literature on how to deal with decontextualized, trans-fictional, trans-world entities. My article closes with some indications on what a discourse often seen as specific for Japanese studies, might contribute on a variety of international phenomena and perspectives.

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[1] The following arguments and observations have first been developed in my media studies/Japanese studies dissertation on the functions of ›characters‹ (*kyara*) within everyday communication of contemporary Japanese society (WILDE 2018a), later expanded in WILDE 2018b.

Introduction. Transmedial Characters without Stories

Characters are essential for what is discussed as ›media convergence‹ (cf. JEN-KINS 2006) or ›media mix‹ (the respective Japanese concept, cf. GALBRAITH/KAR-LIN 2016). These terms both address, maybe with a slightly different emphasis, two interconnected dynamics: on the one hand the expansion of narrative works and worlds by means of different media forms and platforms; on the other, participatory practices related to the creation of user-generated content (cf. SCOLARI/BERTETTI/FREEMAN 2014). Characters can not only be considered the ›currency‹ of and between different forms of media (cf. LESCHKE 2010: 11). In many cases, they also serve as a kind of ›fuel‹, as an incentive for both dynam-ics mentioned above. Marc Steinberg, in his groundbreaking, historically-ori-ented media studies survey of Japanese character marketing, considered a ›character‹ consequently as »an entity that […] both supports the transmedia movement and environmental diffusion […] and refuses to be pinned down in any one medial incarnation« (STEINBERG 2012: 44).

It is not surprising, then, that many character theories in recent years are essentially thought of as *transmedial*: applicable to representations of char-acters through a variety of media (e.g. film, television, comics, video games, etc.). In most cases, however, such theories—often emerging close to what is understood as a ›transmedial narratology‹ (cf. THON 2016)—specifically focus on *narrative media*: media artefacts which offer representations of a story-world, of a diegesis. Consequently, characters are often considered »first and foremost elements of the constructed narrative world« (EDER/JANNIDIS/SCHNEI-DER 2010: 9).

Pre-narrative characters, in contrast, seem to share the common trait of existing in denial of any such ›mandated‹ narratives, official stories, or fictional worlds surrounding them. In this regard, one might consider ›virtual idols‹ or ›fictional celebrities‹ like Hatsune Miku; corporate icons like LINE's Cony or Brown the Bear; or mascots, like the German Railway (DB)'s Max Maulwurf or Paris RATP's Serge the Rabbit. In Japan, ›communicational characters‹ are found on street signs, instruction manuals, in post offices, corner stores, or supermarkets. The notion that there is a contemporary »*character*-ization« of Japan (*kyara-ka* キャラ化, AIHARA 2007) has in fact become a truism within Jap-anese studies by now. »Living in Japan today means being surrounded by characters. The streets are overflowing with products featuring popular char-acters, such as Hello Kitty and Pokémon« (SADANOBU 2015: 10). Some are in-vented with great effort, some emerge out of public contests, some even went through a kind of public grass-roots career (cf. INUYAMA/SUGIMOTO 2012). Fur-ther examples are fictitious beings that were invented only as toys, such as Mattel's Barbie doll or Takara's Licca-chan; and, finally, ›pure‹ product place-ment figures such as Sanrio's notorious Hello Kitty or Thomas Goletz' Diddl Maus which circulate on clothes, coffee mugs, and office supplies. To account for all these phenomena, Japanese theorists offer the helpful conceptual dis-tinction between ›*kyarakutā*‹ (character), on the one hand: a fictitious being

represented to exist within a diegetic domain (storyworld); and ›*kyara*‹, on the other hand: a stylized or simplified visual figuration that can be easily reproduced and consumed outside of its original narrative context (cf. GALBRAITH 2009: 125). Although the term has many contradicting meanings in both everyday and specialized language (cf. SADANOBU 2015), critic Itō Gō[2] proposed to use it as a technical term for fictional entities in a »proto-character-state« (*puroto kyarakutā-tai* 前キャラクター態, ITŌ 2005: 150).[3] His initial model in 2005 has since given rise to a veritable wave of literature in Japanese studies (cf. KACSUK 2016), outlining a ›pre-narrative character theory‹ that has rarely been connected to existing international literature on transmedia characters.

From the Pre-Narrative to the Meta-Narrative Character State

From a narratological perspective, *kyara* phenomena might seem of limited interest. They certainly offer a considerable amount of resistance to the tools and methods of narratological analyses. Cultural critic Azuma Hiroki spoke prominently of a »grand non-narrative« (*ōki na hi-monogatari* 大きな非物語, AZUMA 2001: 54), emerging with *kyara* or, maybe, being mediated by *kyara*. While the media artefacts they are circulating on/in (all kinds of material *kyara guzzu*, character goods) might not primarily be described as ›narrative‹, they are nevertheless not accurately addressed *without* any account of imaginative ›make-believe‹. Steinberg convincingly argued that »[a]s children stickered their surroundings with the image of Atomu [Astro Boy], they incorporated or transposed an Atomu world into their environment« (STEINBERG 2012: 81). Accordingly, a pre-narrative character is often intended to ›overlay‹ the actual environment of their material representation.

   Their ›pre-narrative‹ state is not so much based on a *lack* of narrative information—which could always be supplemented according to something like Marie-Laure Ryan's »principle of minimal departure« (RYAN 2014: 35), by which recipients draw on their general world-knowledge (or previous mediated knowledge) to provide information that the representation is withholding. It has become a commonplace within character theories, regardless of orientation, that fictional entities are by necessity ›incomplete‹. In this regard, the tens of thousands of Hello Kitty products would only appear *more* incomplete, prescribing almost no ›fictional propositions‹ about Kitty's biography and her

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[2] Throughout this issue, Japanese names are given in the original order, with the family name preceding the given name.

[3] In general, I do not think it is helpful to equate ›characters‹ with fictionality: A text that is considered ›non-fictional‹ (as a documentary) will construct its characters in exactly the same way, there is just a different pragmatic truth-claim surrounding the representation. The difference of non-fictional characters to meta-narrative, trans-world entities is that the former will be expected to inhabit one world, and one world only: the one that is acepted as our shared ›reality‹, while deviations must be counted as falsehoods or lies. Characters accepted to have meta-narrative qualities (*kyara*) must therefore be trans-*fictional* by definition.

diegetic contexts. The intuition that Kitty, and the many other entities typically discussed as *kyara*, might be something ontologically different from the usual suspects of transmedial character theory (such as Sherlock Holmes, Batman, or Luke Skywalker, cf. ROSENDO 2016) is rather based on the (over)abundance of competing and utterly incoherent information.

Fig. 1:
Kitty ›as‹ Mount Fuji—›narrative incoherence‹ taken to the extreme; only one of the innumerable ›masks‹ or ›roles‹ Sanrio's iconic *kyara* adopts throughout its countless representations (photographed by the author, 2015 – L.W.)

An instructive example could be found in a tourism poster of Kitty ›as‹ Mount Fuji (found in the restaurant area of the Mt. Fuji bus station, cf. fig. 1). Toratani Kiyoko (2013: 45) uses such examples to observe a »spectrum of pretense« between »Kitty as agent« and »Kitty as object«. At the ›object-end‹ of the scale—where Kitty is depicted *as* a tiny grain of rice or, indeed, as a mountain—there can no longer be any kind of coherence between the semantic information provided in other representations. Myriads of regionalized Kitty-products (*gotōchi* kitty) put Kitty in ever-changing roles, settings, and represented contexts, as if there was a decontextualized entity ›behind‹ all her contextualized instances. The notion that *kyara* function very much like fictitious actors, play-acting or performing a number of incoherent fictional roles as if they had »a body produced (that of the character) and a body producing (that of the actor)« (STEINBERG 2012: 68), is central to the most successful Japanese franchises today.

Hatsune Miku is another obvious example. Initially, the virtual idol ›existed‹ only as the artificial singing part of the Vocaloid2 synthesizer by Crypton Future Media. The manga artist KEI finally produced her a drawn body,

whereupon she went through a rapid career as a pop culture icon, as a ›fictional celebrity‹. During Miku's rise through Japanese and international popular culture, many collaborative media products and platforms developed around her. »Hatsune Miku is one of the most successful cases of convergence, at least in the Japanese media industry, in the twenty-first century« (LEAVITT/KNIGHT/YO-SHIBA 2016: 202). None of her countless instances appearing in fan-produced videos and artworks every day, however, are bound by the requirements of any diegetic coherency. She might appear as a medieval princess in one video, as an early 20th century American circus star in another, or as an Edo-period Japanese warrior. For Sandra Annet, this shows that

> it is possible for fans to engage with the structures that *kyara* create and destratify them. They can find ways to experiment with *kyara* by producing their own programs of desiring. *Kyara* can become the focus of *dōjinshi*, songs, videos, and artworks that have very little to do with the organized uses of *kyara* and more to do with the desires of smaller collectives (ANNETT 2014: 173).

In other words, if characters without stories (*kyara*) are considered ›pre- or proto-narrative‹, as manga critic Itō Gō famously coined it, they essentially function as hubs, interfaces, or intersections for diverging ›games of make-believe‹. These games, in turn, are often forms of aesthetic, medial, social, and especially diegetic *recontextualizations*. Consequently, every *kyara* could also be addressed as a »meta-narrative nodal point« (*meta-monogatari-teki na kessetsuten* メタ物語的な結節点, AZUMA 2007: 125). *Kyara* can easily be placed back into heterogeneous narrative contexts (as contingent *kyarakutā*). »Abstractly speaking«, Azuma pondered in a conversation with Itō and manga theorist Natsume Fusanosuke, »a character is a thing that has only one life. In contrast, if we can imagine an existence of multiple lives, we have a *kyara*« (in ITŌ/NATSUME/AZUMA 2007: 153, translation L.W.).[4] In a nutshell, the »essence of the distinction between *kyarakutā* and *kyara* is based on the imagination of possible worlds« (in ITŌ/NATSUME/AZUMA 2007: 153, translation L.W.).[5] The following figure 2, which is based on a model of manga reception by Itō (2005: 149), shows how a *kyarakutā* (a character) emerges on the horizontal axis as a contextualized diegetic entity (however ›flat‹ or ›incomplete‹): Recipient project a synthesis of the various individual images onto a presupposed storyworld. At the very same time, however, on the vertical axis a *kyara* can arise, if the imagination is stimulated to imagine an existence ›outside the textual world‹ through which the *kyara* appears in completely incompatible contexts, as long as they remain recognizable as the same *kyara*—but not necessarily as the same character (*kyarakutā*). Even parameters such as race, gender, or species might be contingently exchanged.

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[4] Original: »抽象的に言えば、キャラクターとは一回しか人生がない存在のことなんです。それに対して、もっといろんな人生があるかもしれないと想像させる存在が、キャラなんです«.
[5] Original: »つまり、キャラクターとキャラの区別の本質は、可能世界の想像力に関係している«.

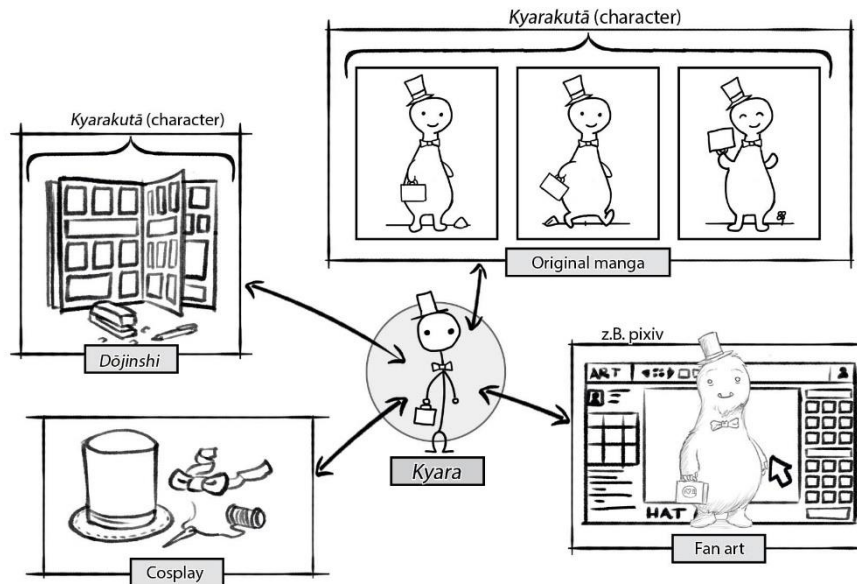**Pre-Narrative Characters as Meta-Narrative Nodal Points**

Fig. 2:
The *kyarakutā/kyara*-model by Itō Gō (2005: 149), slightly modified by the author (L.W.) for a transmedial application (illustration by Kilian Wilde, www.wilde-grafik.com)

The Systematic Divide within Transmedial Character Theories Today

In contrast to the pre-narrative character state, much has been written about the meta-narrative character state in ›Western‹ theory as well, under a number of different terminologies. Yet, a systematic divide seems to run through existing literature on popular characters, regardless of orientation and disciplinary background. Transmedia character theories in the narrower sense clearly prefer the theoretical option that a ›character‹ must first and foremost be thought of as a coherent, contextualized entity (although always presented *incomplete*), which is presumed to exist within a diegetic world. Uri Margolin, for instance, conceptualizes a character as a »non-actual but well-specified individual presumed to exist in some hypothetical, fictional domain« (MARGOLIN 2007: 66). This is also the position of Jens Eder, Fotis Jannidis, and Ralf Schneider (2010) who aim to provide a consensus of wide theoretical and disciplinary approaches. The stronger version of this argument can be found in earlier theories derived from literary studies. In his seminal article on ›interfigurality‹—as a special case of ›intertextuality‹—Wolfgang E. Müller finds that »[o]ntologically and aesthetically, it is […] impossible to have entirely identical characters in literary works by different authors« (MÜLLER 1991: 107).[6] He later goes on,

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[6] In am indebted to Dirk Vanderbeke for bringing Müller's article to my attention.

however, to exclude *popular* characters like Sherlock Holmes entirely in passing:

> There are instances of complete identity, of course, especially in the stereotyped heroes of popular literature [...]. Public demand and enormous financial offers made him [Doyle] resuscitate his detective, who was, of course, expected to be entirely the same person he had been in the first two collections (MÜLLER 1991: 112).

For the countless transmedial characters of popular culture, this transtextual ›identity‹ that Müller is skeptical about is the rule, rather than the exception (cf. ROSENDO 2016). One strategy many theorists adopt is thus to ›relocate‹ the presumed coherent identity of the character from the work of a single work to a *transmedial storyworld* as a whole (cf. THON 2015). This has the obvious consequences for their assumed ontology: Paolo Bertetti, for instance, notes that

> instead of considering the fictional character an entity inscribed in the text itself, we see it as a semio-pragmatic effect produced by texts, the result of an interaction between text and receiver (reader of viewer) [...]. A character can be the overall result not only of a single text, but also of a diverse series of texts, producing a semiotic object (BERTETTI 2014a: 16).

Fig. 3:
The many ›Batmen‹ across media; some, but far from all of them can be accounted for as the same biographical individual. https://sea.ign.com/detective-comics-1937/143458/news/batman-the-arkham-knight-makes-his-dc-comics-debut-in-detect [accessed December 1, 2018]

Other theoretical options to conceptualize this ›semiotic object‹ would be Eder's or Thon's »intersubjective communicative construct« (EDER 2008: 68; THON 2016: 54). In what way one chooses to conceptualize a transmedial ›character‹, however, the question remains whether they are thought of as coherent, contextualized individuals, presumed to exist within any diegesis or possible world. Note that this option is in no way contradictory to the fact that recipients will and must, at times, willingly ›ignore‹ certain inconsistencies between the many representations of the character across media, as they always occur (cf.

THON 2017). If we assume this position, however, then incoherencies and inconsistencies that are too large to be conveniently ›ignored‹ must be accounted for differently—usually, as different characters. The Batman played by Adam West (1966–1968) and the one written by Frank Miller and drawn by David Mazzucchelli in *Year One* (1988), the one animated by Bruce Timm and others in *Batman: The Animated Series* (1992–1995), the Batman played by Christian Bale in *Batman Begins* (2005), the one players use as an avatar in the *Arkham Asylum* (2009) video game, or the one in Mizusaki Junpei's recent anime-adaptation *Batman Ninja* (2018) (cf. fig. 3)… whether (and to what extent) all of these ›add up‹ to the same fictitious entity might be open for discussion and increasingly complex continuity management. »[E]ven the Batman of contemporary comic books is far from a unified, coherent character« (BROOKER 2012: 77). It seems obvious, however, that at least the ›Batmen‹ from so-called Elseworld-stories can *not* amount to the same fictitious individual under the assumption of storyworld coherency. *Superman: Red Son* (2003), for instance, depicts Batman as a Russian anarchist whose parents have been killed by the KGB, while *Batman & Dracula: Red Rain* (1991) presented a ›character instance‹ living his live as a vampire; *Batman: Dark Knight of the Round Table* (1998) introduced readers to a »Bruce of Waynesmoor« at King Arthur's Camelot.

Not only radically incompatible world-settings should dictate insuperable differences in character identity, but also in particular variations in skin color or gender. Nick Fury had a light skin tone within Marvel's regular universe around the year 2000, while Mark Millar and Bryan Hitch turned ›him‹ into an African-American in the competing Ultimate-universe. The respective ›version‹ in Marvel's cinematic universe (MCU) is, again, another version which, in turn, appears likewise in spin-off comics (cf. BROOKER 2012: 75f.). These different ›versions‹ are transmedial themselves, but distinct from each other—or so it seems. Transmediality as such is thus neither necessary nor sufficient to decide identity/difference. Without a concept for a decontextualized, trans-fictional, trans-world, or—with Azuma—meta-narrative entity, the sum of all Batmen (or Nick Furys) must, by necessity, be conceived of as something else: a ›character network‹, for instance, as Thon (2019) proposes. The network is thought to consist of individual ›nodes‹ made up of character versions that are themselves coherent (or can conveniently be thought of as coherent).

Other scholars, however, prefer exactly the other way around: a transmedial ›character‹ is then, actually located ›this side or beyond‹ any single storyworld contextualization. Paolo Bertetti is one of the few ›Western‹ scholars who built a theoretical model around this notion: »[T]ransmedial fictional coherency and consistency are less central. What is instead more important is the recognisability of the character and his identity […] are not always unequivocally defined« (BERTETTI 2014a: 36). This, I would say, does not prescribe that characters cannot sustain or afford an existence in worlds as heterogeneous as Soviet Russia and Camelot—as long as they remain recognizable. Coherence and world-specificity become contingent properties. For Japanese

theorists, this notion seems commonplace. Compare Bertetti's statement to an observation by Nozawa Shunsuke:

> For we are not talking about the absolute condition of sameness and difference but the sufficient condition of character malleability across different contexts. People must be sufficiently convinced in the semiotic event of character-encounter: ›Ok, the way this character behaves and looks in this context, I'm ok with that‹ (NOZAWA 2013: n.pag.).

If we adopt this position, then the ›character‹ from above becomes something else in turn—a ›character instance‹ or a ›character role‹.

Although this is a minority position within ›Western‹ character theories in the narrower sense, it still seems the commonplace notion for many anthropologists and critics less interested in abstract, transmedial models than in the investigation of specific fictional entities: William Uricchio and Roberta E. Pearson argued convincingly why »[t]he very nature of the Batman's textual existence reveals an impulse toward fragmentation« (URICCHIO/PEARSON 1991: 184). They substantiate this claim with the observation that

> [u]nlike other fictional characters, the Batman has no primary urtext set in a specific period [...]. Neither author, nor medium, nor primary text, nor time period defines the Batman. In the absence of these other markers, character, that is, a set of key components, becomes the primary marker of Batman texts (URICCHIO/PEARSON 1991: 186).

Will Brooker, one of the most eminent Batman scholars today, describes his object of study »in terms of multiple but simultaneous variants; Batmen of many worlds, coexisting across alternate earths« (BROOKER 2012: x). While one could argue that the terms ›coexisting‹ and ›Batmen‹ (plural) betrays exactly a network model of nodes (themselves thought of as coherent), Brooker seems to feel no sincere inclination to decide for one side or the other. He constantly highlights the matrix-like nature of ›Batman‹ as franchise, brand, and myth *at the same time* (cf. BROOKER 2012: 74–88). Any new Batman text therefore enters in a »a matrix of difference and sameness, variation and familiarity, which runs through both diegetic representation of ›Batman‹ as corporate concept and the real-world circulation of the character as a commercial property« (BROOKER 2012: 84). Jenkins, too, differentiates between characters that are built on the paradigm of continuity and those that are built on the paradigm of multiplicity (cf. JENKINS 2009a). He thereby seems at least to imply that a ›character‹—as an intersubjective communicative construct or as a semiotic object—can, in principle, be located on the level of the transworld-entity if they can in general sustain many versions, or afford multiple storyworld instances/roles.

Despite the fact that the we do not have to *decide* between identity vs. difference in a lot of cases (Umberto Eco observed an »onereic climate« surrounding the ›myth‹ of Superman, »where what has happened before and what has happened after appears extremely hazy«, ECO 1972: 17, or, in Brookers words, »different continuities lending to, learning from, and even arguing with each other«, BROOKER 2012: 88), the question *does* keep coming back: Identity (or: continuity) *is* a prerequisite within any one ›story‹ (regardless whether one wishes to count, in a Television series, only a single sequence, an episode, a season, or the whole show as one). And *some* inconsistencies are so large (as

between Gotham and Camelot, or between differently gendered versions) that no ›charity‹ will be able to account for them. From a media theoretical or media comparative perspective, however, it is interesting to note that the necessity to distinguish seems most urgent in specific medial contexts only—not surprisingly those which narratologists and character theorists (in a narrower sense) mostly look at.

For the protagonists of many animated film genres, such as the *Looney Toons* cartoons, the prerequisite of world-coherency becomes more difficult to maintain—in many cases even outright counter-intuitive (cf. FEYERSINGER 2017: 79–101). Jenkins himself conceded that a ›modern‹ transmedia character (»who carries with him or her the timeline and the world depicted on the ›mother ship‹, the primary work which anchors the franchise«, JENKINS 2009b: n.pag.) should be clearly distinguished from protagonists of earlier animated cartoons, such as Felix the Cat (»a character who is extracted from any specific narrative context«, JENKINS 2009b: n.pag.). Watching cartoons in which an eponymous protagonist is placed within different roles, worlds, and identities in between almost every episode—maintaining their *gradual* identity only by iconography and certain character traits, not any coherent contextualization—does not require any »sharing or not of a common fictional universe« (BERTETTI 2014b: 2358) as a criterion for identity or difference. Daffy Duck or Felix seem to stay ›themselves‹, no matter which diegetic ›role‹ they are placed in. Within these medial contexts, the ›actual‹ character seems to exist on the plane of decontextualized, trans-fictional, trans-world, meta-narrative entity. One could also think of traditional caricatures and political cartoons that have produced a wealth of meta- or pre-narrative beings such as Uncle Sam (cf. DEWEY 2007: 10–20). Recognizable through their dominant iconographies, they are in no way committed to any specific diegetic contextualization. For such beings, too, an identity that is linked to a (specific) diegetic context would hardly be convincing. And the same applies even more so for those entities that are typically conceived of as (pre-narrative) ›*kyara*‹ in Japan.

The Potentials of a Pre- and Meta-Narrative Character Theory

What keeps their various instances together—what functions as the meta-narrative *nodal point* Azuma was referring to—is less a set of narrative information (in the case of Bruce Wayne/Batman the fact that his parents were murdered, for instance, cf. URICCHIO/PEARSON 1991: 186f.). What remains is merely a recognizable, often highly *affective* iconography, connected to shared assumptions about character *dispositions*—that the entity will behave ›clumsily‹, ›modestly‹, or ›impulsively‹, for instance. But it is in no way bound to a specific context or world. Azuma discussed this famously as a post-modern »database consumption« (*dētabēsu shōhi* データベース消費, AZUMA 2001: 71), replacing the competing reception mode of »narrative consumption«. Where fans were striving

for coherency and continuity before, they now look mainly for the satisfaction of incoherent desires and affects in characters.

It has to be noted that ›Western‹ character theories offer a variety of options to account for decontextualized, trans-fictional, trans-world, or meta-narrative entities as well. Shane Denson and Ruth Mayer established the distinction between ›series characters‹ (*Serienfiguren*) and ›serial figures‹ (*serielle Figuren*)*,* the latter circulating (and ›existing‹, culturally) outside of specific narrative contexts. »After all, the ›true‹ existence of the serial figure is not anchored in the diegesis of any single narrative, but is constantly recreated through the accumulation of performances« (DENSON/MAYER 2012: 93, translation L.W.).[7] Margolin proposed that characters can evolve into a »second level-original« (MARGOLIN 1996: 116), a cultural synthesis of core properties and features of their many different (partially contradictory) versions: »[T]hey undergo a process of culturization, where they are becoming common cultural property« (MARGOLIN 1996: 116). What these traditions usually share, however, is that a ›serial figure‹ emerges only as the *result* of a great number of many contextualized, ›actual‹ characters. It is based on a series of narrative representations, out of which a ›second-level-original‹ can emanate as a contingent entity. This becomes particularly evident in Thon's network-model: there cannot be a network without a plurality of nodes.

Here is where Japanese observers add substantially to the available theory. A *kyara*, a pre-narrative, de-contextualized, trans-world entity, is thought to be a more fundamental phenomenon than a contextualized character. This has profound theoretical consequences, not least (but far from only) on questions of authorship, which can only be hinted at here (cf. WILDE 2019). A closer inspection of the pre-narrative character state—in relation to its meta-narrative state—might help to shed new light on well-known ›Western‹ phenomena as well. Christina Meyer, for instance, has pointed out (2016) that the first American comic book ›celebrity‹, Richard F. Outcault's Yellow Kid, was not only a ›series character‹, but also deeply rooted within illicit practices of theater show producers, sheet music composers, publishers, toy manufacturing companies, and advertisers. It was the recognizability of his iconography—a bald head, a yellow shirt—that enabled his circulation across media, not a set of coherent narrative information. In other words: The Yellow Kid is much closer to the *kyara* than to the *kyarakutā*-end of the spectrum.

If a character's ›default mode‹ is not bound to any one diegetic incarnation, their various contextualized instances can be regarded like ›roles‹ they can take on and off. *Kyara* (or *kyara*-like entities) can accordingly be seen as ›mediated performers‹ or ›virtual celebrities‹ more than anything (cf. MAYNARD 2015): Fictitious actors that can take on any *role* (usually, but not always likewise, fictional) attributed to them. Nozawa expanded on this idea, specifically for *kyara*-communication in public contexts: »Characters' life is maintained through

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[7] Original: »Die ›wahre‹ Existenz der seriellen Figur ankert schließlich nicht in der Diegese einer einzelnen Erzählung, sondern wird durch die Kumulation der Inszenierungen immer wieder neu erzeugt«.

processes of ›decontextualization‹ and ›recontextualization‹‹« (NOZAWA 2013: n.pag.). In this respect, too, comparisons to ›Western‹ phenomena could be illuminating: The Walt Disney studios are well-known for using ›stars‹ such as Mickey, Donald, or Goofy trans-fictionally, *just like actors*: as if they, too, could take on any character roles in highly contingent and contradictory contexts. Uricchio and Pearson, likewise observed that

> Bugs Bunny and Mickey Mouse [...] function as actors/celebrities rather than characters. Bugs Bunny can appear in an opera, a Western, a Sherwood Forest adventure, a science fiction film, or even, as ›himself‹ at the Academy Awards. In each case, he plays a role within the narrative as well as constantly remaining Bugs Bunny, in a similar fashion to such flesh and blood counterparts as Groucho Marx (URICCHIO/PEARSON 1991: 185).

In Disneyland theme parks, performers in full-body suit arguably do not represent Mickey or Donald as contextualized fictitious beings, but rather as (meta-narrative) fictitious actors—mediated performers—*play-acting* all those roles. Often, however, these recontextualizations take place within collaborative networks of participatory culture; in fan fiction, fan artworks, or in cosplay. They can be *enacted* and *performed.* Nicolle Lamerichs, for instance, observed that »perhaps the most important body of the cosplayer is a character body—a referential body that is closely related to the source text where its design, meaning and narrativity are based« (LAMERICHS 2014: 121). If there is little or no official and ›mandated‹ narrative information (or prescribed storyworlds), recipients are almost completely free to develop their own (decisively private) game worlds, thus *appropriating* the *kyara* as their individual *character*. The inherent tension and interrelation between the personal appropriation and the social circulation (through which a *kyara* seems to gain a ›life of their own‹, independent from any authorial agency or intention)—comprises the conceptual core of the *kyara/kyarakutā*-duplicity. This is where he, she, or rather it gains a »life force« (*seimeikan* 生命感, ITŌ 2005: 95), or a »presence« (*sonzaikan* 存在感, ITŌ 2005: 95), to take up Itō's foundational terminology again.

An Overview on the Present Issue

Some questions, which have rarely been discussed in connection, emerge as key issues to all this circulation and re-contextualization, especially if considered from an intercultural and interdisciplinary perspective. The following contributions are based on Tuebingen University's Winter School »De/Recontextualizing Characters. Media Convergence and Pre-/Meta-Narrative Character Circulation« (held from February 27 to March 2, 2018). It took place at the Graduate Academy of the University of Tuebingen, Germany, and was supported by the Institutional Strategy of the University of Tuebingen (German Research Foundation, ZUK 63). The Winter School strived to create a vital dialogue between experts on Japanese and international character theory, investigating character recontextualization across media and formats as heterogeneous as real-life and animated films, comic books, manga, videogames, cosplay, pen-

and-paper RPGs, poetry, internet memes, and advertisement. The participants investigated, from an intercultural and interdisciplinary perspective, several questions: Which medial (material, institutional, and semiotic) *affordances and constraints* are relevant or even necessary for the recontextualization of characters within convergence cultures? Which medial (material, institutional, semiotic, and maybe even affective) ›characteristics‹ are needed in order to identify a given representation as the same decontextualized *kyara*/serial figure/second-level original—but not necessarily as the identical contextualized *kyarakutā*/character? And, conversely, which *sociocultural functions* and *uses* are connected to these circulations through—and especially *outside of*—narrative contexts? In other words: how do social and cultural contexts shape the recontextualization of characters—and vice versa?

Ishida Minori 石田美紀 opens the subsequent discussions with a historically oriented perspective on a specific type of character-hybridity that, at first glance, seems only loosely connected to issues of recontextualization and database-consumption: The *Sailor Moon* anime from the 1990s, approached via a series of close readings of key sequences. Conceptualizing anime characters such as Haruka Tenou as, in Azuma's terminology, intersections of decontextualized, affective database elements, Ishida demonstrates the full potential of this methodology even without immediate concern for later *dōjinshi* (fan fiction). Anime characters such as Haruka, generally *kyarakutā* (characters) in the full sense*,* can nevertheless be seen as compound entities of both visual and vocal elements, the latter referring to the prominence of voice actors within a complex star system. »[T]he anime audience«, Ishida argues, »can imagine a character's appearance and design just by listening to his or her voice. The opposite can also be true: the audience can imagine a certain type of voice just by looking at the character's visual design«. While both ›databases‹ are usually in close cooperation with each other to produce characters with a high level of consistency, they can also generate tensions and deviations that are open for all kind of subversive interpretations. In some cases, these frictions intentionally destabilize notions of gender and sexuality in media-specific fashions. Following Haruka and her successors from a feminist perspective, Ishida demonstrates how authors of the 1990s »interpreted them enthusiastically and created their own narratives with regard to their gender and sexuality«. The duplicity of both visual and a vocal ›databases‹ thus carries a *virtual potential for recontextualization* specific to anime, its star system and its elaborate conventions.

Luca Bruno expands this notion of ›databases‹ further and develops a complex theoretical conception of decontextualized characters within the »Akihabara cultural domain«. Setting out from the Japanese videogame genre of visual novel games, Bruno builds on Azuma's notion of affective character elements and Stevie Suan's recent idea of ›the anime-esque‹ as a continuous reperformance of conventions. Distinguishing between »projected« and »un-projected« forms of characters—rather than between *kyarakutā* and *kyara*—Bruno nevertheless argues that unprojected »[c]haracters can exist within, without,

and in-between texts and, more importantly, before any media specificities are applied to them«. If ›unprojected‹ characters within Japanese popular culture are conceived of as hierarchal sets of pre-narrative database-elements—most saliently in, but not restricted to, visual novel games—then »characters constitute a distinct category of intersubjective communicative constructs, antecedent to the storyworld«. What Bruno addresses as ›aggregated character elements‹ might be even *more* decontextualized as is typically accounted for with ›*kyara*‹, bordering on generalized character *types*, such as *osanajimi* 幼なじみ (›childhood friend‹) or *tsundere* ツンデレ (a female character appearing cold or hostile in public, but revealed to be caring in private). The ›character literacy‹ required from players of visual novel games is then, in Bruno's conclusion, a complex negotiation between characters' pre-narrative aspects (design elements), narrative ones (the ›actual‹ characters within the game's story), as well as meta-narrative ones (references to similar characters in other media or stories).

While the first two contributions address character (re)contextualization from a ›Japanese‹ perspective, the following two articles are concerned with ›Western‹ phenomena of character identity and hybridity. Tobias Kunz first takes a close look at continuity and authorship management within the *Star Wars* franchise where—in contrast to many of the examples discussed in the articles before—questions of character identity are strictly governed by the intellectual property rights holder Lucasfilm/Disney. Analyzing the transition of Grand Admiral Thrawn from the pre- to the post-2014 continuity model in particular—and especially Lucasfilm/Disney's respective strategies to ›handle‹ narrative inconsistencies and contradictions—Kunz traces Thrawn's migration from Timothy Zahn's fan-favorite novel *Heir to the Empire* (1991) to Disney's new continuity established from 2014 onwards: Thrawn recently re-appeared in the third season of *Star Wars: Rebels* (2014–2018). While the earlier Expanded Universe‹ (EU) has, in general, been completely de-canonized from ›actual‹ Star Wars history, rendering earlier iterations of Thrawn *different characters*, Disney nevertheless employed countless strategies—textual as well as paratextual ones—to let the new version reflect his earlier iterations to maintain a sense of identity and continuity wherever possible. Placing these negotiations within a complex theoretical model of ›ideal‹ and ›subordinate model readers‹ (both addressed and accommodated by the rights holder), Kunz suggests that »the (mainly biographical) changes made to the character are legitimized by resorting to the authority of Dave Filoni, who is framed as an heir or torchbearer to George Lucas; at the same time«, Kunz continues, »the implication that Thrawn should still be understood as a single character with a single life history was reinforced by Timothy Zahn, who, as the original creator of Thrawn, is framed as *the* (or at least *a*) legitimate authority on the character and his attributes«.

Mark Hibbett sets out to investigate a somewhat related phenomenon within the Marvel Comics universe: the character of Doctor Doom. Different from most other protagonists within Marvel's ever-expanding storyworlds,

Doctor Doom only ever headlined one short-lived, ongoing series of his own. This lack of his own series (or a dedicated creative team) has allowed him to evolve as a prototype ›open source‹ character, Hibbett suggests, developed by numerous creators with no predetermined path. Hibbet's contribution then describes the process of generating an empirical corpus for the examination of Doom's transmedial developments as a »wandering character« during the period known as ›The Marvel Age‹. Of major concern are the many problems in defining clear selection criteria for Doom's many narrative, non-narrative, and ambiguous appearances (such as in comic flashbacks, in actual, but rather obscure radio shows and record albums, and even in advertisements). Hibbett discusses the benefits and methodological difficulties in using online comics databases, notably The Grand Comics Database, and suggest data-cleaning methods by which these issues can be mitigated. »From this research«, the author concludes, »it is clear that although online databases […] can be very useful for transmedia research they must, at all times, be used with caution, applying stringent cleaning procedures before any conclusions can be drawn«.

The concluding article is contributed by Nicolle Lamerichs, who brings together a variety of questions and approaches while also connecting ›Japanese‹ and ›Western‹ phenomena and theories in an original way. Lamerichs demonstrates the full potential of the pre-narrative ›*kyara*‹ concept by applying it to an emerging field of virtual characters, located somewhere in the borderlands between videogames, participatory culture, and embodied performances. Analyzing characters (or rather *kyara*) based on emerging technologies such as chatbots, intelligent personal assistants, and holograms, Lamerichs indicates that »characters are not passive entities that audiences consume; increasingly, they are becoming ›digital puppets‹ […]. Once machine learning enters the picture«, she argues, »characters also learn from their interactions with users and become new entities altogether, which perhaps will no longer fit the current conceptual box of ›character‹«. How could these »characters of the future« be conceptualized? Lamerichs draws on theories of video game avatars, applying them to Azuma Hikari, a personified interface that could be seen as a Japanese evolution of iOS' Siri or Amazon's Alexa. Primarily a digital hologram in Vinclu's Gatebox device, Azuma Hikari evokes strong affective responses in ›her‹ fanbase, users being even able to marry ›her‹ in a make-believe frame. The interrelation between the personal appropriation and the social circulation of *kyara* thus becomes substantiated by technology and its institutional framework, as Lamerich's observes: »Each user has their own Gatebox, and the contract is very specific about the fact that users can marry just *one version* of the character, namely the hologram in their own personal Gatebox«. In the remainder of her article, the author explores how one ›character of the future‹ that has long arrived in our present is used to *reflect* these developments. In Shibuya Keiichiro's digital opera *The End* (2013), the only actor on stage is Hatsune Mike—the virtual idol that the present article here opened up with as well—employed as an aesthetic and artistic interface between human and non-human agency, between the real, the fictional, and the virtual.

Concluding this introduction, it is my hope that all these approaches to pre- and meta-narrative character circulation might bring us closer towards a truly *transmedial* character theory that does not limit itself to the analysis of narrative media. It should have become clear that this is in no way meant to compete with narratological approaches for which a great many analytical tools are at our disposal, but rather complement them in areas where our concepts and categories are still underdeveloped. While this is the first publication that emerged out of the Winter School »De/Recontextualizing Characters«, it will not remain the only one in which participants are going to present their contributions. Some additional theoretical and methodological impulses circling around the topic of character recontextualization and their pre- and meta-narrative state will be included in the upcoming special issue of *Frontiers of Narrative Studies*, 5(2) on »Characters across Media«.

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