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Katharina Hülsmann: Japanische Fan-Comics: Transkulturelle Potenziale und lokale Gemeinschaft 2025

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Book Review

Katharina Hülsmann: Japanische Fan-Comics: Transkulturelle Potenziale und lokale Gemeinschaft

KEYWORDS

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Book Review

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Where do Japanese *dōjinshi* artists position themselves in relation to their chosen source material and rights holders? And where do Japanese *dōjinshi* artists position themselves in relation to fannish communities? Are local structures more important than transcultural exchange?" (cf. p.12). Following these questions, Katharina Hülsmann's recently published PhD monograph *Japanische Fan-Comics: Transkulturelle Potenziale und lokale Gemeinschaft* (trans. *Japanese Fan Comics: Transcultural Potentials and Local Community*) represents an impressive study at the intersection of Japanese studies, fan studies, cultural studies, and media studies. The scope of the book indeed extends far beyond its specific subject matter, Japanese *dōjinshi*—fan-created manga, circulated online and (especially) through local events—dedicated to and building upon North American characters, storyworlds, and franchises of *yōga* (Western films), *kaigai drama* (Western TV shows), and *amekomi* (American comic books). Hülsmann's examples include hundreds of fan-production groups focused entirely on (and constantly rewriting) *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars*, or (especially recently) the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Interestingly, some franchises that are quite prominent in North American and European contexts—Hülsmann mentions *Game of Thrones* and *The Walking Dead* as examples (cf. pp.54f.)—have received far less attention within Japanese *dōjinshi* communities than others, potentially because the Japanese fan-creators are evaluating the source material with respect to highly specific character constellations that can be more easily transformed into homoerotic slash or *yaoi* stories. Building on cases like these much more broadly, Hülsmann confidently and quite elegantly combines ethnographic fieldwork with advanced cultural-theoretical reflections. The resulting 270 pages—as well as substantial attachments—certainly have the potential to contribute important insights, productive provocations, and foundational reflections to all the disciplines and fields mentioned above.

Even the clear structure of *Japanese Fan Comics* is impressive: The book develops, step by step, a precise conceptual framework for the author's own 'comprehensive' interview work (after Kaufmann, Jean-Claude: *Das verstehende Interview: Theorie und Praxis*. Konstanz: Universitätsverlag Konstanz, 1999) and her participant observations by situating her fieldwork, conducted locally at altogether eight Japanese *dōjinshi* events, at the intersection of various disciplines and paradigms. The results are grounded in sophisticated understandings of (trans)culturality as represented by Fernando Ortiz (cf. *Tabak und Zucker, ein kubanischer Disput*. Frankfurt: Insel, 1987), Wolfgang Welsch (cf. "Transkulturalität: Zur veränderten Verfassung heutiger Kulturen." In: Schneider, Irmela/Thomsen, Christian W. [eds.]: *Hybridkultur: Medien – Netze – Künste*. Köln: Wienand, 1997, pp.67-90), Roland Robertson (cf. "Values and Globalization". In: *ibid.*/White, Kathleen E. [eds.]: *Globalization: Critical Concepts in Sociology, Vol. IV*. London: Routledge,

2003, pp.69-84), and Britta Saal (cf. “Kultur in Bewegung: Zur Begrifflichkeit von Transkulturalität.” In: Mae, Michiko/ibid. [eds.]: *Transkulturelle Genderforschung: Ein Studienbuch zum Verhältnis von Kultur und Geschlecht*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2007, pp.21-36). Hülsmann states that her main focus is on power and hierarchy-generating differences as well as the overcoming of binary constructions of difference in the sense of transdifference (cf. p.68). Despite such a broad, highly sophisticated ‘panorama’ at the cutting edge of current culture theory, Hülsmann’s research questions, or rather her series of interconnected, overarching arguments developed through them, is impressively ‘hands-on’ and precise. She traces—not only with theoretical expertise but conclusively grounded through her interviews—how *dōjinshi* must be described through various tensions of highly local fan practices on the one hand and transcultural flows on the other, without ever resulting in simple dichotomies. Instead, she points at numerous positionings of the involved artists, which create countless internal distinctions: with respect to ‘normal’ Japanese society, towards fans abroad, towards fans of manga, anime, and games, towards fans who have been active for some time or those who are new, and sometimes especially towards fans who like the same films but perhaps emphasize a different constellation of characters in their fan works (cf. pp.27f.). Her carefully developed concept of (trans)culturality thus offers an innovative understanding of a global fandom, in which interconnections between local structures, material practices, and embodied interactions are never ‘levelled out’ but emerge as particularly meaningful tensions and thresholds. Taken together, national categories of difference do never quite achieve superordinate importance and—as Hülsmann puts it—fandom, at this intersection in the global field, can actually be regarded as transcultural (cf. p.255).

Impressive as this is, to build important and quite rare bridges (as Nele Noppe did with *The Cultural Economy of Fanwork in Japan: Dōjinshi Exchange as a Hybrid Economy of Open Source Cultural Goods*. PhD thesis. Leuven: University of Leuven, 2014) between ‘area studies’ such as Japanology and fields like media studies or fan studies, the true heart of the book lies in Hülsmann’s ethnographic work: interviews and participant observations, conducted in Japanese, with altogether ten (quite heterogeneous) *dōjinshi* creators. Certainly, at least in comic studies, this is extremely innovative. Individual earlier advances, such as Yūko Kawahara’s (cf. “Nijisōsaku bunka no shūdanronteki kentō.” In: *Kyōto Shakaigaku Nenpō* 28, 2020, pp.127–148), have after all not been translated from the Japanese. Hülsmann’s methodological reflections are indeed as exemplary as her thoughtful ethical considerations: Her interviewees, their identity carefully protected without compromising the transparency of the book’s arguments, remain contradictory and complex. In allowing this, Hülsmann again and again considers her own dual positioning as a true participant of *dōjinshi* culture and as a researcher, always maintaining a balance between these two (in theoretical and historical terms—this is reflected through Matt Hill’s 2002 critique of underlying dichotomies in earlier fan studies [cf. *Fan Cultures*. London/New York: Routledge, 2002]). The typically more text-centered, interpretative humanities approaches are thus refreshingly expanded into a multidimensional positioning of research to fandom, outlining in turn how local fans relate to transnational communities in various ways. Thus, despite its seemingly narrow and highly specific subject matter, Hülsmann’s *Japanese Fan Comics* undoubtedly provides foundational work for Japanese, fan, cultural, and media studies.

