OVER the past 25 years, anime has continuously attracted not only fans but also academics. Bolton's brilliant book joins a growing collection of outstanding academic works about Japanese animation, such as those by Anne Allison, Jacqueline Berndt, Ian Condry, Thomas Lamarre, and Susan J. Napier, as well as works in Japanese by Murakami Takashi, Otsuka Eiji, and Azuma Hiroki, most of which are rarely translated. That these texts converge in Bolton's study is one of its major strengths. Being both a Japanologist and a comparatist, Bolton is able to read and bring together rich Western texts like Lamarre's, Lacan's, and Jameson's with scholarly works written in Japanese, sometimes to corroborate or complement each other and at other times to challenge prevailing Western views on anime and Japanese culture.

Although younger than its Anglo-Saxon counterpart, Japanese science fiction (SF) has been prevalent in literature and other media since the 1960s, especially in anime. Although anime covers all genres (historical, romantic, erotic, pornographic, etc.), SF, with its subgenres like mecha and cyberpunk that originated as anime, is ubiquitous. As a specialist in Japanese studies, Bolton also has expertise in SF. He is the author of two books on the subject, one on avant-garde writer Abe Kobo (2009) and another, Robot Ghosts and Wired Dreams, Japanese Science Fiction from Origins to Anime (2007), for which he served as co-editor. He is also a founding member of the editorial board of Mechademia, the academic journal on anime.

In Interpreting Anime, Bolton has chosen six SF anime, some already famous, to make a case for the richness of these “texts.” He begins by asking, “What can anime do that other media cannot?” (6), and although I would argue that his answer to this question is not convincing, his chapters are nonetheless thorough and illuminating. Bolton argues that what most long-feature anime do best is to strike a balance between immersion and distanciation. The shortcomings of this argument are that the question is too general, and he inevitably focuses only on examples that support his thesis. The question asked in the title of the last chapter, “It’s Art but Is It Anime?”
(233), is revealing: Miyazaki’s artful animation would not be considered anime because they tend to be mostly immersive. Similarly, one could argue that some American animations, which are not mentioned at all, could also be interpreted as using the same balancing technique (see for example Eric Herhuth’s *Pixar and the Aesthetic Imagination*, 2017). Therefore, readers are not given a satisfying answer to his too general question about anime.

Undeniably, Bolton’s hermeneutical methodology (obvious from its book title) provides sophisticated arguments and analysis that should convince the few remaining skeptics who are unconvinced that popular media/genre is potentially as rich as our literary texts. To this, Bolton adds two strong specificities. The first one is that he analyzes not only narrative devices and dialogues but also visual language in a very detailed, precise, and convincing way. The second is that, being also a comparatist, Bolton performs “text” analysis within a comparative paradigm by comparing the same narrative in various media, i.e., anime with theatre, manga, TV anime, and novels. However, Bolton emphasizes the abundance and richness of self-reflective symbolic devices, such as the mirror and the half-opaque window, as an insightful postmodernist reader-scholar, but what of the immense majority of other viewers who are not academics? We see here the weak point of his study: the absence of the readers’ agency within these insightful interpretations. Hence, in Chapter 4, when he first considers the otaku in his analysis, it is to make “it” (the otaku) play a role inside the “text” as another distancing device. Interestingly, Bolton sees the otaku not as a “separate group or even a separate way of reading but to describe a potential in any viewer and any viewing—the potential to have a third eye open as we become aware of the artifice or artificiality, and become able to see ourselves watching the text” (156). This otaku reading would be more idealized, “a mode of reading associated particularly if not exclusively with anime and its viewers” (168). Moreover, the author favors progressive critical readings rather than conservative ones, or rather he favors the tensions between these two readings, when most people might see one or the other in the anime but not both.

In Chapter 6, after using Lamarre’s subtle hermeneutical methodology, Bolton directly mentions other methodologies, such as Allison’s and Condry’s ethnographic approaches. He then addresses Otsuka Eiji’s character and “grand-non-narrative” (216) interpretation, as partly integrated by Marc Steinberg in his media studies approach, by writing, “With their ideas about the decline of individual narratives
and individual auteurs, and/or the need to focus more broadly on characters, collaborations, franchises, and commercial contexts, the critics above position their work variously as a supplement, alternative, or replacement for the kind of interpretive close readings of individual anime and individual directors practiced in this book” (217). He then considers whether we can combine these two approaches by evaluating three different franchises of Blood. His answer, although well-rounded, is not completely convincing.

To conclude, this book is a very useful and enlightening reading for many scholars and students of literature and media. This is especially true for those without much knowledge about Japan and/or anime. But, as the book insists, if students, like anime fans, read in a more participative way through the balancing act of immersion and distancing, anime (and other media) studies need to integrate their points of view. In his book, Bolton uses “we” a lot; however, if “we,” as academics, still want a grand narrative of tolerance and social progress, we need to teach and write not only through lectures, regardless of their quality, but from the students-readers-viewers-fans-producers’ perspectives also.