Animation Platforms

Yoshiyama Yū, Tropical Rouge! Pretty Cure, *and* Sakuga *as New Media*

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Some animation yells, "Look at me!" Ambitious sequences showcase appealing motion: unique, recognizable, original. Recently, animator Yoshiyama Yū has garnered much attention from fans of anime's animation (known as *sakuga fans*) for her outstanding sequences on the magical girl series *Tropical Rouge! Pretty Cure* (2021). This article examines how sakuga fans see animation and how Yoshiyama responds to their viewing practices. I explore the critical potential of nontraditional viewing modes by engaging with Yoshiyama's work through the websites sakugabooru and Twitter. On these platforms, we encounter small parts of anime—clips and screenshots rather than full episodes—allowing us to more clearly understand that individual sequences and frames are created by animation workers. Considering fragments of animation both in isolation and in relation to the overall work, I show that new meaning can be generated by the fan practices of *framestepping* and sharing screenshots. I argue that sakuga fandom establishes an epistemology of anime production, constructs an evaluative critical framework, and drives a labor movement. Although this study examines sakuga fandom by way of its favored gathering spots, it is important to recognize that digital platforms must be understood as open systems, that websites are not perfectly representative of users' values, and that fan communities are not monolithic.

Tropical-Rouge! Pretty Cure (2021) is a recent installment of the long-running *Pretty Cure* magical girl franchise produced by Tōei Animation. The series follows five middle school girls banding together to fight against the Witch of Delays and her servants Chongire, Nemuri, Elda, and Butler, who sap motivation from civilians for nefarious purposes and create monsters called *Yarane-da* out of miscellaneous items. Of particular importance for this article is the oldest member of the team, a third-year student named Takizawa Asuka. Asuka's cool demeanor, stylish design, and independent streak conceal a traumatic past involving her exit from the tennis team and estrangement from her doubles partner, the strong-willed Shiratori Yuriko

(who also happens to be the student council president). After meeting the other Pretty Cures, Asuka learns how to work with other people again and joins the team as Cure Flamingo. Asuka's most important scenes—her transformation sequence, her finisher attack sequence, and the climax of a tennis match with Yuriko that resolves her arc—are all animated by Yoshiyama.

Sakuga, which in Japanese simply refers to drawn animation, has been appropriated in Western fan discourse to refer specifically to "particularly good animation."[1] As the popularity of sakuga spread to the West, the website sakugabooru was built from the template provided by the *moebooru* anime image board system.[2] On sakugabooru, users upload clips of standout pieces of animation and tag them with information to make the database searchable. The video player built into the site features five speed settings (from 0.2x up to normal speed) and a framestepping function. There are social features as well, a comments section on every post and a forum. Posts on sakugabooru are often downloaded and reshared on Twitter (and other social media sites) to a broader audience. The sakugabooru uploads for Yoshiyama's work on the series can be found by a search for her name with the series title.[3] I examine Yoshiyama's animation by engaging in sakuga viewing practices, with attention to what the affordances of certain platforms do and do not reveal about the way sakuga fans build knowledge of anime production, make value judgments, and act as labor agitators.

Ways of Seeing

Wandering the Modern Wing of the Art Institute of Chicago, we may come across a Rothko. Aside from the painting itself, we might consider the way it is framed (or not), the way it is lit, or its position with respect to other works in the gallery. Recalling the artist's famous statement that his work should be viewed from a distance of only eighteen inches, we might try to step closer to the canvas so that we may feel the effect of its size.[4] But get too close and we may draw a warning from museum staff. In short, the experience of spectatorship is always intertwined with physical and social contexts of exhibition. Personal context is also important—for instance, a security guard's experience may be impacted by their being "on the job." John Berger, Walter Benjamin, and others have explored how the contexts of exhibition can change our experience of a work of art.[5] Today, the consumption of animated media is not limited to the cinema or the television; the media experience of

animation is increasingly digital. What bearing do new modes of spectatorship have on our understanding of animation? Can platforms of distribution also be considered media with forms worth exploring?

Sakugabooru and Twitter are both examples of what Marc Steinberg calls "contents platforms," hosting user-generated content and facilitating social interactions, though the former is noncommercial and obviously has a much smaller userbase.[6] Neither has a secure future; sakugabooru is in a state of precarity due to its reliance on user donations and vulnerability to copyright claims while Twitter is subject to the whims of its impetuous leadership. Since these developments are ongoing, I do not attempt to predict the fate of either platform. Instead, I examine how they have already functioned: as sites of (knowledge) production, distribution, and consumption, but also as "new media" experiences that enable alternative modes of perception. Here I understand "new media" as "computer based artistic activities" that "[privilege] the existence of potentially numerous copies, infinitely large number of different states of the same work, author-user symbiosis (the user can change the work through interactivity), the collective, collaborative authorship, and network distribution (which bypasses the art system distribution channels)."[7]

Of course, as Thomas Lamarre shows in his genealogical account of television animation, what is called new media is usually nothing new.[8] This is also the case with what I have been calling "sakuga." While the rise of sakuga fandom outside Japan is a relatively recent phenomenon, a similar movement had already developed in Japan in the 1980s.[9] The advent of the VCR allowed fans to see their favorite works of animation over and over and to slow them down significantly or pause them on single frames. This allowed for the intense study of the formal elements of anime on the level of drawings and motion. The study of the animation revealed the unique characteristics of individual animators, giving rise to the "charisma animator" movement, which celebrated the uniqueness and artistry of a handful of top animators, especially Kanada Yoshinori. Many of these early sakuga fans would go on to make their marks on the world of Japanese animation, where they continued the tradition of enabling and celebrating the individuality of the animator. Today, the practices of repeated viewings, slower viewings, and framestepping remain significant aspects of sakuga spectatorship, as does the practice of identifying animators by their individual quirks. This celebration of stylistic particularity dovetails nicely with the *Pretty Cure* franchise's portrayal of diverse kinds of femininity and *Tropical-Rouge! Pretty Cure*'s message of being true to yourself.

Yoshiyama's animation is particularly suited for the viewing practices of sakuga fans. One of her most distinctive traits is her placement of "Easter eggs" in her effects and impact frames. These drawings, shown only for a split second, contain sly nods to other anime she has worked on (Figure 1), shapes that pertain to the traits of specific characters, and so on. In an interview with the sakuga fan website artist_unknown, she revealed her motivation for practicing such a high-effort technique: "I'm aiming for you all to look at my parts over and over, it's essentially bait for you to do so. To me an impact frame is the Jack-in-the-box of animation techniques (Yoshiyama laughs). I just hope people who spot them will find them funny to look at."[10] Special effects and impacts are flashy in the sense that they are explosions of color and movement that demand your attention, but also in the sense that they "flash" by quickly, such that it is only possible to get a real good look at them by breaking the animation down frame by frame. Yoshiyama leaves messages hidden in plain sight for those who are willing to see in a different way. Admittedly, such a practice is not new to animation or to television anime—in one corner of the twenty-sixth frame of a cut from episode 19 of the anime *His and Her Circumstances* (1998, *Kareshi Kanojo no Jijō*) uploaded to sakugabooru, we find that Ogura Nobutoshi has drawn the character Rasa from *Birth* (1984), an OVA with animation direction and character designs by Kanada.[11] What sets Yoshiyama apart is the sheer number and density of secret delights she leaves for the discerning viewer, such that they are not just quick jokes, but a core element of her aesthetic identity.

It is also notable that Yoshiyama frequently takes to Twitter to invite fans to search for her Easter egg frames, even leaving extra clues and confirming correct identifications for fans who post screenshots of her cuts. Keenly aware of the platforms through which her work will be experienced, she knows that sakuga fans will use their video players (on sakugabooru or elsewhere) to pore over every frame of her work and that they will then rush to Twitter to post their findings in groups of four pictures. Given Yoshiyama's acknowledgement and encouragement of sakuga fans, we might ask: are framestepping her cuts on sakugabooru and viewing her frames in isolated Twitter posts not also intended (albeit optional) viewing experiences? What critical frameworks and discourses might we build around this new type of animation appreciation and distribution? To fully explore these questions, we need to take a closer look not just at Yoshiyama's animation, but also at the platforms on which sakuga fans experience them.

Figure 1. An impact frame in episode 40 of *Digimon Adventure* (2020) depicting Cure Flamingo. Notably, this episode aired before Asuka made her first appearance. *Digimon Adventure* episode 40; animator: Yoshiyama Yū (2020); available on Crunchyroll.

Here Comes Senpai! Burn, Cure Flamingo!

Characters in the *Pretty Cure* franchise change from civilians to "legendary warriors" in lavishly animated transformation sequences. Magical girl series ride on these scenes, which repeat in every episode; they are important moments of characterization that are also crucial for selling toys and filling up runtime. In the following section, I examine the sakugabooru upload for Cure Flamingo's transformation sequence to explore new possibilities for viewing animation on digital platforms.[12] I also hope to demonstrate the critical potential in thinking about transmedia flow beyond the production committee and its approved commodities, which have been the primary focuses of scholarship on anime's transmediality since Steinberg's pioneering study on media mix.[13]

Of course, official products and modes of distribution remain important. As a starting point, let us consider the platform on which anime are first seen: live broadcast television. Obviously, there are aspects of the television experience that are not reproduced on sakugabooru. Viewers who do not watch the Japanese broadcast will not see the commercials for toys and other items that are vital to *Pretty Cure's* media mix strategy.[14] There is also the digital clock in the corner of the screen, always reminding us that television is on a schedule.

Pretty Cure gets its half-hour; then it makes way for something else. The temporal flow of the moving image is completely out of viewers' hands.

Streaming offers more control. The video can be paused, specific passages can be replayed, opening themes can be skipped, and sometimes the viewer can even change the playback rate. Still, for the most part the viewer on a streaming platform will be watching the animation uninterrupted and at normal speed. Of course, this viewing mode is possible on sakugabooru as well. For fans simply looking to find a specific sequence they enjoyed, "the *booru*" (as it is referred to by users) is often the most convenient place to look, and they need not do anything more than press play to see (but not hear) the scene again. I will now view and analyze the Cure Flamingo transformation sequence in this way. I encourage the reader to do the same.

On a first viewing, the most striking feature of the animation is the snappiness of the movement. This stands in sharp contrast to the magical girl convention of using fluidity of motion as a showcase of beauty and grace.[15] Because the spatial distance between consecutive poses is large while the number of drawings is kept high, it feels like Asuka is three times faster than her peers. Other distinct visual elements include dynamic poses and colorful effects. Because these elements are common to the animation style pioneered by Kanada Yoshinori, many sakuga fans have labeled Yoshiyama part of the "Kanada school." Yoshiyama herself identifies most closely with Ōbari Masami, considered by some anime historians to be "the most famous representative of . . . 'the second-generation Kanada school.'"[16] The flamboyant and unconventional approach to movement championed by animators in the Kanada lineage is a significant element of the characterization of Asuka and Cure Flamingo. Like the animation itself, the character is charismatic, spontaneous, and stylish. Like her animator, Flamingo has an individualistic streak, but nonetheless must embrace working as part of a team to realize her goals. Yoshiyama's special attachment to the character, then, comes as no surprise; Asuka/Cure Flamingo embodies her animation philosophy, and, in the sense that animators "act" by putting the body of a character in motion, Yoshiyama *is* Cure Flamingo.

One controversial characteristic of sakugabooru is that it forbids the inclusion of sound in uploads. This stems from a desire to focus on animation: sound effects might change our impression of a heavy impact, voice acting may or may not match the character animation, or music might heighten the emotion of a scene. In short, sakuga fans want to view animation on its own terms. If we watch the transformation sequence on sakugabooru, we will miss Cure Flamingo's catchphrase ("Fluttering wings! Cure Flamingo!"), delivered

with gusto by voice actress Seto Asami. We will also not hear the sound effects accompanying each step in her makeup routine (perhaps some of the same sound effects generated by the toys). We will not be swayed by the eager and upbeat music, and if we *only* watch transformation sequences on sakugabooru we might overlook how this music, serving as the background for every character's transformation, emphasizes the sense of teamwork so vital to the *Pretty Cure* franchise and especially to Asuka's character arc. Indeed, when individual transformation sequences are combined into a group transformation in later episodes, the collation works in part because all sequences already use the same background music.

It cannot be denied that sakugabooru's no-audio policy prevents, at least temporarily, a holistic reading of *Tropical Rouge! Pretty Cure,* as it eliminates the sound-image relationship, the sound-narrative relationship, and the role of sound in *Pretty Cure's* media mix. To address this, we could leave sakugabooru and watch the Cure Flamingo transformation on CrunchyRoll's YouTube channel.[17] But is it possible to gain something by ignoring sound? Let us consider the conditions of anime production. Specialization and dispersion of labor means that the animator may only have a vague sense of sound effects and music. They must imagine these elements on their own and hope that their animation mixes well with everything else. Viewing animation on sakugabooru, we might share in this act of imagination, or even imitate the sound design of *The Wind Rises* (2013) and *Keep Your Hands Off Eizouken!* (2020) by making the sounds with our own mouths. We might fill in the snapping of Flamingo's costume implied by the sharpness of her motion; the twinkles and jingles suggested by crosses and circles flashing across the screen; the ruffle demanded by the toss of her voluminous red hair (Figure 2). By removing the sound of *anime, sakugabooru* reveals the "sound" of *animation* in our mind's ear. We find that the sound-image relationship does not have to originate entirely from an external cinematic object because moving images *seem* like they should make certain noises.

In losing the whole we gain a new part, a different mode of perception. It is not the view from the living room couch or the director's chair, but from the animator's desk. It turns out that what we might typically think of as the "whole" work—the final product, the TV anime—is itself only a part of the larger experience of *Tropical-Rouge! Pretty Cure*. Of course, it must be acknowledged that we are not actually looking over Yoshiyama's shoulder, much less seeing into her head. But however far we may remain from the real act of animation, the sakugabooru viewing position brings us closer than any other, and

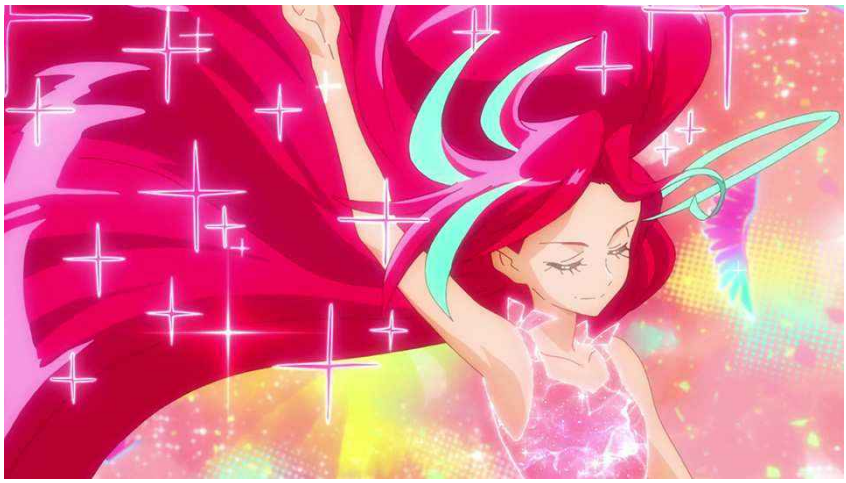

Figure 2. Asuka tosses her hair. *Tropical Rouge! Pretty Cure*, animator: Yoshiyama Yū (2021); available on Crunchyroll.

we can ultimately combine our experience of sakugabooru with other ones to paint a more interesting critical picture of anime and its animation.

Let us move to other features. Sakugabooru is not just a repository for clips but also a site of critical evaluation. While posts are visible as soon as they are uploaded, they are subject to a moderation process to determine whether they are notable enough to be on the site and may be removed for lacking in quality or originality, not fitting the site's focus on the drawn portions of animation, or simply for handling video improperly (changing the frame rate, for instance). Moderation prevents the site from being overrun with excessive clips of the most popular superpower fighting shows, but tensions can arise around uploads for older anime and Western animation, which moderators have less experience viewing and evaluating. Articulation of a critical framework for evaluation also happens in the comments of uploads. For Cure Flamingo's transformation, reactions range from mild disappointment to effusive praise (Figure 3). One user finds it jarring that the sequence cuts frequently between Yoshiyama's animation and 3DCG shots of the compact, an accessory that allows the Pretty Cures to transform. Of course, the series must include shots of the compacts if it is to sell plastic toys, and, as Bryan Hartzheim has noted, 3DCG offers a way to "render the contours and movement of the Pact as close to the real toy Pact as possible."[18] These comments point to the uneasy relationship between the series' expressive ambitions and its commercial obligations in the form of a gap between 2D and 3D. But if the tension between art and

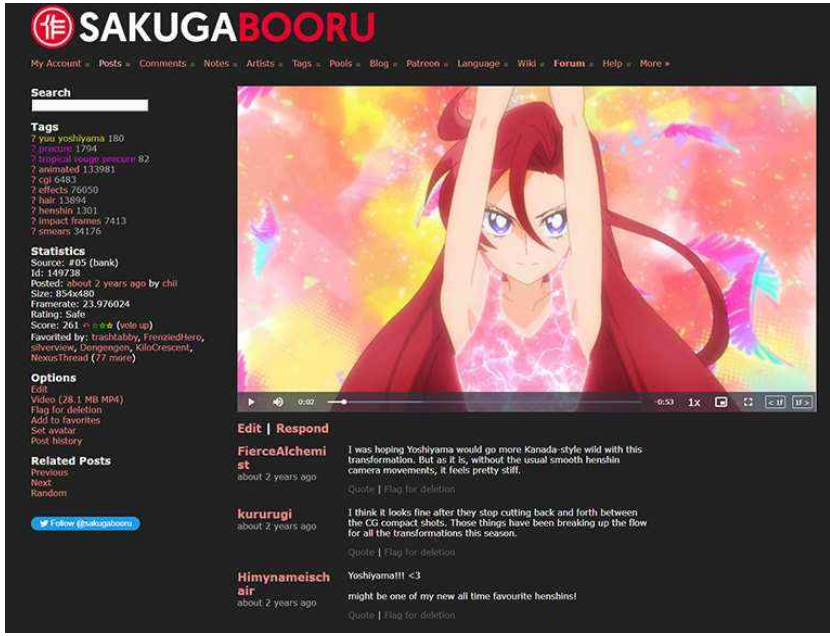

Figure 3. Screenshot of the sakugabooru upload for Cure Flamingo's transformation sequence. *Tropical Rouge! Pretty Cure,* key animator: Yoshiyama Yū (2021); available on Crunchyroll.

commercialism exists within the animation itself, it does not seem to be a problem for Yoshiyama, who frequently posts her *Pretty Cure* merchandise on her Twitter account. Like most of anime's animators, Yoshiyama is an anime fan engaged simultaneously in production and consumption, often playfully combining Pretty Cures with Gundam figures, model insects, and other paraphernalia in a sort of unscripted play with toys.

Perhaps the most important of sakugabooru's features are the tags, listed in a column on the left-hand side of the page for each upload. They function to provide basic production information and describe uploaded sequences in technical language, but they can also be used to search for other uploads; each tag can be clicked to bring up search results for other posts labeled with the tag. It is tempting to say, then, that sakugabooru users engage in literal database consumption, responding to specific repeated aesthetic features (here, *yutapon_cubes, smears, running* instead of cat ears, blue hair, glasses) existing outside of narrative.[19] We see later that the situation is more complicated, but let us first take a closer look at the tags for the Cure Flamingo transformation sequence (Figure 3).

The first tag on each post is the name of the animator. Sometimes, cuts are identified by reading through interviews, artbooks, and so on. Otherwise, fans piece together their knowledge of the traits of individual animators with the names written in the credits to guess the animators responsible (when this happens, they add the presumed tag). Because Yoshiyama announces what she did on Twitter whenever she has worked on an episode, guessing is not necessary. Still, authorship in anime is never as simple as assigning a sequence to a key animator. Like the Pretty Cures, animators work as part of a team, with each member contributing specialized skills. However, unlike the Pretty Cures, the teams that make anime are hierarchical in structure and geographically (and usually transnationally) dispersed. And sometimes, to the disappointment of sakuga fans and animators alike, the final product does not fully reflect the key animator's intent—the chief animation director changes how something is drawn, compositing obscures the details of a smoke effect, and so on. Yoshiyama, as an animator pursuing bold expressions, is no exception to anime's system of supervision.[20] Animation style in an industrial environment is thus always negotiated (though not on equal terms) between many agents in a way that the tagging system obscures.

Of course, sakuga fans are quite sensitive to the importance of people like animation directors and layout artists in determining the visual qualities of a scene. There have been discussions around including labels for animation directors and layout artists within the tagging system.[21] This is nontrivial from a technical standpoint, but the situation would remain complicated even if these changes were implemented; conversations on Twitter and the sakugabooru forums reveal that tagging practices vary by uploader and are sensitive to the highly specific conditions of anime productions. For example, sometimes an animation director is tagged when the uploader strongly feels their "hand," sometimes as an actual tag and sometimes in the "source" field of the upload.[22] Uploaders work within a conception of creativity as individual expression. Thus, sakugabooru tags are not simply committed to recognizing just any kind of labor, but specifically to the production of distinctively drawn movement.

This becomes clearer when we look down the list of tags for the Cure Flamingo transformation sequence and come across another complication: the *cgi* tag. Although many uploads have this tag, CGI as such is not the focus of sakugabooru. For instance, *Beastars* (2019), despite its popularity in general anime fandom, has only four uploads on the site, only one of which involves CGI. But the situation gets more complicated still: *Sakuga Blog*, which is directly affiliated with sakugabooru, published an article in 2019 celebrating

the animation of *Beastars* specifically for its creative use of CGI.[23] Again we find that the sakuga community is not a monolith but rather a complex network of people, platforms, and publications.

The incongruity between the values suggested by the affordances of sakugabooru and the actual attitudes and practices of sakuga fans can be further illustrated by considering more information that is not tagged: roles that are visual but not strictly animation (art direction, compositing, storyboards), below-the-line "noncreative" roles (cel painters, in-between animators, camera operators), information pertaining to anime-as-business (studio, production staff, production year, release year, format). Again, sakugabooru, as a platform, seems to support a miniature auteurism that values key animation at the exclusion of all else. But the platform is not a closed system. Among the list of items running between the header and the video player is a link to *Sakuga Blog*. Examining the publications of this and other sakuga fan sites like artist_unknown and Full Frontal reveals much more complexity. To varying degrees, they are interested in animation specifically, but they are *also* interested in visuals in general, committed to the labor rights of below-the-line staff, and bitterly familiar with the economic aspects of anime production.[24] As they have published articles discussing these issues on sakuga-oriented sites, it seems fair to label these concerns as sakuga-related, even if sakugabooru's design pushes them to the periphery. Limitations in the site architecture of sakugabooru (sometimes the result of technical challenges, but sometimes intentional) belie sakuga fans' underlying understanding of the complex problems of authorship and labor in anime production.

Asuka Strikes!

In his study of transnational sakuga fandom, Stevie Suan makes the interesting claim that sakuga fan viewing practices are "estranged from narrative."[25] For Suan, sakuga's non-narrativity deemphasizes the "Japaneseness" of anime and dovetails into greater awareness of the transnational nature of anime production. The supposed non-narrativity of sakuga is a powerful and provocative concept. It does seem fair to regard sakugabooru as a platform for non-narrative media. After all, it collects decontextualized excerpts of animation sorted by default in reverse-upload order for viewing by animation enthusiasts who have not necessarily seen the source works. Still, awareness of animation aesthetics should not imply ignorance of narrative. In the rest of this article, I

explore how Yoshiyama's animation challenges the separation of sakuga from narrative and resists the subsumption of the part under the whole.

The *Pretty Cure* franchise makes heavy use of *bank cuts* (animation sequences meant for reuse in multiple episodes) in transformations and in special "finisher" attack sequences. Like the transformation sequence, the finisher carries a high level of prestige and presents an opportunity to flex production muscle while also selling toys (in the case of *Tropical-Rouge! Pretty Cure,* lipstick). Cure Flamingo's finisher, in which Asuka uses a tennis racket to smash a flaming red comet that chars the monster of the week, has two uploads on sakugabooru as a result of a modification to the sequence.[26] In episode 38 of the series, Yoshiyama added a new effect layer and an impact frame to the attack, which was enough to justify an additional upload of a clip long enough to cover the changes, listed as a "child" post to the "parent" upload of the original attack as seen in episode 5. Building on Ida Kirkegaard's examination of how the usage of bank cuts can operate not simply as a cost-saving measure, but also as an artful way to generate meaning, I examine the difference between these two uploaded sequences.[27] The reader is encouraged to use sakugabooru to framestep these posts and try to spot the new frames on their own before continuing.

The two added frames are shown in Figure 4. The first one is very abstract: eight jagged red lines on a black background, paired and angled to direct our line of sight towards a small V-shape in red and a small upside-down V in white. Based on this frame alone, it is difficult to determine what additional meaning is generated by the insertion of the impact frame, even for those who have seen the show. In the next frame, however, the abstract and distant V-shapes burst into the foreground as a flamingo and a swan. A yellow tennis ball also comes into view. If we were "watching" *Tropical Rouge! Pretty Cure* exclusively on sakugabooru, this image would hardly have any more meaning than the last one. It would "only" be a very nice drawing of two birds. But if we were following the television series, we would know what occurred in the narrative to induce this change in the animation. In an emotional tennis match between Asuka and Yuriko, Yuriko reveals that she has always longed to play with Asuka again. Years of estrangement and resentment dissolve with the swing of a racket and the two resolve to aim for the top of the world of high school girls' tennis together at Phoenix Academy. With this context, the meaning of the added frames becomes obvious—the flamingo and the swan (a reference to Yuriko's family name, Shiratori) attack together once more. Revealed only through sakuga viewing practices, the added frames are a visual representation of both characters' development.

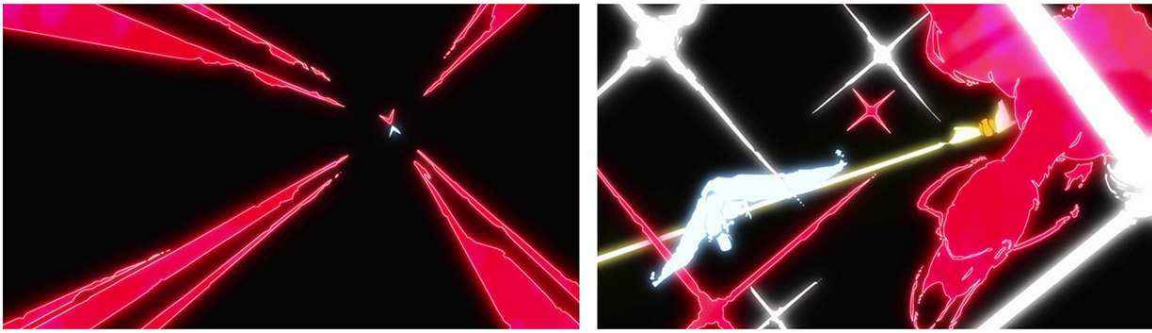

Figure 4. Frames added to the finisher bank sequence in episode 38. *Tropical Rouge! Pretty Cure* episode 38, animator: Yoshiyama Yū (2021); available on Crunchyroll.

In retrospect, we can read the repeated use of the unmodified finisher sequence in earlier episodes of the show as a representation of Asuka's stagnation. Indeed, much to the disappointment of her fans, the plot of the series gave Asuka very little attention for most of its run, focusing instead on the charismatic mermaid Laura and the sunny protagonist Manatsu. As early as episode 5, Asuka had embraced working as part of the Pretty Cure team, but from then until episode 38 she was still missing her partner, as she had not truly moved on from her past trauma. Although the character takes a backseat from a plot perspective, Asuka's story is represented throughout the show in the form of the bank cut and the impact frame. This is sakuga-as-narrative. What we have here is not the choice between the whole (the television anime *Tropical-Rouge! Pretty Cure*) and the part (Yoshiyama Yū's sequence on sakugabooru), but the nonhierarchical presentation of the whole *and* the part as mutually reinforcing but freestanding media forms. If we do not watch the show, we will still have a nice drawing of a bird; if we do not framestep, we will still feel the overall impact of the scene on the level of movement and character writing. But experiencing whole and part *together* gives us even more. In this way, Yoshiyama challenges both conventional and sakuga modes of consumption by asking fans to engage in both. Indeed, just as conventional viewing can lead to sakuga viewing when fans review their favorite cuts at slower speeds, sakuga viewing can lead to conventional viewing when fans see sakugabooru posts that introduce them to new anime.

PARS CON TOTO

As we have seen several times, sakugabooru is not a closed system. Sakuga fans use the site to find good animation, but there is also a strong culture of sharing this experience with other fans, especially on Twitter. There are

several Twitter accounts dedicated to (re)posting clips downloaded from sakugabooru, but I want to focus here on another common form of sharing in sakuga fandom: posting screenshots, usually in groups of four, of particularly amusing or interesting frames, often without commentary. When this is done with Yoshiyama's animation, the results are particularly striking. In this section, I return to a non-narrative framework, turning to the form of individual screenshots. After all, is there any real harm in enjoying an image just because the shapes are sharp, and the colors are bright? No—a case could be made for an alternative animation viewing practice: treating screenshots of Yoshiyama's work as whole pieces of art, taking up the study of the single frame inaugurated by Hannah Frank.[28]

To framestep on sakugabooru is to consider the single frame, but never in isolation. Although we control the speed, we still follow the sequential logic of animation: each image responds to its predecessor and anticipates its successor. Mash the forward button quickly enough—clickclickclickclick—and the illusion returns: still drawings come back to "life." Thus, there is always the potential for (re)animation in the video player. Impact frames and camera cuts can be considered disruptions to the flow of the motion, but such an understanding still grounds them in the context of the broader movement. Is it even possible, then, to view distinctive frames like impact frames in truly standalone fashion? Frank presents some of them this way in *Frame by Frame,* but as the curator of these frames she would have already seen them in context.[29] While her descriptions of the pure forms of single frames are brilliant, she could not have completely forgotten what they were really depicting. But what if Frank had a few thousand friends, equally as enamored of the art of the single frame and eager to spread the word about their favorite artists? In sakuga Twitter, there is potential for a new media experience that Frank did not get: single frames, fully removed from the perceptual gestalt of animated movement. This is an even smaller part of an anime than we find on sakugabooru, which removes the sequence from the episode and cleaves sound from image while still preserving the movement and the order of frames. The Twitter screenshot abandons movement altogether, and for any given post we have no way of knowing the relation of any image to any other: what order they appear in, how close in time, etc. Individual frames are so small that they do not "threaten" conventional viewing in the way that sakugabooru uploads are perceived to. That is, it seems silly to say that we look at a screenshot *instead* of watching the whole work. It is easier, then, to entertain a consideration of single frames on their own terms, outside of their function in the larger work.

This is the opportunity that sakuga fan Kevin Cirugeda offers us in a Twitter thread, retweeted by Yoshiyama, highlighting the climactic battle of the series.[30] Noting the increased intensity of Yoshiyama's effects and impact frames, he states that "at some points the scene becomes a jaw-dropping expressionistic spectacle," posting eight exemplary frames in two Tweets (Figures 5 and 6). Chaotic bursts of colorful shapes, the frames have little to no relation to any real-world referent. Impact frames *could* refer to the moment when one object collides with another and effects *could* refer to physical phenomena (fire, light beams, etc.), but these relations are considerably weakened when the frames are decontextualized. Therefore, we can consider them not as parts of a TV show, but as standalone works of abstract art. Confrontation with abstraction is the experience of pure form: shapes and colors that will, per Kandinsky, carry certain affective associations.[31] Impact frames become striking frames; they grab our attention on a Twitter feed instead of representing a collision. Effects become affects; they make us feel the sublime in abstraction instead of representing natural elements. It's not anime! It's a curious feeling.

Figure 5. The first set of screenshots posted by kViN: *Tropical Rouge! Pretty Cure,* episode 45, animator: Yoshiyama Yū (2021); available on Crunchyroll and Kevin Cirugeda. Twitter, 22 January 2022. https://twitter.com/Yuyucow/status/1485098722199486468.

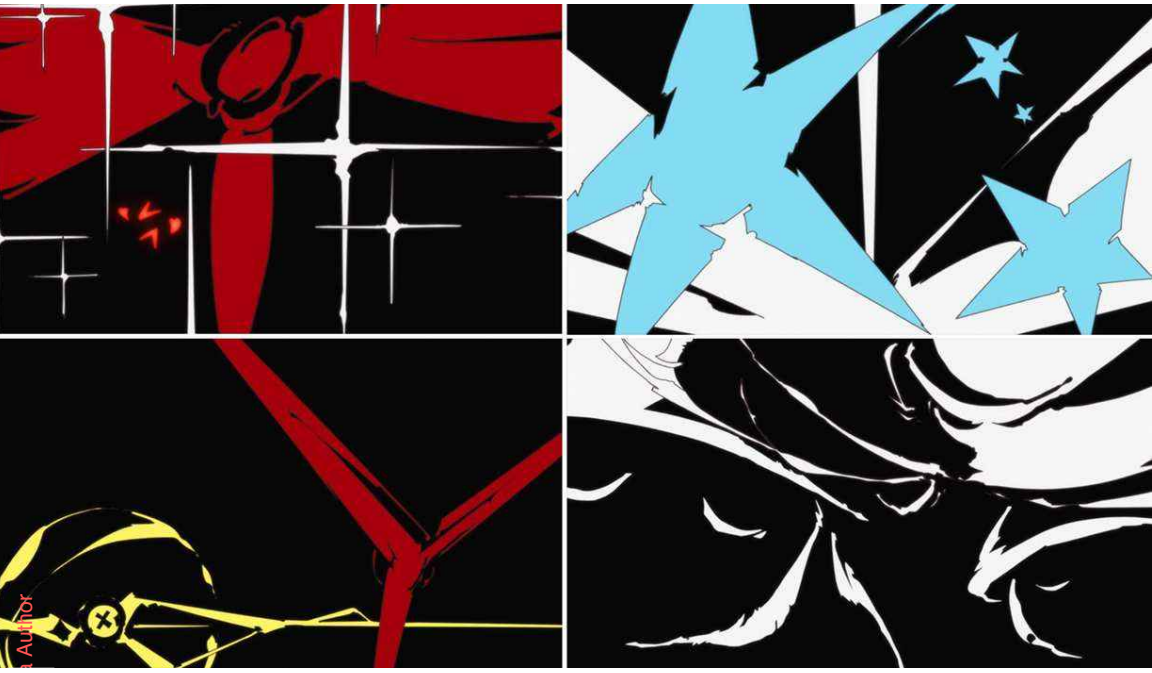

Figure 6. The second set of screenshots posted by kViN: *Tropical Rouge! Pretty Cure*, episode 45, animator: Yoshiyama Yū (2021); available on Crunchyroll and Kevin Cirugeda. Twitter, 22 January 2022. https://twitter.com/Yuyucow/status/1485098847005290497.

At this point, we are engaged so much with animation "as such" that it is worth asking whether sakuga forms of spectatorship are merely *l'animation pour l'animation*. It is clear to me that they are not. As Suan has shown, there is a strong commitment to labor advocacy engendered by sakuga as a viewing practice, wherein fans "become somewhat critically engaged, mainly in concern to the terrible work conditions of the animators themselves."[32] In a *Sakuga Blog* article titled "Anime's Present And Future At Stake: The In-Betweener Problem," Cirugeda describes the conditions faced by in-between staff as "hellish" and decries "how the delegitimization of an essential job is ruining lives and putting anime's present and future at risk."[33] Similar articles outline "anime's collapsing mentorship," the "layout crisis," and "the unrewarding nightmare to assemble a high-profile team."[34] On Full Frontal, Matteo Watzky has launched a series of articles titled "Anime Numbers," which attempts to understand the industry's labor problems from a quantitative and historical perspective.[35] And when productions begin to visibly collapse

partway through a show's run (a frequent occurrence), sakuga fans are quick to point out the problems in Twitter threads. It is important to note that several of them are engaged in sakuga-like activity—that is, they post clips of impressive sequences and often name the animator(s) responsible—who do not identify as "sakuga fans" because they do not agree with the established culture of maintaining a critical position toward the industry's labor practices. For these fans, the experience of consumption takes priority over concerns about working conditions, such that sakuga fans' tendency to complain about production problems is simply elitist nitpicking. There is a distinction, then, between the enjoyment of animation as a "purely" aesthetic endeavor and the more labor-oriented position of established sakuga fandom.

When sakuga fans see animation, they do not just consider form as an end-in-itself; they always know they are looking at labor. Consider the Rothko again. His name is nowhere to be found on the painting. And yet, the instant we see it, we know who made it, which changes how we feel about it. Indeed, I spoke not of a specific work but of a "Rothko" in the abstract, and even his name instantly calls up a mental image of large painted rectangles with soft edges. The same is true of Pollock, Mondrian, and so on. Our aesthetic experience of a work by a well-known figure, from the moment it catches our eye to the moment we leave it, and even our recollection of our encounter with it, is shaped by art historical knowledge, which is not just a history of works (*No. 5,* 1948), but also a history of work (for instance, art historical accounts tend to stress the physical intensity of Pollock's painting process). Similarly, when we see a Yoshiyama cut or frame we recognize her style, which becomes synonymous with her name. We might pick out her energetic hand shapes, jagged effects, intense shading that recalls the shell of an insect, erratic timing, dynamic poses, or of course her Jack-in-the-Box frames. When we see that she has hidden Cure Flamingo in a *Digimon Adventure* episode that aired *before* Cure Flamingo's first appearance in *Tropical Rouge! Pretty Cure,* we are reminded that animators work on multiple shows at the same time. Keeping the name of the artist in mind, we are always reminded that artwork is work. We are always looking at labor.

In chapter 3 of *Frame by Frame,* Frank poses a question about animation's potential for revealing the labor involved in its production by invoking a construction metaphor: "What if every brick, every tile, bore the traces of the hands that touched it?"[36] Frank speaks here not just of the hand of the key animator, but of anonymous animation workers: the colorist, the in-betweener, the camera operator, and so on. It must be acknowledged that sakuga fans do

not dive below-the-line in quite the same way that Frank does; they do not share the radical aesthetic interest in "noncreative" labor that caused her to painstakingly search every frame for specks of dust and misarranged cels, because their notion of creativity is based on the artistic *choices* of individuals.[37] Still, sakuga fans do have an intimate knowledge of the conditions of dispersed and transnational anime production. Given that the world of industrial animation is highly unlikely to ever produce a film or series in which in-between animators and colorists enjoy total creative freedom, sakuga fandom's view of anime—that is, anime as a collection of sequences drawn by stylistically differentiable animators and other animation artists with varying levels of creative agency—may be the closest existing approximate answer to Frank's question.

Coda

Sakugabooru's exclusive focus on animation, especially its hardline policy against the inclusion of audio, has been controversial in popular discourse because it seems to foreclose on the holistic experience of a work. But if sakugabooru's exclusive focus on animation is a problem, it is only because there are not equivalent sites for other aspects of anime production (except for music). Difficulties of site maintenance notwithstanding, there would be much to gain from a *backgroundbooru,* a *soundeffectsbooru,* and so on. The momentary fragmentation of our sense of perception allows us to focus specifically on individual elements. A different mode of perception is made possible. I have experienced *Tropical-Rouge! Pretty Cure* in whole and in part: the standard way (as television), the sakugabooru way (as clips), and the Twitter way (as screenshots), and each time I have only gained for it. Of course, this could be attributed to Yoshiyama's consciousness of sakuga viewing practices. A similar approach may not work as well for other anime or animators. Still, Yoshiyama proves that the potential is there. Just as the invention of the camera did not render our eyes obsolete, the existence of sakuga fan viewing practices does not preclude other ways of seeing. Each way of seeing has something unique to contribute to the experience of animation media. The intentional partiality of sakuga challenges the dominant paradigm wherein animation is framed exclusively in terms of its function in the overall work, showing that we can engage in viewing practices on sakuga platforms *in conjunction* with conventional spectatorship to discover new critical potentials. The whole may be greater than the sum of its parts, but the sum of the whole *with* the parts is greater still.

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