

A Postmodern Reading of *Gintama*: Parody, Metafiction, and the Problem of Subjectivity in Japanese Popular Culture

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Abstract: This article examines *Gintama* through a postmodern framework, arguing that the series mobilizes parody, pastiche, and metafiction not merely as stylistic devices but as critical strategies for interrogating cultural authority, historical narration, and subject formation in Japanese modernity. Rather than treating *Gintama* as a site of intertextual excess alone, the analysis demonstrates how its hybrid Edo setting and persistent self-reflexivity destabilize distinctions between past and present, fiction and reality, and tradition and modernity. Drawing on theories of postmodernism and subjectivity, the article further explores how the series reconfigures identity as historically contingent and challenges modernist classifications of normativity and deviance. By situating *Gintama* within broader debates on anime and postmodern culture, the article argues that postmodernism operates not as a purely Western formation, but as a critical logic that emerges across diverse historical contexts.

Key words: *Gintama*; postmodernism; anime; parody; pastiche; metafiction; Japanese modernity; subjectivity

1. Introduction

Postmodernism remains a contested term, but its critical value lies less in any single stable definition than in its capacity to interrogate dominant narratives of modernity, rationality, subjectivity, and cultural authority. Rather than designating a unified style, it may be more productively understood as a mode of reading that attends to fragmentation, reflexivity, intertextuality, and the destabilization of inherited ideological forms. Such a framework has most often been developed in relation to Western modernity. However, this emphasis risks obscuring the fact that modernity has never been historically uniform, and that postmodern cultural forms may emerge differently in non-Western contexts shaped by uneven modernization, historical discontinuities, and cultural hybridity.

Japan provides a particularly productive site for such inquiry. As a society marked by rapid modernization, imperial expansion, wartime defeat, and postwar American influence ^[1], alongside the persistence of strong cultural particularities ^[2], Japan cannot be easily subsumed under a universalized model of “Western” modernity. The tensions within Japanese modernity have generated cultural forms that do not simply replicate Euro-American postmodernism but rather refract it through a distinct historical and ideological configuration. Within this context, anime constitutes a significant cultural archive through which these tensions can be examined.

Existing studies on anime and postmodernism have emphasized the medium’s formal hybridity, intertextuality, and its entanglement with late-capitalist cultural logics^{[3][4]}. Within the Japanese context, popular culture was conceptualised as structured by database consumption, in which narrative coherence gives way to fragmented, recombinable elements ^[5], while there is a shift from grand narratives to modular storytelling practices ^[6]. Extending this perspective, Steinberg situates anime within transmedia commodity circuits, highlighting its embeddedness in broader systems of circulation

and reproduction ^[7]. While these accounts illuminate anime's postmodern aesthetics and media ecologies, they pay comparatively less attention to how specific texts mobilize these strategies to interrogate subjectivity and modernity at the level of narrative and ideology. This article addresses that gap by examining how *Gintama* deploys parody, pastiche, and metafiction as critical mechanisms for rethinking subject formation within Japanese modernity.

This article argues that *Gintama* is not merely a comic anime that exhibits postmodern stylistic features; rather, it mobilizes parody, pastiche, and metafiction to stage a sustained critique of cultural authority, historical narration, and modern subject formation in Japan. Its significance lies not only in its intertextual play, but in the way such play unsettles distinctions between history and contemporaneity, fiction and reality, and irony and commitment. Through its hybrid Edo setting, persistent self-referentiality, and recurring engagement with questions of identity, normativity, and social marginality, *Gintama* articulates a specifically Japanese form of postmodern reflexivity. In doing so, it suggests that postmodernism is not exclusively a product of Western modernity, but a critical logic that can emerge across diverse historical formations.

The discussion proceeds in four stages. First, the article situates *Gintama* within Japanese anime culture and outlines its relevance as a case for postmodern analysis. Second, it examines parody and pastiche as mechanisms through which the series destabilizes cultural hierarchy and linear historical consciousness. Third, it analyzes the anime's metafictional structure and its collapse of boundaries between text, production, and spectatorship. Finally, it turns to the question of subjectivity, arguing that *Gintama* uses comedy and formal disruption to rethink identity and "modern malady" beyond rigid modernist frameworks.

2. Japanese Anime and *Gintama*

Anime has become one of the most visible and influential forms of Japanese cultural production, both domestically and globally ^[8]. Its significance does not rest solely on commercial success, but on its capacity to mediate social anxieties, historical memory, and ideological contradiction through highly stylized narrative forms ^[9]. Anime is therefore not simply entertainment; it is also a site in which modern Japanese life is imagined, negotiated, and critiqued.

Within this field, *Gintama* is an especially revealing text. Originally created as a manga by Hideaki Sorachi in 2003 and adapted into an anime television series in 2006, *Gintama* has achieved substantial popularity in Japan and abroad. A survey showed that in 2014 *Gintama* was one of the most popular anime of the year ^[10]. In My Anime List, in the Top 10 Anime List, 5 of them are *Gintama* series of different seasons, with the average score of 9 out of 10 of all seasons ^[11]. More importantly, however, it is formally unusual even within anime culture. Set in an alternative Edo period in which extraterrestrials have invaded Japan, the series combines samurai iconography, science fiction, contemporary urban life, absurd comedy, and historical parody. Its protagonist, Gintoki Sakata, is nominally a samurai in a semi-feudal world, yet he moves through a social landscape saturated with references to modern consumer culture, celebrity fandom, television, digital media, and other features associated with late modern life.

This setting is central to the anime's importance. *Gintama* does not merely juxtapose "tradition" and "modernity" for comic effect. Rather, it constructs a world in which those categories have already collapsed into one another. Edo is no longer a stable historical setting, and the contemporary is no longer presented as separate from the past. The result is a deliberately disordered temporal and cultural field in which inherited symbols—samurai ethics, the shogunate, national identity, masculine heroism—are continuously recontextualized and stripped of secure meaning. It is precisely this instability that makes *Gintama* an especially productive object for postmodern analysis.

3. Parody, Pastiche, and the Destabilization of Cultural Authority

One of the most immediately visible features of *Gintama* is its pervasive use of parody. Characters repeatedly mimic or invoke other anime, manga, games, films, and celebrity cultures. References to works such as Dragon Ball, One Piece, The King of Fighters, and Star Wars are not occasional embellishments but a constitutive part of the anime's narrative texture. These intertextual incursions do more than produce humor. They transform the viewing experience into an act

of cultural recognition in which meaning is produced through citation, displacement, and collision.

In this respect, parody in *Gintama* exceeds simple imitation or satire. As Hutcheon argues, parody “historicizes and politicizes” representation by exposing the codes through which culture becomes intelligible ^[12]; *Gintama* mobilizes parody precisely in this critical sense. By inserting recognizable media fragments into incompatible narrative contexts, it foregrounds the constructedness of genre, authorship, and cultural authority. No text remains self-contained; instead, each appears as already mediated, iterable, and open to recontextualization. The authority of the original is thus destabilized—not simply through mockery, but through its transformation into a mobile and non-sovereign form.

Parody in *Gintama* therefore cannot be reduced to comedic reference. Its intertextual logic redistributes interpretive authority from author to audience, rendering recognition a constitutive condition of meaning production. At the same time, the series resists fixing any singular interpretive outcome: parody may register as homage, critique, indifference, or some combination thereof. This indeterminacy is central to its function. By suspending stable authorial intention, *Gintama* cultivates a mode of spectatorship that is participatory, historically layered, and epistemologically open. Parody thus operates as a postmodern device not merely through citation, but through its capacity to unsettle hierarchical distinctions between original and copy, seriousness and play, and cultural memory and contemporary consumption.

If parody is one of *Gintama*’s primary techniques, pastiche is the broader logic of its world-building. According to Jameson, pastiche is a central postmodern practice, a form of “blank parody” characterized by neutral imitation rather than overt satire ^[13]. While *Gintama* draws on the historical framework of seventeenth-century Japan—the Edo period, marked by relative isolation and later disrupted by the forced opening of the country in the nineteenth century ^{[14][15]}—it does not attempt historical reconstruction. Instead, this setting is saturated with elements of contemporary Japan: advanced technologies, modern lifestyles, and recognizable forms of popular culture coexist with feudal institutions and samurai iconography. Characters move through this hybrid world as if it were coherent, behaving as modern subjects while visually embedded in a premodern environment.

This juxtaposition produces not merely stylistic incongruity, but a structural dislocation of historical time. The Edo period is no longer presented as a recoverable past, but as a surface onto which contemporary cultural forms are projected. Figures such as Terakado Tsu, who mirrors J-pop idol culture, and Shinpachi, whose practices reflect contemporary otaku fandom, exemplify how late-modern identities are retroactively inscribed into a historical frame. Through the conjunction of disparate temporal and cultural elements, *Gintama* constructs a pastiche in which distinctions between past and present collapse, and cultural forms circulate without stable origin.

As Jameson ^[13] suggests, such postmodern pastiche is symptomatic of a broader cultural condition in which identity is mediated through inherited and reproducible signs. This logic resonates with Barthes’ notion of myth as a system that naturalizes historically contingent meanings ^[16], as well as Baudrillard’s concept of simulacra, in which representation precedes and substitutes for the real ^[17]. The cultural materials mobilized in *Gintama*—drawn from both historical imagery and contemporary popular culture—thus function less as reflections of reality than as circulating signs that produce the illusion of coherence and identity. In this sense, the series does not simply depict a hybrid Japan; rather, it exposes how modern subjectivity itself is constituted through the repetition and recombination of such mediated forms.

4. Metafiction and the Collapse of Narrative Boundaries

Another indication that *Gintama* contains postmodern elements lies in its status as a form of metafiction, extending beyond conventional narrative structures. It is necessary to clarify why metafiction should be considered alongside postmodernism: both share a concern with reflexivity, self-awareness, and the interrogation of representational boundaries. Metafiction can be defined as a cultural artifact that incorporates references not only to reality but also to its own processes of production ^[18]. In other words, it foregrounds the problematic and unstable relationship between reality and textuality, often emphasizing the constructed nature of narrative itself. Although the concept of metafiction is most frequently applied in literary and film studies, it can be productively extended to anime as a form of cultural production. Gonzalez further distinguishes between two degrees of metafiction in comics ^[18]. The first involves intertextual and transtextual devices that draw attention to other texts, while the second entails a more radical level of reflexivity that

breaks the boundary between the fictional world and the reality of its production and reception. This framework is particularly useful for understanding *Gintama*. At the first level, the series constructs its metafictionality through parody and pastiche, as previously discussed. At the second level, however, *Gintama* goes further by collapsing the distinction between narrative and production, thereby foregrounding its own status as an artifact.

This second level of metafiction is especially significant in distinguishing *Gintama* from more conventionally immersive anime. Rather than sustaining a coherent fictional universe, the series repeatedly disrupts narrative continuity by exposing its own mechanisms of creation. It undermines the separation between author, text, and audience, and blurs the boundary between fictional narrative and real-world production. For instance, the creator Hideaki Sorachi appears within the series in a caricatured form, directly addressing the audience and commenting on the creative process. Similarly, episode 252—ostensibly a recap of the preceding season—explicitly foregrounds production constraints: the characters apologize for failing to deliver the anticipated continuation, assemble the episode using recycled footage, and even dramatize their own “failure” as part of the narrative. These moments disrupt the illusion of narrative autonomy by integrating the conditions of production into the text itself.

Such instances do not merely function as comedic devices. Rather, they destabilize the ontological boundary between fiction and reality. Characters address the audience directly, acknowledge their status as constructed figures, and behave as if they are actors within a production rather than self-contained fictional entities. In doing so, *Gintama* transforms spectatorship into an awareness of mediation, inviting viewers to recognize the anime as both narrative and artifact simultaneously. Through these metafictional strategies, the series challenges conventional narrative immersion and confronts the assumed division between the virtual and the real, rendering both categories contingent and open to critical reflection.

5. Self-Reflexivity, Subjectivity, and the Critique of Modern Normativity

As a key postmodern element in *Gintama*, self-reflexivity operates not only at the level of metafiction as a formal strategy, but also within a deeper engagement with subjectivity and ideological discourse, particularly in relation to what may be termed “modern malady.” Beyond the preceding discussion of style and narrative, which functions at a more formal level, *Gintama* develops a sustained reflexive inquiry into the constitution of the modern subject in contemporary Japan. In this regard, Bourdieu advocates a form of “participant objectivation” in the study of subjectivity, that is, “the objectivation of the subject and the operations of objectivation” ^[19]. Rather than embedding subjectivity implicitly within representation, *Gintama* externalizes and renders it visible, inviting critical reflection on its formation. Two interrelated dimensions are particularly salient: the negotiation of Japanese subjectivity and the reconfiguration of behaviors conventionally categorized as forms of modern malady.

On the one hand, the series offers a sustained reflection on Japanese subjectivity within a context of historical transformation. The fictional Edo setting functions less as a reconstruction of the past than as a refracted image of postwar Japan, shaped by processes of westernization and modernization. As Naoki notes, drawing on David Pollack’s metaphor of the “frog in the well” (*wakan*), Japanese subjectivity has historically been defined in relation to an external referent—first China, and later the United States ^[20]. This metaphor highlights the extent to which identity is structured through shifting contextual boundaries. However, Naoki critiques Pollack’s emphasis on external determination, arguing that such accounts risk overlooking the persistence of internal subjectivity ^[20]. This tension is reflected in *Gintama*: despite the pervasive influence of “alien” (read: external or modern) forces, the series suggests that subjectivity is not wholly reducible to external imposition but continues to emerge from internal cultural and historical conditions.

This negotiation is embodied in the juxtaposition between traditional Japanese ethos and the pressures of modernity. Within the anime’s alternative universe, Bushido—the ethical and moral code of the samurai—serves as a residual marker of cultural identity, while the intrusion of “alien” culture and economic systems represents the forces of

modernization. The protagonist, Gintoki¹, exemplifies this contradiction. As a figure associated with the declining samurai order, he ostensibly represents tradition; yet his habits, attitudes, and lifestyle—marked by individualism, consumerism, and detachment—align closely with those of modern society. By presenting Gintoki as a composite figure, the series neither fully preserves tradition nor fully endorses modernity but instead reconfigures both within a shared framework. As Harootunian observes, drawing on Takeuchi's notion of the “intellectual shudder,” Japanese modernity often appears as a dilemma between adopting Western forms and retaining a “native” identity^[15]. *Gintama*, however, resists this binary by suggesting that such alternatives are incomplete. Subjectivity is instead produced through the ongoing negotiation between historical inheritance and contemporary conditions.

On the other hand, *Gintama* extends its reflexive critique to forms of behavior commonly categorized as modern pathology. Drawing on Foucault's distinction between reason and non-reason—where “madness” is constituted through its exclusion from rational order—the series introduces characters who embody forms of social deviance^[21], such as Madao and Isao Kondou². Yet these figures are not simply marginalized or condemned. While presented humorously, they are also granted narrative depth, personal history, and ethical complexity. In this way, *Gintama* challenges the normative frameworks through which modernity defines and regulates acceptable behavior.

Moreover, the series situates such behaviors within broader social, historical, and experiential contexts, rather than isolating them as individual deficiencies. As Deleuze and Guattari argue, forms of “delirium” should be understood as assemblages shaped by multiple forces—historical, cultural, and social—rather than as purely pathological deviations^[22]. *Gintama* adopts a similar perspective: behaviors labeled as irrational or unproductive are not simply rejected but recontextualized as meaningful responses to particular conditions. This does not imply an uncritical endorsement of such behaviors; rather, it signals a resistance to the reductive classifications imposed by modernist discourse, which often equate deviation with dysfunction in the service of productivity and social order.

Taken together, these elements demonstrate that the self-reflexivity of *Gintama* extends beyond formal experimentation to encompass a broader ideological critique. By interrogating both the construction of subjectivity and the categorization of deviance, the series destabilizes the normative assumptions underpinning modern identity. Its postmodernism thus lies not only in its stylistic fragmentation, but in its capacity to render the subject itself an object of critical reflection.

6. Conclusion

This article has offered a postmodern reading of the Japanese anime *Gintama* in order to examine the formal techniques and ideological dynamics that structure the work. It has argued that *Gintama* mobilizes parody and pastiche not merely as stylistic devices, but as critical strategies that destabilize cultural authority and historical coherence, while its metafictional logic foregrounds reflexivity at the level of both narrative form and production. By extending this analysis to questions of subjectivity and so-called modern malady, the discussion has demonstrated that *Gintama* interrogates dominant discourses of modernity in Japanese society, particularly those that seek to fix identity and regulate normative

1 Gintoki Sakata is the protagonist of *Gintama*, a former samurai who fought in the Joui War and now lives as a freelance odd-job worker (yorozuya) in an alternative Edo period. Although he outwardly appears apathetic, self-indulgent, and disengaged from social norms—spending his time reading manga, watching television, and avoiding stable employment—he nonetheless retains a strong ethical core shaped by the residual values of Bushido. This tension between his apparent detachment and his underlying moral commitment makes him a composite figure through which the series negotiates the contradictions between tradition and modernity, as well as the instability of subjectivity in contemporary Japanese society.

2 In *Gintama*, Madao (an acronym for “marude dame na ossan,” meaning “a completely useless middle-aged man”) refers to Hasegawa Taizō, a recurring character portrayed as chronically unemployed, socially marginal, and economically unstable. Despite his apparent failure within the norms of productivity and success, he is depicted with emotional depth and ethical sincerity, complicating his status as a figure of “deviance.” Kondou Isao, by contrast, is the commander of the Shinsengumi police force, yet is characterized by his obsessive and often inappropriate behavior—particularly his compulsive stalking of the character Otae. While his actions are framed comically, they nonetheless position him within the domain of “non-reason” as defined by modern normative standards. Together, these characters exemplify how *Gintama* represents socially marginal or excessive behaviors not simply as pathological, but as embedded within broader social and affective contexts.

behavior.

In this regard, *Gintama* aligns with Hutcheon's account of postmodern cultural production^[12], which resists singular authorial intention while sustaining the conditions for ongoing contestation and interpretive plurality. Rather than resolving contradiction, the series intensifies it, undermining established discourses and opening them to divergent readings. At the same time, as Jameson suggests, postmodernism should not be understood as a fixed aesthetic category, but as a critical logic or interpretive framework through which contemporary culture may be re-examined^[13]. From this perspective, *Gintama* does not simply exemplify postmodernism; it demonstrates how postmodern strategies operate within a specific historical and cultural context.

Ultimately, this analysis suggests that postmodernism cannot be confined to a particular geographical or cultural domain. The case of *Gintama* indicates that postmodern critical practices emerge in relation to diverse modernities, and that isolating cultural contexts from postmodern inquiry risks reproducing the very boundaries that postmodernism seeks to unsettle.

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