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The Ocular Gaze in Shōnen Anime

Posthumanist and Religious Framings of Ocular Power in Bleach: Thousand-Year Blood War (JP 2022–present), Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba (JP 2019–2024), and Naruto Shippuden (JP 2007–2017)

Abstract

Eyes saturate religious, philosophical, and cultural imaginaries, from the "divine gaze" of sacred iconography to the disciplinary optics of modern surveillance. Japanese anime radicalizes this optic order: ocular motifs cease to signify mere sight and instead function as metaphysical, juridical, and posthuman *dispositifs* of power. Despite extensive work on anime's spirituality, media ecologies, and posthuman embodiment, the persistent and elaborate deployment of ocular powers across major franchises remains undertheorized. This study addresses that gap by examining how eyes in Bleach: Thousand-Year Blood War, Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba, and Naruto Shippuden encode sovereignty, charisma, and judgment through hybrid religious and posthuman grammars. Methodologically, the analysis combines diegetic analysis (abilities, limits, narrative costs), semiotic reading of nomenclature and visual design, and religion-and-media approaches attentive to mythic referents, eschatology, and ritualized seeing. Attention is also given to paratexts and reception, aligning with anime/media scholarship on media mix and database consumption. The implications of this exploration are twofold: first, anime must be recognized as a critical site where visual culture, religion, and posthuman theory converge; second, the study of ocular motifs illuminates how vision itself is reimagined as a primary medium of power, belief, and futurity in contemporary media ecologies.

Keywords

Anime, Posthumanism, Religion and Media, Gaze, SDG 16, Bleach: Thousand-Year Blood War (Directed by: Tomohisa Taguchi, TV Tokio, JP 2022–present), Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba (Directed by: Haruo Sotozaki, Tokio MX, JP 2019–2024), Naruto Shippuden (Directed by: Hayato Date, TV Tokio, JP 2007–2017)

Biography

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Introduction

Eyes saturate the symbolic order of human culture, from the "divine gaze" of religious iconography to the unblinking lenses of modern surveillance. As Martin Jay[1] and Jonathan Crary[2] have consummately documented, Western thought has long constructed vision as a privileged, often dominating, site of knowledge and power. Michel Foucault[3] theorized the gaze itself as a disciplinary mechanism that produces and organizes subjects. Within the landscape of contemporary visual media, Japanese shonen anime – the subcategory of animated works adapted from manga serialized in magazines for adolescent male audiences, typically defined by extended serialized conflict, systematic power hierarchies, and the protagonist's teleological journey toward mastery – radicalizes this optic imaginary: eyes cease to be neutral organs of sight and instead become dense nodes of metaphysical, political, and technological force. In this narrative mode, to see is not merely to perceive but also to command, to judge, to punish, and to save.

The pervasive and potent deployment of ocular motifs across major franchises suggests this feature is a constitutive element of anime's narrative and symbolic economy. The article will focus on three shonen animes and their corresponding ocular motifs. In Bleach: Thousand-Year Blood War (TV Tokio, JP 2022–present), the focus is with Yhwach, a transcendent king in the series, and his ultimate ability, "The Almighty", which collapses epistemology and ontology, rendering all possible futures visible and therefore subject to his decree. In Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba (Tokio MX, JP 2019–2024), the inscribed eyes of the Upper Moons function as hieroglyphs of metaphysical authority and cultic seduction, encoding a terrifying fusion of charisma and monstrosity. In Naruto Shippuden (TV Tokio, JP 2007–2017), the ocular

1 Jay 1993, 1–15.
2 Crary 1990, 1–24.
3 Foucault 1977, 195–228.

triad of the Sharingan, Byakugan, and Rinnegan institutes nothing less than a cosmo-legal order, i. e. a comprehensive regime of judgment, illusion, and world-making that rivals divine law. These eyes are never merely ornamental; they are semiotic condensations of theology, politics, and futurity.

For readers less familiar with anime's visual grammar, it is important to note that the prominence of eyes is not limited to elite characters or specific franchises but is part of a broader, long-standing monster iconography within Japanese popular culture. Anime and manga frequently exaggerate, multiply, or displace eyes as a shorthand for non-human power and ontological otherness. Such ocular excess operates as a visual signal of danger, supernatural perception, and moral ambiguity, conditioning viewers to read eyes as privileged sites of power, threat, and revelation.

This convention also resonates with far older mythic structures. In various cultures, the "evil eye" functions as a widespread magical concept, denoting a gaze capable of inflicting harm, misfortune, or domination. From Mediterranean and Middle Eastern folk traditions to South and East Asian cosmologies, the eye is imagined as an active force rather than a passive sensory organ. Anime's monstrous eyes can thus be understood as modern, media-saturated rearticulations of this belief: the gaze that wounds, corrupts, enthralls, or judges. Anime renders vision itself as a site of existential risk and power even before it is formalized into named techniques such as *dōjutsu*, demonic ranks, or divine omniscience.

To theorize this phenomenon, the analysis in this article draws from posthumanist theory,[4] treating anime's eyes as what might be termed "posthuman organs": hybrid prostheses that dramatically exceed the inherent limits of the human sensorium. Following the semiotic tradition of Roland Barthes,[5] we can read them as potent cultural codes, signifiers that work to naturalize specific ideologies of control, destiny, and redemption. Foucault's[6] and Jay's[7] accounts of ocularcentrism further reveal how these eyes dramatize a pervasive politics of the gaze, wherein surveillance and domination intertwine with transcendence. Anime, however, complicates the modern panoptic model by embedding vision within mythological grammars that simultaneously sanctify and corrupt the very act of looking.

4 Wolfe 2010, xi-xv.
5 Barthes 1977, 15–31.
6 Foucault 1977, esp. chapter 3, 195–228.
7 Jay 1993, 21–82.

This study insists that such intricate ocular economies deserve serious scholarly attention. As leading scholars in visual culture and religion have emphatically argued, images are active, powerful mediators of belief, power, and affect.[8] Anime's prolific and detailed imagination of eyes dramatizes how vision itself is reconfigured as a primary instrument of destiny, sovereignty, and transcendence for a posthuman age. By pursuing a comparative close reading of visual motifs, naming conventions, and choreography alongside their intertextual religious references, like the Shintō-Buddhist cosmology in Naruto Shippuden, the apocalyptic thematics in Bleach: Thousand-Year Blood War, and the sectarian charisma in Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba, this study positions shonen anime as a critical cultural site for interrogating the profound intersection of vision, religion, and power.

Posthuman Vision and the Politics of the Gaze

Posthumanism dislodges the primacy of the autonomous human subject by highlighting assemblages of bodies, technologies, and media.[9] Within this framework, the anime eye emerges as a "bio-symbolic interface", a site where memory, foresight, domination, and metaphysical judgment converge. As Donna Haraway suggested in her foundational figuration of the cyborg, vision itself can be understood as a technology that dissolves binaries, e. g. human/machine, natural/supernatural, material/spiritual.[10] Anime dramatizes this collapse by turning ocular motifs into hybrid devices that simultaneously discipline, enchant, and reconfigure human limits.

Barthes's semiotics clarifies that these ocular powers function as potent "codes" that anchor narrative authority and naturalize ideologies of control, destiny, and salvation.[11] Foucault's account of panopticism reveals the political valence of seeing, wherein vision operates as a form of governance, embedding surveillance within the very act of perception.[12] Yet, as Jay[13] and Crary[14] remind us, vision is a historically contingent regime, constantly

8 Morgan 2012, 1–20.
9 Hayles 1999, 1–24.
10 Haraway 1991, 149.
11 Barthes 1977, 15–51.
12 Foucault 1977, 200–205.
13 Jay 1993, 1–15.
14 Crary 1990, 1–24.

renegotiated through culture and media. Anime, therefore, does not simply replicate the modern politics of the gaze but transforms it, overlaying surveillance logics with religious grammars.

This religious dimension is central for, as we have heard, vision in religious contexts is mediatory, a practice that structures affect and belief. Anime's ocular powers function precisely in this way: they sacralize the act of seeing. Names such as Amaterasu, Tsukuyomi, and Susanoo (in Naruto Shippuden) invoke Shintō deities; the Rinnegan derives from the Buddhist notion of *rinne* (輪廻, samsara); Yhwach's "The Almighty" in Bleach: Thousand-Year Blood War openly signals apocalyptic sovereignty; and the eyes of the Upper Moons in Demon Slayer encode religious charisma, salvation, and damnation. In these examples, the eye becomes both "panopticon" and "hierophany", a mechanism of control and a manifestation of the supernatural.

The persistence and proliferation of such motifs signal a phenomenon that cannot be dismissed as ornamental. As Susan Napier[15] has shown, anime consistently operates at the intersection of fantasy, religion, and sociopolitical critique, while Thomas Lamarre[16] demonstrates that anime's visual technologies reimagine perception and subjectivity. Taken together, these insights demand a theorization of anime eyes as posthuman organs of power. To study these ocular economies is to engage not only with the politics of vision but also with the religious imaginaries and posthuman futures that contemporary anime makes visible.

Method and Corpus

The corpus for this study comprises three seminal shonen anime franchises: Bleach: Thousand-Year Blood War, Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba, and Naruto Shippuden. The analysis is structured through three interrelated methodological approaches: (1) a diegetic analysis of the abilities, limits, and narrative costs of ocular powers; (2) a semiotic examination of nomenclature and visual design, including iris inscriptions, multi-eyed forms, and chromatic hierarchies; and (3) religion-and-media lenses that foreground mythic referents, eschatological thematics, and the ritualized forms of seeing these series depict. Throughout, the analysis highlights the ethical

15 Napier 2005, 3–23.
16 Lamarre 2009, 3–41.

stakes of these visual regimes (including questions of agency, consent, and domination) and considers trajectories for reception research, a growing emphasis in the field.

This inquiry proceeds with a posthumanist-inflected literary method that is attentive to both mediation and reception. First, it draws upon the foundational work of **Haraway's** *A Cyborg Manifesto*, which theorizes the breakdown of boundaries between human and machine, natural and artificial.[17] Anime's ocular powers, which are often grafted, stolen, or technologically enhanced, model this cyborgian condition, extending sensory perception into realms of prediction, hypnosis, and telemetry while simultaneously binding characters to networks of obligation, inheritance, and control.

Second, the study adapts **Morgan's concept of the "sacred gaze"**, which describes a mode of looking that organizes power, disciplines subjects, and carries profound affective charge.[18] This framework is applied to these media texts to analyze how anime eyes function as normative, mythically resonant instruments that train both characters and spectators in specific, affectively charged habits of looking.

Third, methodologically, the study aligns with religion-and-media scholarship that emphasizes multi-sited evidence and the cultural work of mediation. This entails (a) analysis of moments of ocular revelation, (b) intertextual comparison to trace shared visual and mythic grammars, and (c) attention to production paratexts, such as official art and marketing materials, as part of a broader media ecology that shapes the meaning of these ocular motifs.

Bringing these strands together, this study reads shonen anime's ocular regimes as complex *dispositifs*, a term Foucault used to describe heterogeneous apparatuses that produce and manage subjects that entangle vision, power, and myth.[19] They are at once disciplinary, religious, and deeply enmeshed in shonen anime's media ecologies. To theorize these eyes, therefore, is not only to examine their narrative role but also to engage their extended cultural afterlives within religious imaginaries, media economies, and fan receptions.

17 Haraway 1991, 149–152.
18 Morgan 2005, 2–5; 48–75.
19 Foucault 1977, 205.



Fig. 1: Yhwach the Almighty can see and alter the futures. Film still, Bleach: Thousand-Year Blood War (TV Tokio, JP 2022–present), Episode 28, 00:09:10.

Eschatological Omniscience and the Sovereign Eye

Bleach: Thousand-Year Blood War is the final arc of Tite Kubo's long-running shōnen franchise, following the protagonist Ichigo Kurosaki and the Soul Reapers – guardians who shepherd souls between the living world and the afterlife – as they battle the Quincy, an ancient clan of spiritually aware humans seeking to overthrow the gods of death themselves. Their emperor, Yhwach, wields a gaze that can see and alter all possible futures, making vision itself the ultimate instrument of sovereignty and destruction (fig. 1). Yhwach's Almighty in Bleach: Thousand-Year Blood War operates as one of the most formidable ocular *dispositifs* in contemporary anime. At the diegetic level, this power is framed as the ultimate Quincy ability: a gaze that perceives all possible futures and grants the capacity to edit causality itself. Once the pupil blossoms into a crossed iris, Yhwach achieves not merely foresight but total omniscience; every branching timeline becomes available for his selection and manipulation. This power effectively literalizes a posthuman condition where subjectivity is distributed across informational patterns, transforming Yhwach from a discrete character into a nexus of algorithmic futures, a sovereign intelligence embodied in flesh.

The limits of The Almighty are as significant as its capabilities. Yhwach's power is not effortless omnipotence but a vision that consumes possibility itself. Every alternative path collapses into the one he chooses, producing a narrative exhaustion of potential. For both antagonists and protagonists, his vision is experienced as pure coercion: a seen future becomes an inevitable future. This diegetic logic powerfully mirrors contemporary anxieties surrounding predictive technologies (from artificial intelligence to algorithmic governance) where the

capacity for foresight is inextricably linked to mechanisms of control, a concern explored by surveillance studies like David Lyon's *The Culture of Surveillance.*[20]

The nomenclature and design of The Almighty are saturated with religious resonance. The Quincy order mobilizes Christian and biblical symbolism: the cross insignia, the German word *Schrift* (script, writing), and hymn-like battle rhetoric. Yhwach's ocular transformation – pupils multiplying into a cross-shaped iris – figures his sovereignty as a fusion of sight and scripture. The cross in the eye is not ornamental. It signals a theological claim: omnivision is providence. As scholars such as Napier have observed, anime frequently appropriates religious iconography not for doctrinal fidelity but for its profound affective and symbolic power.[21] In Bleach: Thousand-Year Blood War, the eye functions as a liturgical emblem, a visual sermon on absolute sovereignty staged for the characters and the audience.

The aesthetics of spectacle reinforce this semiotic layering. The anime deploys stark, high-contrast palettes and intense close-ups that isolate the eye as a terrifying cinematic interface. This technique resonates with what animation theorist Lamarre identifies as the "animetic interval" – the unique capacity of anime to create layered, multiplanar images that generate distinct perceptual experiences.[22] The Almighty visualizes this by presenting timelines as stacked, shifting frames. Yhwach flips between potentialities like an editor splicing film reels, aestheticizing sovereignty as ultimate editorial authority over time itself.

From a religion-and-media perspective, The Almighty exemplifies what Morgan terms the "sacred gaze": a mode of looking that organizes power, disciplines subjects, and carries immense affective charge.[23] To be seen by Yhwach is to be pre-determined, to have one's potentiality foreclosed. His gaze collapses surveillance and creation: a visible future is already a decreed one. Theologically, this inverts Christian providence, where divine omniscience is traditionally understood to coexist with human freedom. Yhwach's omniscience is purely authoritarian, enforcing a regime where foresight annihilates agency. This secular remixing of sacred concepts aligns with the work of scholars like Brent Plate, who argues that media constantly "re-code the sacred" into new, potent forms of modern myth-making.[24]

20 Lyon 2018, 102–135.
21 Napier 2005, 235–256.
22 Lamarre 2009, xiii–xxvii.
23 Morgan 2005, 48–75.
24 Plate 2008, 85–112.

Ethically, this raises stark questions. If futures are pre-selected, what becomes of responsibility and hope? The series answers this through its heroes' resistance. Ichigo and his allies refuse to yield, insisting on loyalty, courage, and sacrifice even in the face of inevitability. These actions embody what Morgan, in a later work, describes as a vision rooted in the body and its affective relations – a site where love, grief, and commitment resist total capture by systems of control.[25] Even under algorithmic omniscience, human bonds generate alternatives irreducible to calculation, staging a narrative contest between cold sovereignty and passionate humanism.

This analysis must also account for reception and media ecologies. As Marc Steinberg illustrates, anime functions within a "media mix", extending beyond the screen into tie-in merchandise, artwork, and paratexts.[26] Paratextual imagery of Yhwach (on trading cards, posters, and figurines) consistently highlights the proliferating pupils and cross-shaped iris. These images circulate as detachable icons of absolute power, consumed independently of the narrative. This dynamic resonates with Hiroki Azuma's theory of "database consumption", where audiences engage with modular, decontextualized motifs, like the omniscient eye, recombining them across forums, memes, and fan art.[27]

Read through Foucault's theory of the *dispositif*, an apparatus or institution of power that produces and manages subjects, Yhwach's eye functions as a supreme technology of discipline, making all life calculable and governable. Yet the narrative insistently reveals cracks in this apparatus: acts of defiance, unquantifiable sacrifices, and a steadfast refusal of determinism. These ruptures demonstrate how anime can dramatize the core tension between totalizing systems of surveillance and the persistent, residual force of human values.

In sum, a theological, media studies, and posthumanist perspective reveals that Bleach: Thousand-Year Blood War operates at the intersection of theology, media aesthetics, and posthuman politics. Yhwach's Almighty enacts eschatological omniscience as algorithmic governance, collapsing foresight into decree. Yet, in response, the anime foregrounds an ethical resistance, rooted here in love, loyalty, and sacrifice, that remains incalculable. This dual movement, between determinism and fragile freedom, exemplifies

25 Morgan 2012, 1–18.
26 Steinberg 2012, 131–158.
27 Azuma 2009, 79–98.

how shonen anime's ocular motifs function not only as narrative devices but as sophisticated posthuman mythologies embedded within global media ecologies.

Cultic Charisma, Corrupted Salvation, and Ocular Hierarchies

Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba follows Tanjiro Kamado, a young boy who becomes a demon slayer after his family is slaughtered and his sister Nezuko is transformed into a demon. Set in Taisho-era Japan, the series pits the human Demon Slayer Corps against the Twelve Kizuki (Upper Moons), an elite hierarchy of demons led by the immortal Muzan Kibutsuji, with the eyes of the Upper Moons serving as visible insignia of their rank and corrupted power. In Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba, ocular motifs encode not only combat capacities but also a sophisticated theology of corrupted vision. At the diegetic level, the eyes of the Upper Moons constitute starkly visible indexes of rank and authority. Inscribed irises (numerals and kanji are literally etched into the pupil) render hierarchy as bodily semiotics. These ocular inscriptions operate as both identity and function: Akaza's ringed eyes signify his relentless martial ethos (fig. 2), Dōma's prismatic irises aestheticize a charismatic and cold detachment (fig. 3), while Kokushibō's six-eyed visage hyperbolizes perception into pure monstrosity (fig. 4). Here, the diegesis frames the eye as a living archive of power, incising social order directly into the flesh.

The limits and costs of these ocular augmentations are explicit in the tension between enhancement and dehumanization. Kokushibō's proliferation of eyes grants him unparalleled perception, yet it transforms his humanity into a grotesque excess. To "over-see" is to lose empathy; vision becomes monstrous when utterly divorced from ethics. Likewise, Dōma's radiant, hypnotic gaze conceals a vampiric predation, consuming those who entrust themselves to his cult of "Eternal Paradise". Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba thus dramatizes a central paradox: ocular power amplifies ability but simultaneously corrodes moral responsibility.

In terms of nomenclature and visual design, the eyes in this shonen anime participate in a richly symbolic semiotics. The kanji numerals burned into the irises function like indelible religious tattoos: inseparable from the body, impossible to conceal, and perpetually signaling status. The multiplicity of



Fig. 2: Akaza's ringed eyes symbolize his ethos. Film still, Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba (Tokio MX, JP 2019–2024), Episode 32, 00:11:18.

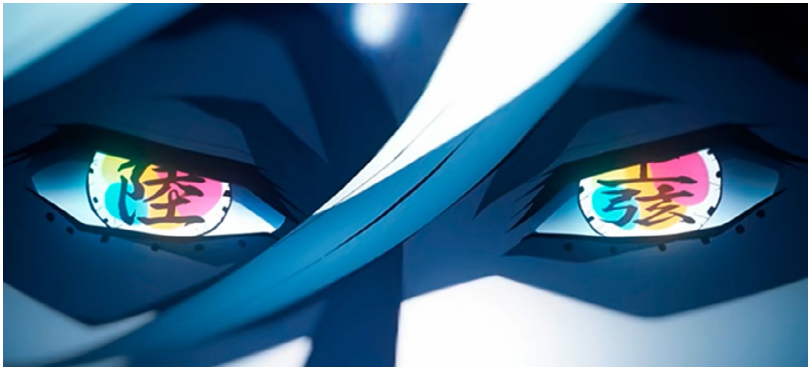


Fig. 3: Dōma's prismatic irises. Film still, Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba, (Tokio MX, JP 2019–2024), Episode 44, 00:19:33.



Fig. 4: Kokushibō's six-eyed visage. Film still, Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba (Tokio MX, JP 2019–2024), Episode 45, 00:15:29.

Kokushibō's eyes recalls Buddhist and Hindu iconography of divine beings who are "full of eyes" (e. g. the *thousand-eyed* Avalokiteśvara), but this motif is inverted into a demonic grotesque. Dōma's lotus motifs and crystalline irises draw from Buddhist imagery of paradise and enlightenment, but they are twisted into the aesthetics of false salvation. In Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba, the sacred lotus becomes bait for consumption, not a path to transcendence.

A religion-and-media lens illuminates how the series' ocular hierarchy dramatizes a dualistic cosmology. The Breath techniques and Nichirin blades of the Demon Slayer Corps represent disciplined, ascetic training, modeled on martial and Buddhist practices of bodily mastery. In contrast, the ocular powers of the demons constitute an anti-*darshan.* In Hindu and Buddhist traditions, *darshan* is the auspicious, mutual act of seeing and being seen by the divine, a conduit for blessing and grace.[28] Here, to be seen by a demon is to be unmade. This aligns with Morgan's concept of the "sacred gaze". Dōma's gaze enchants and enthralls followers, while Kokushibō's overwhelming multiplicity paralyzes them. In Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba, eyes become liturgical instruments of domination, orchestrating worship and sacrifice for a malevolent end.

From a posthumanist perspective, these ocular powers reveal the demonic body as endlessly reconfigurable, mutable, and technologically extended. The demons' regeneration, grafted eyes, and ocular mutations dramatize the body as a site of both upgrade and degeneration. This resonates with notions of the posthuman body as a malleable interface, which returns us to Haraway's framing of breaching of the boundaries between organism and machine. Akaza's ringed eyes function as bio-symbolic circuits tuning him for combat, while Dōma's irises calibrate charisma to invite trust before devouring it. In this sense, demonic vision is operational, akin to a kind of predatory programming written in the flesh.

The ethical stakes are profound. The series insists that ocular enhancement without virtue degenerates into pure domination. It starkly contrasts demonic ocularity with human discipline. Breath techniques represent ascetic training grounded in restraint, loyalty, and self-sacrifice. Demonic eyes, by contrast, aestheticize the absence of restraint – unbounded vision, charismatic domination, and sensory excess utterly detached from ethical moorings. The cosmology is clear: perception must be disciplined by virtue

28 Eck 1998, 45–60.

or else it corrodes into monstrosity. This moral logic is embodied in the sacrificial deaths of the Hashira, whose human eyes shine not with supernatural inscriptions but with unyielding conviction and care.

Attention to reception and paratexts reveals how these ocular motifs circulate beyond the anime's narrative. Upper Moon eyes are reproduced in fan art and official goods as modular icons of "coolness", charisma, or dread, often detached from their narrative context. This practice similarly aligns with Azuma's theory of "database consumption", where audiences engage with decontextualized character elements (moé) as often as with overarching plots.[29] The affective response to these images is complex; viewers may admire the aesthetic spectacle of Dōma's gaze while simultaneously recognizing it as an allegory of predatory authority. This dual response exemplifies what Morgan describes as the interplay between the visual as spectacle and as a site of ethical and affective training.[30]

Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba thus codes ocular power as both charismatic enchantment and cautionary allegory. The Upper Moon eyes form a visual liturgy of domination: they are eyes that promise paradise but deliver predation, that multiply vision until it dissolves empathy, that reduce religious symbols to hollow spectacle. Yet within this economy of corrupted sight, the series affirms an ethical counter-vision grounded in human discipline, sacrifice, and embodied care. The posthuman body may regenerate and graft eyes without limit, but without virtue, such vision is nothing more than domination in a luminous disguise.

Genealogies of Sight, Theological Adjudication, and the Posthuman Eye

Naruto Shippuden is the sequel to the original Naruto series (TV Tokio, JP 2002–2007). The young ninja Naruto Uzumaki returns to his village after two years of training to face the criminal organization Akatsuki. Set in a world where chakra (life energy) enables supernatural abilities passed down through bloodlines, the series elaborates a comprehensive "triptych of ocular lineages" – the Byakugan, Sharingan, and Rinnegan – that collectively structures its cosmology, ethics, and political theology. Where Bleach:

29 Azuma 2009, 3–33.
30 Morgan 2012, 7–11.

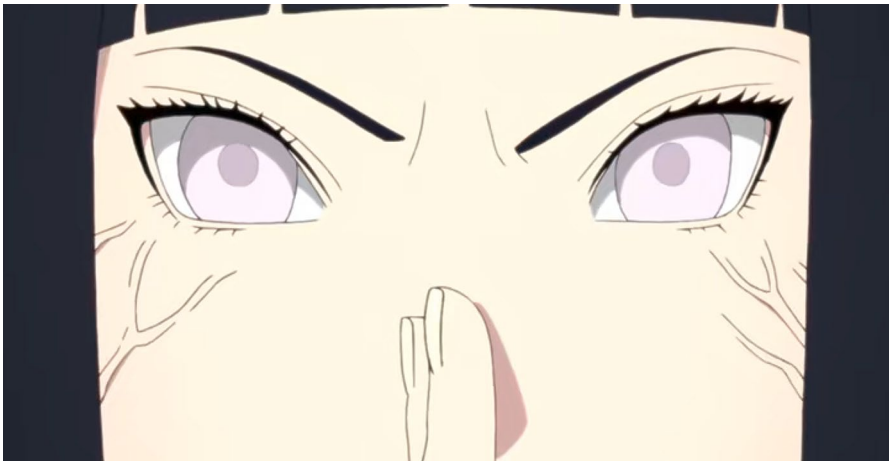


Fig. 5: Hinata's Byakugan activation. Film still, Naruto Shippuden (TV Tokio, JP 2007–2017), Episode 484, 00:08:06

Thousand-Year Blood War configures the eye as apocalyptic omniscience and Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba frames demonic ocularity as corrupted charisma, Naruto Shippuden articulates a distinctly juridical theology of vision: to see is to adjudicate, and judgment itself authorizes sovereignty.

This system is rooted in the diegetic functions and limits of each eye. Possessed by the Hyūga clan, the Byakugan (白眼, "White Eye") offers near-total panoramic sight and the ability to perceive chakra circulatory systems, operating as a forensic gaze that reveals lineage, purity, and hidden energy flows (fig. 5). Yet its power is constrained by social hierarchy, weaponized through rituals of control like the "caged bird" seal used to subordinate branch family members. The Uchiha clan's Sharingan (写輪眼, "Copy Wheel Eye") embodies mnemonic and hermeneutic functions – copying techniques, predicting movement, and rewriting perceived reality through *genjutsu*. Its divine-named techniques, Amaterasu, Tsukuyomi, and Susanoo, embed Shintō deities directly into ocular practice, yet this power is explicitly indexed to trauma, requiring profound emotional loss to awaken and evolve. Rare and godlike, the Rinnegan (輪廻眼, "Samsara Eye") links to the Buddhist concept of *rinne* (transmigration), aligning ocular power with the cycle of death and rebirth. Through its Six Paths techniques, including resurrection and soul extraction, it situates the gaze as cosmic magistracy. As Nagato's use demonstrates, however, it is never neutral. It often reduces individuals to puppets, highlighting the dehumanizing cost of wielding divine jurisdiction. Together,

these eyes literalize social and metaphysical capacities into biology: surveillance, interpretation, and ultimate judgment are inscribed in the iris itself.[31]

The naming conventions and visual design of these *dōjutsu* intensify their theological registers. The Byakugan evokes purity and priestly transparency, the Sharingan implies reflective repetition and hermeneutic cycling, while the Rinnegan explicitly anchors vision in Buddhist cosmology, tying authority to karma and reincarnation. Visually, each eye is codified through striking geometric motifs (concentric rings (fig. 6), tomoe spirals (fig. 7), veined pale irises (fig. 8)) that recall both mandalic diagrams and targeting systems. As Lamarre suggests, anime's "animetic interval" gives transcendent concepts tangible form, and these ocular designs function as both aesthetic spectacle and cosmological diagrams: the Sharingan's tomoe resemble wheels of fate, the Rinnegan's ripples evoke endless cycles of samsara.[32] This visual and nominative symbolism dramatizes a hybrid religious semiotics. The Sharingan's techniques invoke Shintō *kami*, enacting deity through spectacle, while the Rinnegan draws on Buddhist structures, its Six Paths paralleling the realms of rebirth and its function mirroring a karmic judge. In this way the "sacred gaze" becomes a mode of looking that disciplines, authorizes, and sanctifies, i. e. to possess these eyes is to bear juridical authority.

This authority is physically literalized through the frequent transplantation of eyes, which points toward a posthuman condition where subjectivity is networked and technologically grafted. Ocular techniques function as transferable modules, suggesting that identity and capability are not essential but assembled. The eye becomes a site of exchange, a biological upgrade, and a cosmic inscription.

Yet if vision authorizes judgment, the central ethical question becomes whether compassion can redeem a power predisposed to control. Itachi Uchiha embodies this tension in that his Mangekyō costs him his sight, yet he uses his gaze protectively, transforming ocular sovereignty into sacrificial care. In contrast, Nagato deploys the Rinnegan as a disciplinary apparatus, imposing his vision of peace by stripping others of agency. The series continually dramatizes this tragic dialectic: ocular ascension is purchased with sacrifice, trauma, and loss. The Byakugan's surveillance is twisted into clan coercion, the Sharingan's genius risks deceit, and the Rinnegan's sovereignty courts tyranny. Still, the narrative ultimately refuses ocular determinism,

31 Lamarre 2009, 3–41.

32 Lamarre 2009, 7.



Fig. 6: Itachi's newly awakened Sharingan. Film still, Naruto Shippuden (TV Tokio, JP 2007–2017), Episode 453, 00:20:49.



Fig. 7: Itachi's Mangekyō Sharingan. Film still, Naruto Shippuden (TV Tokio, JP 2007–2017), Episode 136, 00:19:51.



Fig. 8: Nagato's Rinnegan. Film still, Naruto Shippuden (TV Tokio, JP 2007–2017), Episode 128, 00:13:40.

insisting that vision must be mediated by empathy, loyalty, and hope, which Morgan might classify as an "embodied" and ethical mode of looking.[33]

Beyond the narrative, NARUTO SHIPPUDEN's ocular motifs also proliferate through the "media mix" identified by Steinberg, i. e. manga, anime, games, merchandise, where they function as detachable, portable signs. The Sharingan, in particular, circulates as a global icon. This practice exemplifies Azuma's "database consumption", where audiences engage decontextualized elements like eye designs as modular units of affect, consumable as codes of power or tragedy. Fan discourses often celebrate the aesthetic spectacle of these powers while grappling with their ethical weight, elevating Itachi's compassion or critiquing Nagato's authoritarianism.

In the end, NARUTO SHIPPUDEN's ocular triptych constitutes nothing less than a full political theology of sight. The Byakugan stages a forensic gaze of transparency, the Sharingan dramatizes hermeneutic vision as mimesis and domination, and the Rinnegan codifies cosmic magistracy. Together they serialize a theory of sovereignty legitimated by genealogy, administered through surveillance, and contested through interpretive technologies. Read through posthuman theory, these eyes are bio-prosthetic codes circulating among hybridized bodies; through religious studies, they remediate Shintō and Buddhist concepts of divine sight and karmic adjudication. Ultimately, they dramatize the series' central ethical tension: can a vision that governs ever be reconciled with a vision that cares?

Conclusion

Shonen anime's ocular powers are architectures of metaphysics. They function as posthuman prosthetics that recalibrate the boundaries of perception and agency; simultaneously, as potent religious semiotics, they sacralize sovereignty, adjudicate truth, and proffer (or pervert) pathways to salvation. To read these motifs through the intersecting lenses of posthumanism, the study of religion, and visual culture theory is to recognize how contemporary anime serves as a cultural forum for working through urgent ethical dilemmas of our time: the seductions and tyrannies of omnipotent surveillance, the nature of legitimate authority, and the possibility of ethical relations in a world mediated by technical sight.

33 Morgan 2012, 1–3; 71–74.

Placing these three shonen anime franchises in dialogue reveals a shared narrative investment in vision as a foundational technology of the real. These eyes are not decorative; they are narrative organs that compute futures, enthrall communities, and adjudicate reality. They are, in essence, theological-political interfaces that pedagogically train the viewer in specific habits of looking: modes of submission, recognition, and resistance. A critical approach clarifies that to "see" in these worlds is to be irrevocably enmeshed within dense networks of power, obligation, and social bond.

The relentless focus on the ocular across these series issues a powerful reminder: vision is never innocent. It is an inescapably world-constituting act, laden with theological weight and political consequence. To trace the function of these gazes, as sovereign decree, seductive trap, or juridical instrument, is to hold a mirror to our contemporary condition, where we are perpetually enmeshed in economies of seeing, from the biometric gaze of the state to the predictive algorithms that curate our digital realities. The critical task, therefore, transcends interpretation. It demands that we, as scholars and educators, leverage this recognition for a more vigilant and ethically responsible praxis of looking, in the form of a commitment to discerning the power embedded in every gaze, both on screen and in the mediated world we navigate daily.

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Filmography

Bleach: Thousand-Year Blood War (Directed by: Tomohisa Taguchi, TV Tokio, JP 2022–present).
Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba (Directed by: Haruo Sotozaki, Tokio MX, JP 2019–2024).
Naruto (Directed by: Hayato Date, TV Tokio, JP 2002–2007).
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