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The Depressed Messiah: Religion, Science Fiction, and Postmodernism in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*

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The article explores the anime series “Neon Genesis Evangelion” (1995–1996). The work is considered as a cultural product that is within the science fiction tradition of the second half of the twentieth century. The article shows how the series weaves together elements of Shinto and Abrahamic religious traditions as equally relevant. Through the use of religious topics, the science fiction work acquires an inner cognitive logic. The religious in the series is represented on two levels: an implicit one that defines the plot’s originality, and also an explicit one, in which references to religious matters become a marketing tool aimed at Japanese and Western media markets. To grasp the sometimes controversial and incoherent religious symbols, the author proposes to use a postsecular framework of analysis and the elements of a postmodern philosophy of culture. The author then proposes an analysis of the show’s narrative using the religious theme of apocalypse.

Keywords: postsecularism, postmodern, Neon Genesis Evangelion, Shinto, Christianity, anime, science fiction, popular culture.

Introduction

AMONG the many hallmarks that define mass culture are its universality and versatility (Iglton 2019, 177). National cultural industries, which orient themselves toward an audience with specific requirements, seldom become globally popular. The fortunes of Japanese popular culture¹ at the end of the twentieth century, howev-

1. The concepts of “mass culture” and “popular culture” are not identical, but within this article they are used as synonyms. For more on this question, see Pavlov (2019a, 206–207).

er, proved a striking exception to the rule. First of all, Japanese popular culture managed to achieve recognition on the global marketplace (Wong 2006, 26–27). Secondly, its expansion took place at a time of economic stagnation and the loss of Japanese geopolitical influence within the Asian Pacific region, and thus it cannot be ascribed purely to socio-economic factors. When *Pokémon* and *Hello Kitty* exploded onto television screens and supermarket shelves in the United States, Japanese economic influence was paradoxically on the wane; yet it was precisely at this time that American researchers (and many Japanese officials) began to speak of the rise of a new form of Japanese power (Darling-Wolf 2015, 101).

This power referred not to Japanese culture as a whole, but namely to Japanese animation, or anime, which not only attained global prominence, but became commercially successful far beyond the borders of its homeland. By comparison, Japanese cinema, music, and even literature were far less successful.² The term “anime” literally means a Japanese version of animation, the development of which was deeply influenced by Disney’s highly successful animated films — the genre’s primary trend-setters after World War II (Dolle-Weinkauff 2017, 240). If one is too narrowly focused on animation, however, one would miss anime’s broader influence on society and culture. To understand anime, it is important to remember that it is related to other cultural phenomena. Animated shows and films, often adaptations of Japanese comics (“manga”), are frequently accompanied by other kinds of merchandise, including action figures, plush toys, stickers, posters, anime music videos, and cell phone cases. Although external to the films themselves, these items are all part of the phenomenon and influence its reception. I would submit that what unites these diverse products of popular culture is a shared *style*, which the consumer can easily identify.

In this analysis, my purpose is not to disentangle these various pop culture genres, inspired by Japanese mass culture; I simply treat them all as belonging to anime. Researchers often treat anime as an offshoot of Western popular culture. This approach seeks out certain well-known features of Western pop culture in new subject matter

2. This is not to say that Japanese literature or film did not have global success. Obvious counterexamples include the literary works of Haruki Murakami or the iconic film *Battle Royale* (2000), directed by Kinji Fukasaku. Yet *Neon Genesis Evangelion* is one of the single most profitable franchises of all time, taking seventeenth place in the rankings, behind the likes of *Pokémon*, *Star Wars*, and the Harry Potter universe. See Peters (2018).

and thus demonstrates popular culture's universality. However, this approach ignores what is unique about the genre and downplays its "non-Western" content. Another important research tradition relies on an "Orientalist" strategy, which, in contrast, attempts to identify the traditional, nationally specific themes of Japanese culture within anime (Buljan and Cusack 2015, 68).

These approaches do not do justice to the subject matter's complexity and result in certain themes being overlooked in the scholarly literature. Among these is the treatment of anime's religious content (both Western and Eastern) (Artemov 2015). This article analyzes the landmark anime series *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995–1996),³ directed by Hideaki Anno, and the subsequent feature-length film *The End of Evangelion* (1997),⁴ produced by the Gainax studio and written and directed by Anno. It will break down how Shinto and Christian religious elements are incorporated into these works, how the former influence the latter's reception by a mass audience, and how religious symbolism emerges as an essential element of fantasy storytelling. Taking the use of religious visual semiotics as a marketing tool, it demonstrates that the anime creator's attempt to overcome the genre's hyper-commercialization failed, and simply turned into a postmodern inscription of the religious in the postsecular reality (Shimchuk 2011, 176–178).

Robots, Fantasy, and Buddha

The giant, humanoid robot is a fixture of Japanese popular culture. An entire genre has developed around it called *mecha*, an abbreviation of the Japanese loan word for "mechanical." Works in the *mecha* genre recount the struggles of either autonomous or human-controlled robots. Adolescents are the target audience; therefore, *Neon Genesis Evangelion* can also be classified as *shōnen*, a subgenre of anime aimed at adolescent boys ages twelve to eighteen.⁵ It is perhaps no surprise that the Japanese — whose cultural anxieties about modern life differ from those of Western cultures — have transformed the products of cutting edge robotics technology into benign objects of wor-

3. Although *Neon Genesis Evangelion* has also become known in Russian by the simple title *Ievangelion*, this article will use the full English title in order to avoid confusion.
4. The US release of the film was called *Neon Genesis Evangelion: The End of Evangelion*, but this text will use its original release title, *The End of Evangelion*, by which it is better known.
5. For more on *Neon Genesis Evangelion* and the *shōnen* genre in general, see Denison (2015, 85–100).

ship and adoration: “While US companies have produced robot vacuum cleaners and war machines, Japan has created humanoids and pet robots as entertaining friends. While the US makes movies like *Robo-cop* and *The Terminator*, Japan is responsible for the friendly *Mighty Atom*, Aibo and Asimo” (Hornyak 2006, second cover). At the same time, it is not just home robots, but also military robots with destructive power that have become cult objects in Japan and, to some extent, beyond its borders.

Science fiction often deals with the reinterpretation of religious symbols, and *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, the focus of this study, is no exception. In fact, one could describe the anime genre of *Neon Genesis Evangelion* as a subset of science fiction. The anime has a non-linear narrative structure, complicated by its atypical method of storytelling, in which many plot details are revealed only in passing and are not verbalized by the characters. The director’s intention was to convince viewers, dissatisfied with a superficial interpretation, to attentively re-watch the show. In deconstructing the popular genre, Hideaki Anno sought to confuse and ensnare the viewer, causing him or her to reflect. Still, in order to support the claim that the show is science fiction, it is important to emphasize several plot elements. This will avoid sacrificing analytical rigor and allow general conclusions based on an analysis of Japanese science fiction to be applied to contemporary fantasy as a whole.

The action of the show takes place in 2015, which was twenty years in the future at the time of the show’s release in 1995–1996. The future is envisioned as a world after a global catastrophe. The true reason for the disaster, however, remains unknown to a large part of the population. According to the official version, an ecological cataclysm occurred after a small meteor, travelling at near light-speed velocity, struck the Earth. The characteristics of the meteor apparently made it impossible for earth-based monitoring services to detect its approach. Apart from officials’ statements, the population received no convincing evidence of the meteor’s existence. Subsequently, the audience learns that it was not a meteor at all. The cause of the event, known as the “Second Impact,” was, in reality, an unsuccessful “contact experiment” with an “angel.” Referred to as “Adam,” this creature was buried in ice at the South Pole in a state of suspended animation. The aforementioned unsuccessful contact experiment, which took place in the year 2000, awoke “Adam” and created an explosion that melted the polar ice caps, causing a rise in sea levels and provoking an ecological catastrophe. As a result,

more than two billion people died. A substantial part of the planet's infrastructure was also destroyed, its biodiversity suffered, numerous species disappeared, and the population was forced to limit consumption due to a resultant economic crisis. Certain technologies, however, made a quantum leap forward.

In this persistent state of threat from attacks by other “angels,” the existence of which is known to the government and the military, a secret paramilitary organization called NERV is formed, which is meant to prevent a potential “Third Impact.” The organization has giant robots called “evangelions” at its disposal, and its motto is a quote from Robert Browning's play “Pippa Passes”: “God's in his Heaven / All's right with the world.”⁶ Only these robots are able to resist the angels, against whom conventional and nuclear weapons are ineffective. The NERV agency, the actions of which are secret even to some within the organization, is actually carrying out an entirely different mission, however. Control of the world, including over NERV, rests in the hands of the secret organization Seele (the German word for “soul”), which is seeking to realize the “Human Instrumentality Project,” around which the show's intrigue is built.

The idea of the “Human Instrumentality Project” in *Neon Genesis Evangelion* is based on the work of the twentieth-century American science fiction writer Cordwainer Smith (1913–1966). These stories describe a future of fantastical transformations and the advancement of humankind. At their core is an attempt to “combine” humanity into one whole by destroying human bodies to create space for the next evolutionary leap, in which people will exist outside the boundaries of their bodies. “The evolution of the human animal into something transhuman, (‘the way to be a god,’ as one character in *Evangelion* asserts) seems to be motivated by a desire for disembodiment concealed by a desire for reembodiment” (Brown 2010, 226n62).

This brief recapitulation of the plot points and stylistic features of *Neon Genesis Evangelion* is sufficient to regard this anime as science fiction, in accordance with contemporary theories, which posit that science fiction must create possible worlds (Bertetti 2017, 50–51). On the one hand, the work is distant from the familiar world, in that it contains certain features characteristic of fantasy: the participation of extraterrestrial civilizations or divine powers in the story, the development of advanced technologies, as well as strange and unfamiliar so-

6. In Nikolai Gumilëv's poetic translation, these lines are rendered “Бог в своих небесах – / И в порядке мир!” (Browning).

cial or political structures. On the other hand, this universe simultaneously follows the psychological and physical rules of the actual world.

According to the authoritative view of the Canadian literary critic, Darko Suvin, “science fiction is defined by narrative predominance or hegemony of the imagined “novum” (innovation), supported by cognitive logic” (Suvin 1979, 63). In *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, giant robots and angels, which bring death to the Earth, represent the innovations or, in Suvin’s term, the “novum.” The angels, around which the storyline is built, are an extraterrestrial phenomenon, which, according to quasi-religious prophecies, regularly attack the Earth. As is revealed in due course, the irony of the plot is that the angels and robots are one and the same. The evangelions are not robots, but are rather cloned from one of the angels (“Lilith”); they are biological creatures wearing mechanical armor, which controls them (and which is piloted by children whose mothers perished in the “Second Impact”). This detail is important to the anime, but the analytical focus of this article suggests another question: if even the evangelions are not the typical robots of *mecha*, is there something within them of general significance for the genre, and even more importantly, is that something attributable to the national religious tradition of Shinto?

For an understanding of how the sacred functions in Japanese science fiction, it is worth looking at how divine power manifests itself in crises requiring external intervention. In Japanese fantasy, the enormous humanoid robots play a role analogous to that of superheroes in American culture: “superheroes seem to manifest the value systems of Abrahamic religions while giant robots tend to reveal their Shinto and Buddhist backgrounds” (Lunning 2008, 276). The distinguishing feature of the functioning of divine power in Japanese culture is the autonomy of objects, which is rooted in a belief in the animacy of all things. Everything in the world, including robots created by humans, contain *kami* or spirits that can influence the bodies that house them. If in the Abrahamic traditions the key scenario is power through divine descent, then Shinto religious concepts would find important the possibility of the autonomous functioning of objects, even those created by humans. In *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, this is even more explicit than in many other works of the genre (Buljan and Cusack 2015, 113-8). It becomes clear that the spirits of the pilots’ mothers are part of the robots, making it easier to understand the spontaneous actions of these bio-mechanical giants.

This reading of *mecha* — as the transfer of Japanese religious concepts into mass culture — is, however, problematic. Clearly, a major re-

ligious tradition is not homogeneous. This contention holds true in the case of Shinto, which was itself heavily influenced by Buddhism. There are also numerous sects within Shinto, which influence the country's cultural life to this day. Their presence in mass culture is self-evident, and one can observe their influence in *Neon Genesis Evangelion* as well. The priest Roman Artemov, a scholar of religion and Japanese popular culture, shows that the Aum Shinrikyo cult⁷ was involved in the production of anime within the *mecha* genre, financing a series of projects and heavily influencing many directors and writers, including Hideaki Anno:

In an interview with a Japanese television station, Hideaki Anno reported that the plot of the anime was based on an Aum Shinrikyo doctrine. After the sarin attack on the Tokyo metro in 1995, however, he was forced to change the show's concept after reports appeared in the press about the connections between *Evangelion* and the cult. In light of this, the writers were forced to fundamentally change the plot of the anime series. This fact demonstrates the role that Aum Shinrikyo played in the development of the anime genre of *mecha* (Artemov 2016, 324).

Admittedly, scholars have not yet analyzed the earliest versions of the show's script, and for this reason, the cult's actual influence on Hideaki Anno remains poorly understood.

Pointing out the multifaceted and complex influence of religion on Japanese culture does not invalidate attempts to explain the behavior of giant robots with reference to Shinto beliefs about the animacy of material objects. On the contrary, this intriguing sketch underscores the importance of a religious analysis of anime, in which the sacred can be encountered in the most unfamiliar of forms. The Japanese tradition of science fiction is of global importance, thanks to the popular and engaging way that it has represented and developed science fiction concepts (La Bare 2000, 23). For the purposes of this article, the existence of a religious layer in *Neon Genesis Evangelion* is of principle importance. This anime's religious connotations help define the work's unique plot and style, uniting the show with the *mecha* genre and the latter's religious roots. This shows that the religious element

7. Aum Shinrikyo is a terrorist religious organization, founded in Tokyo in 1984 by Shoko Asahara [editor's note: it is banned in Russia]. For a brief overview of the history of the organization, see Gunaratna (2018).

in non-Western science fiction can be structural; it explicitly and implicitly maps out the coordinates by which the genre functions.

Apocalypse, Crucifixion, and Depression

The traditions of Shinto or Buddhism were not of conscious interest to Hideaki Anno;⁸ they were instead built into the storytelling, according to the canons of the genre. The same cannot be said, however, of the Christian, Jewish, Islamic, or Kabbalistic symbols that appear in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. From this perspective, the key to understanding the references to New and Old Testament traditions lies in the area of the visual semiotics of religion (Ortega 2007, 224). Biblical references, along with themes like the late urbanization of Japanese cityscapes and adolescent sexuality, form the visual basis of numerous works. For example, the *Angel Sanctuary* manga and its video adaptation, by artist Kaori Yuki, rely primarily on Western religious elements (Reed 2015, 419). These products of mass culture were influential enough that they drew imitators: “Names of angels, demons, and otherworldly realms have been culled from N[ew] T[estament] apocrypha and O[lid] T[estament] pseudepigrapha for reuse in and across story lines about imagined futures and cosmic realities” (Reed 2015, 419).

On the most basic level, to briefly don a “Westernized” lens of analysis, *Neon Genesis Evangelion* becomes a reinterpretation of the apocalypse. Although one might note that the apocalypse resulting from the “Second Impact” has already happened, the end of the world emerges as a drawn-out process (Thouny 2009, 113). The organizations NERV and Seele use quasi-religious sources in anticipating successive attacks of angels, which are expected to complete what they began and destroy humanity. Furthermore, the “Dead Sea Scrolls,” which the anime series references multiple times, turn out to be a more reliable source of information for the government than the research and forecasts of scientists. Cutting-edge science and religious texts are on an equal footing in the narrative. Suspended between the first phase of the apocalypse that has already come about and the anticipated second phase, social reality fades away into an endless expectation of the inevitable, atomizing society, which from its inception is unable to come together (Thouny 2009, 113–115). The “Human Instrumentality

8. On the other hand, one might observe that, as anime became a global phenomenon, conscious reference to the religious heritage of Japan became a successful marketing strategy, although this topic is outside the scope of this article.

Project” in this context does not appear as an irrational, misanthropic scheme. Rather than allow chaotic destruction and mass death, the secret society plans to take control of the situation, if not to prevent the apocalypse, then to play it out according to its own scenario, while simultaneously solving the problem of social alienation, which the cataclysms only exacerbated by fully revealing human loneliness and underscoring humanity’s imperfection as a life form.

Curiously, the majority of religious symbols that appear in the anime go by without comment from the protagonists. In this way, the viewer is responsible for picking up on the religious visual and verbal symbols. This point is worth dwelling on. The name of the show itself is extraordinarily important, since it is set up as a direct reference to religious traditions. If one were to translate *Neon Genesis Evangelion* literally, the translation might be “the gospel of a new generation.” As described above, the story works with biblical subject matter through the participation of super-human forces. However, even if the series touches on the problem of the apocalypse — which turns out to be inevitable due to human imperfection and humanity’s inability to improve its lot — it still remains unclear how the viewer should interpret this (Anderson 2015, 191). If one recalls that the word “gospel” or “evangelion” (from the Greek word εὐαγγέλιον) literally means “good news,” the fact that the main characters are deeply unhappy makes the end of the world seem like a fortuitous event, since it will rid them of the reasons for their unhappiness.

Now I will examine the show’s “angels.” “Angels” (from the Greek word ἄγγελος) are literally “messengers,” which fulfill the function of delivering messages from a higher power. The protagonist of the series, the adolescent Shinji Ikari, is forced to pilot the “Evangelion-01” in order to save humanity. According to the unfolding plot, it falls to this adolescent to determine the fate of humanity, and thus Shinji’s role parallels that of a “messiah.” In addition, this teenager is practically the only one who wonders why the humans are battling the angels. Yet, the motive behind these concerns is to avoid the pain that piloting the robot causes. Shinji’s questioning appears justified if the angels are not bringing evil, but rather divine providence. If this is the case, then resisting and thus increasing human suffering is pointless. It is also striking that the organization that created the evangelions named them this way. Bio-mechanical robots, cloned and built by humans, are bringing “good news,” while the attacking “angels” are not. But this judgment refers to the human, not the divine, and as such is but an interpretation of divine will. Thus, *Neon Genesis Evangelion*

can be understood in two ways. On the one hand, the whole scenario of the apocalypse can be interpreted as “good news.” On the other hand, if one takes the position of NERV, then the robots that humans created are the “bearers of good news,” since they are preventing the apocalypse. And in fact, there are no real reasons — other than a feeling of solidarity with the struggles of the show’s protagonists — to favor one viewpoint over the other.

The visual dimension may be of use here. Each angel has its own bodily form, in which it was incarnated. These forms are, for the most part, not anthropomorphic, or, at the very least, the artists distort certain human features, which in turn creates feelings of alienation, disgust, and danger. In one of the episodes, it is said that the physical structure of the angels is comparable to light. If this extra-terrestrial life does not resemble anything human, then it follows that there is no desire to come into contact with it. Remember also that Hideaki Anno took the names of the angels from the Old Testament: Adam, Lilith, Sachiel, Shamshel, Ramiel and others.⁹ Also interesting is the story of the use of the term angel, which was first utilized in the English adaptation and from there in all other translations. The term “angels” could also have been plausibly translated from Japanese as “apostles” but the director personally intervened to ensure that the term “angel” was used in the English version.

It has already been noted that the religious is more often than not embodied in visual semiotics. For the purposes of this research, it would be redundant to describe and indicate all examples of how the director utilizes Christian esthetics. It is, after all, peripheral to the show and was done with the goal of attracting the attention of a young audience. If allusions to Christian and Kabbalistic traditions were too subtle, they might have remained unrecognized or, even worse, gone entirely unnoticed. As such, the references were anything but subtle: when the evangelions defeat the angels, enormous crosses appear in the sky; the angel Lilith, having become the basis for cloning the biological components of robots, is kept in an underground lair, where the angel is crucified on a cross; and a fig leaf appears on the NERV logo.¹⁰ Like many other anime films, *Neon Genesis Evangelion* made

9. A full list of the anime’s characters, including the angels, their images, and necessary reference information about all of the important objects in the *Neon Genesis Evangelion* universe can be found in Gainax and WE’VE, inc. (2015); Gainax and WE’VE, inc. (2016).

10. In this article I discuss the original series from 1995–1996 and the concluding film *Neon Genesis Evangelion: The End of Evangelion*. The commercial success of the anime led

liberal use of religious symbols, but it is how the show's creators used them that is of interest here, because it sheds light on the religious dimension of the show's reception (Jackson 2009, 316).

Even this freewheeling use of religious symbols offers room for analysis and interpretation. It would be a mistake to dismiss possible religious readings simply because sacred images are used in a chaotic and contradictory way. This is, after all, a postmodern product of mass culture, distinguished by a fundamental superficiality when using symbols of traditional culture. For viewers, this means that when the show addresses the apocalypse, it remains perfectly possible for it to be understood in a Gnostic way (Napier 2002, 425). That is to say, the seeming contradictoriness of the horror of the "Third Impact," which ought to be a positive, is removed when one dons another, no less religious, lens. In short, it is possible that a higher power was not acting to save humanity from suffering, but to destroy it; perhaps God was not all-merciful. It is up to the viewer to decide how to look at it. Regardless of the chosen reading, there remains the figure of the messiah, which takes on a great meaning in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*.

The series is part of the *shōnen* genre of anime, which is often criticized for its triviality, primitiveness, and psychological implausibility. In this subgenre, the key role of hero is played by a child or teenager who possesses unbelievable power, but who is at first unworthy of it or unready to take it on. It is assumed that the target audience (young people or teenagers) should sympathize and identify with the protagonist. From this angle, *Neon Genesis Evangelion* can be understood as a deconstruction of the genre. But Shinji Ikari, a typical withdrawn adolescent, who has the chance to operate an enormous robot, does not elicit sympathy; the protagonist's depression and lack of self-confidence, in fact, alienate the audience. Shinji is indecisive; he cannot even make one decision and consistently shifts responsibility onto others. The messiah, on whom the fate of humanity depends, appears powerless, and thus the anime does not carry out the therapeutic function of mass culture. This contradiction can only be understood through the lens of the series' religious content. Usually, the hero merely appears to be unworthy, improves through training, and then realizes that he or she is capable of more. Shinji, however, does not

Hideaki Anno to release additional full-length films, including *Rebirth of Evangelion* (2009), which departed from the original script. For the most part, they preserved the signature visual style and did not substantively change the religious symbols (only simplifying them in some cases). In the new series, the NERV logo is made up of an upside-down apple (the symbol of sin) with a fig leaf superimposed on it.

have any distinguishing qualities. Furthermore, those characters who might be better suited to the mission laid on Shinji's shoulders are not considered "chosen." The show's divine power is neither all-powerful nor merciful, and the messiah is in a state of depression: this "gospel of a new generation" is devoid of any good news.

Postmodernism, Postsecularism, and the American Market

In February 1995, the American periodical *Animerica*, which covers the anime industry, published an article, in which Hideaki Anno announced the next release from Gainax. In the creator's words, the series would touch on questions such as: "What is the nature of evolution? What is humanity's relationship to his or her god? Does god, in fact, exist? What does it mean for the human race if that question cannot be answered definitively?" (Ledoux 1995, 14). As these questions demonstrate, Anno's interest in religious and philosophical issues was, indeed, genuine. But how does this square with the claim of certain members of the team that worked on the show, namely that Hideaki Anno had never read the Bible, or that all the religious symbols were included for marketing purposes and do not carry any symbolic weight?

At the 2001 Otakon convention, the animator Kazuya Tsurumaki explained the "cross" symbolism in *Neon Genesis Evangelion* to a journalist this way:

There are a lot of giant robot shows in Japan, and we did want our story to have a religious theme to help distinguish us. Because Christianity is an uncommon religion in Japan we thought it would be mysterious. None of the staff who worked on *Eva* are Christians. There is no actual Christian meaning to the show, we just thought the visual symbols of Christianity look cool. If we had known the show would get distributed in the US and Europe we might have rethought that choice (Thomas 2001).

This raises the problem of how one interprets the difference between intentions and reception and whether it would be better to simply abandon attempts to find meaning where it does not seem to exist.

To understand why there is so much religious imagery in *Neon Genesis Evangelion* and whether it contains some kind of message, one should turn to a different level of interpretation. Before starting

the project, Hideaki Anno had been in a state of depression for several years. Indeed, reading an enormous amount of philosophy and psychoanalysis and then writing the anime helped the creator overcome this personal crisis. For Anno, the series was a personal and philosophical statement. Its message was not simply a story about a depressed adolescent destroyed by indecision and a world in chaos, but about the industry as a whole. In the 1990s, Japanese society experienced numerous economic crises, which led to an increase of social escapism and the expansion of a specific popular culture that worked according to a postmodern logic (Shumilova 2018, 28).

Situating the genre, including its intellectual pretensions, within the cultural logic of late capitalism helps reveal the artistic uniqueness of *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (Dzheimison 2019, 28). What so disturbed Hideaki Anno was the hyper-commercialization of the anime industry, specifically the practices of changing the visual imagery and simplifying the content of an anime in order to attract an audience (Schilling 2014). Studios and directors obviously consider the general mechanisms and marketing of mass culture in order to ensure the commercial success of their products, but this does not mean that the commercial product cannot have content unrelated to marketing considerations. Upon examination, the beginning of *Neon Genesis Evangelion* does not seem all that different from its competitors in the *mecha* genre. On the contrary, the story is fairly typical and is told in bold colors. Likewise, the traditional strategy of sexualizing female characters to attract the attention of an adolescent male audience is fully present in the early stages. In the first episode, the protagonist receives a letter containing an erotic photograph and a provocative note from the female officer, who is supposed to meet him. Having won the audience with its dynamism and visual appeal, the show's atmosphere changes over the course of the storyline, and in the end, the traditional attractive style gives way to the incomprehensible style of its finale (episodes 25 and 26), which seeks to portray the characters' internal suffering. In point of fact, the show's audience disliked the last two episodes so strongly that the studio was forced to create a more dramatic alternate ending, after receiving threats from unhappy fans. This explains the appearance of the animated film *The End of Evangelion* (1997), which offered a more visually appealing and comprehensible conclusion to the animated series.

Neon Genesis Evangelion is obviously a postmodern work, and its creator consciously designed it to be a critical statement on contemporary culture. Such a critique of postmodernism in popular culture,

however, cannot really function; as one scholar argues: “what used to be virulent, subversive, or at least offensive ideas, have now been transformed into so many material signifiers, at which you gaze for a moment and then pass on” (Dzheimison 2019, 330). In attempting to deconstruct the hero, Hideaki Anno does not really succeed; Shinji Ikari remains a popular and recognizable fixture of mass culture, shorn of any unattractive qualities. The visual image of the sympathetic adolescent piloting a giant robot causes the viewer to forget about unsympathetic components of Shinji’s personality. The image of Shinji Ikari remains, according to the postmodern logic of late capitalism, a triumph over reality: “For capitalism, it is much more important to create pseudo-events, in order to ensure the triumph of advertising over ‘reality’” (Pavlov 2019b, 6).

Something analogous takes place with the female protagonists. The director creates a provocation by sexualizing and objectifying them over the course of the narrative. Yet, at the same time, Anno asks the audience whether it is right to perceive these deeply unhappy and lost girls as sexual objects. To reinforce this provocation, early in the film, *The End of Evangelion*, there is a scene in which the heroine Rei Ayanami looks at her clones, which are practically falling apart, exposing their internal biological parts: skeleton, muscles, etc. . . It would seem that such non-erotic depictions of corporality might alter the heroine’s reception, leading to an aesthetic catharsis (Yates 1998); yet, Rei Ayanami remains one of the most popular sex symbols and an erotic ideal for fans of Japanese mass culture.

Perhaps the show’s postmodern roots can assist in overcoming the difficulties of interpreting its religious content. After all, the postmodern world and the phenomenon of postsecularity are clearly connected (Uzlaner 2011, 4). In addition, the superficiality of cultural images, the speed with which impressions change, and the development of technology have led to doubts about the late twentieth-century expectation that secularization is progressive and unidirectional. (Williams 2011, 21). The religious began to re-enter the culture of seemingly secularized Western people in the most unexpected of forms: religious fundamentalism, new religious cults, and religious syncretism. The visual became the universal medium of the postsecular religious renaissance. In short, without regard to metaphysical rigor or any limits on possible combinations, the visual can produce a mass culture with the illusion of depth for contemporary audiences bereft of it. The above observations about *Neon Genesis Evangelion* correspond neatly to this proposition. The utilization of religious themes in the anime

may be incoherent, but the visual semiotics of sacred symbols is woven into the storytelling. It thus creates an available interpretive frame that endows action taking place in the constructed world with a “reality.” The creators’ attempt to set their anime apart from its competitors succeeded because they understood the needs of their audience; they were the first ones who dared to work with religious elements in a postsecular setting.

The postsecular lens also allows for an explanation of the symbiosis between science and religion in the series. In this era, “there is no radical contradiction between religion and contemporary European science, between faith and the rational-technological mastering of the world. It is possible to use any of the fruits of modern technological science, while simultaneously rejecting or simply ignoring its worldview” (Kyrlezhev 2013). Science and religion are intertwined in fantasy, and thus, a direct religious reading of fantasy is now impossible. By way of comparison, the most widely used methodology for studying the works of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, the founding fathers of the genre, consists of interpreting their works as following a Christian spirit (Efimova and Shekhireva 2017, 185-6). Yet, it is not worth basing one’s interpretations of or commentaries on *Neon Genesis Evangelion* on one single religious tradition.

Nevertheless, its references to religion underscore the fundamental role religion plays in the construction of possible fiction worlds. If the sacred is lost, then the narrative’s overall logic would become not one single tradition, but rather the soundness and non-contradictoriness of language games that are irreducible to themselves (Kaputo 2011, 204). The symbolic potential of religious visual symbols is enormous and explains their use in popular culture. As in the case of *Star Wars*, *Neon Genesis Evangelion* needs religion: “Although the *Star Wars* saga does not debunk religion or present it as a kind of pre-scientific superstition, its enduring popularity is due not least to its reproduction of fundamental mythic structures, to its transposition of classic religious images into the world of high technology” (Kaputo 2014, 132).

Having appropriated material from religious traditions, the science fiction author is intellectually constrained; first of all, by his or her ideas about the audience’s expectations — that their religious views or their ideas about religion might mean something to them — and secondly, by the limits of his or her own knowledge, which is more than likely to be superficial in religious matters. The inclusion of religion in the conceptual framework of postsecular and postmodern performance, which is external to the show, nevertheless influences the in-

ternal dynamics of the narrative. Thus, it is worth taking seriously the fact that Hideaki Anno chose to use the Judeo-Christian tradition and the theme of the apocalypse. However paradoxical it may be, having experienced an internal conflict (a state of depression) caused by the cultural cataclysms of the 1990s, when Japanese society experienced a crisis of culture. The director has given the viewer a messiah who can only exist in an entirely new world: a weak, feeble, introverted, and depressed teenager: “In the opinion of the Japanese critic Tsunehiro Uno, the story’s protagonist Shinji Ikari, with his pessimistic nature and similarities to *hikikomori*, becomes the face of Japan’s ‘lost generation,’ which lost faith in itself and its future” (Shumilova 2018, 29–30). The real Christian messiah, however, cannot be depressed or down in the dumps (Starobinskii 2016, 54–55). Nor can the post-secular reality of mass culture be Christian, even if those claims may still exist.

Conclusion

This examination of the anime *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, directed by Hideaki Anno, has analyzed the work’s science fiction content from the perspective of its connections with religion. This allows for a few observations about fantasy, religion, and the connections between them in the (post)modern world. Having interpreted the show’s distinctive narrative, one cannot deny that science fiction’s essential mechanisms function, even in the decidedly non-Western genre of *mecha*. The plot is unique and deeply influenced by Japanese national culture in a way that is unusual for American or European popular culture. The science fiction universe of giant robots and extra-terrestrial angels, nevertheless, remains consistent and logical. Its “science fiction-ness” consists of the presence of certain novel elements that do not currently exist, but which are understood as a continuation and expansion of the “cognitive logic” of the familiar world.

To a large extent, this analysis is made possible by the fact that the globalization of the last several decades has influenced the Japanese cultural industry to such an extent that the latter can be described as a hybrid phenomenon (Seo and Takekawa 2006, 238–9). Incidentally, this makes the scholar’s task more difficult because it forces an acknowledgement that elements of national traditions co-exist alongside the global. One of the key elements in *Neon Genesis Evangelion* that connects the *mecha* genre of anime to Shinto tradition is the fact that giant robots manifest divine power. This distinguishes Japanese tra-

dition from the superhero culture of countries in which the Abrahamic religions predominated. The robots are endowed with a spirit and are capable of spontaneous action, which does not fit into the canon of Western popular culture. This observation reveals that these works of fiction are implicitly connected with religious themes.

The show's visual and verbal references to the symbols of Judeo-Christian traditions has created a great deal of debate about the show's proper interpretation. The entire plot is built around the apocalypse, with its attendant semantic connotations; it thus nudges the viewer toward a Christian interpretation, even if the "end of the world" scenario was, of course, also quite popular in Japanese culture after the Second World War (Napier 1993). Furthermore, it is clear that the references to the sacred symbols of the Abrahamic religions do not function according to the canons of religiously influenced science fiction literature; rather they are superficial, surface-level gestures, made according to the logic of postmodern mass culture. It might seem that this makes addressing the question of anime's religious content impossible. Yet, the postsecular lens facilitates analysis that will not overlook religious content and, at the same time, will reveal the rules according to which it is used in the products of mass culture.

The connections between the postsecular world and postmodernism are readily apparent in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. In the show, religious symbols served to attract the audience's attention and pique its curiosity and, in the end, to ensure the work's commercial success. Science fiction's need for religion is thus not only a structural requirement of meaning-making within the genre, but also a response to audience demand. These two theses are equally important in this analysis of *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. The science fiction world consists of two elements: a fictional universe and a mystical world of deep symbolism that is difficult to perceive in everyday life. Accordingly, when it comes to content, the sacred does not carry any autonomous conceptual meaning; for the researcher, it is simply a visual illustration of the postsecular. In order to recover a lost sense of the profound and overcome the postmodern hyper-commercialization of culture and anime, the show's creators deconstructed the genre and used sacred symbols, but they did so in full accordance with the principles of the postsecular age, which is to say, superficially.

In the end, the anime lacks a singular internal logic when it comes to working with the religious. What is clear is that the choice of apocalyptic and messianic storylines (as opposed to others) clearly exerts an influence on the narrative. In this case, the messiah of the fan-

tasy world of *Neon Genesis Evangelion* is truly in a state of depression. Here, it is useful to recall the “Human Instrumentality Project.” To paraphrase Jameson (Dzheimison), the anime’s protagonist, Shinji Ikari, and director, Hideaki Anno, have simply tired of modernity and “the subjective as such in its older classical forms (which include deep time and memory) and [want] to live on the surface for a while” (Dzheimison 2019, 332). Today’s mass culture provides just such an opportunity.

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