

## **Anime and East Asian Culture: Neon Genesis Evangelion**

The field of televised Japanese animation, popularly known as “anime” (pronounced ah-nee-may, a word derived from the French term for animation), has always led a curious double life. While anime is often considered to be the quintessential expression of Japanese culture, its greatest documents are scandalously un-Japanese. Unlike the Japanese manga or comic strip, which is rooted in Japan’s centuries-old traditions of woodcut carvings and graphic prints, anime is the purest product of the multinational era.

Spawned in the 1960s by Japan’s postwar media boom, anime quickly became one of the most innovative sites of the multinational video culture. Early anime series such as Osamu Tezuka’s Tetsuwan Atomu [Astro Boy] (1963) derived much of their visual inspiration from the classic Disney and Warner Brothers cartoons, while scriptwriters drew deeply from the well of Western European and US science fiction narratives. By the early 1970s, anime had begun to develop its own unique array of forms, ranging from the teenage martial arts comedy to the human-piloted robot adventure or “mecha” tale. By the mid-1980s, anime had transformed a complex blend of Japan’s indigenous manga culture, US science-fiction and animation, European scriptwriting and theater, and the editing techniques of the Hong Kong martial arts films into a whole new art-form. Today, the anime culture has become one of the heavyweights of the global media industry.<sup>1</sup>

One of the key reasons for the anime boom was the belated development of the Japanese mass media vis-a-vis its US and Western European analogues. This late start meant that anime was dominated by small independent animation houses and studios, rather than profit-minded conglomerates. These studios had few ties to Japan’s existing national culture-industries, but powerful and enduring links to marginal forms such as US science fiction and fantasy

periodicals, as well as the classic texts of early video culture (e.g. Patrick McGoochan's 1967 *The Prisoner*). As a result, they became hothouses of aesthetic innovation, places where artists could create media works with a freedom unknown in a more heavily commercialized Hollywood environment.<sup>2</sup>

What these animation houses lacked, on the other hand, were Hollywood's technical resources and marketing expertise – something particularly noticeable in the substandard soundtracks and editing techniques of early anime. What solved both problems was a singular historical event which no one could have predicted: this was the rise of a thriving East Asian media culture, energized by the Pacific Rim economic boom and regional trade integration. The result was an aesthetic history set on permanent fast forward: the patently American automotive symbolism of the *Speed Racer* series of the late 1960s gave way to the internationalized giant robot or mecha narratives of the 1970s (e.g. *Mazinger Z* and *Mobile Suit Gundam*), and finally to the complex multinational consumerisms of the 1980s. These latter ranged from gender-bending domestic dramas such as Rumiko Takahashi's uproarious martial arts satire *Ranma½*, to epic sagas of Pacific Rim industrialization such as Akira Toriyama's *Dragonball Z* series.<sup>3</sup>

All of this is essential context for understanding the single greatest anime series ever made, *Shinseiki Evangelion* (English title: *Neon Genesis Evangelion*). *Evangelion* was a 26-part science fiction series which first aired on Tokyo TV in 1995, and became an overnight sensation, triggering a tsunami of Web shrines, fan clubs and commentary across the entire planet. The series was the brainchild of Hideaki Anno, an animator with Gainax Studios, a small independent animation company co-founded in 1981 by Anno and two of his friends from an Osaka art-school. One of those friends, Hiroyuki Yamaga, directed one of the most intelligent anime films of the 1980s, *Wings over Honneamise*, a retro-19th century version of the space race. For most of the 1980s, Hideaki Anno worked as a key animator on several Gainax projects, before directing

*Nadia: Secret of Blue Waters* (1991), an above-average anime series loosely based on Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. In retrospect, this series was a warm-up for *Evangelion* – several of the character-designs in *Nadia* were the model for various characters in *Evangelion* – most notably, Nadia is the model for Misato Katsuragi – and the script dealt with a number of serious social themes, ranging from militarism to adolescent maturation.

Nothing in Anno's track record, however, prepared viewers for the earthquake of *Evangelion*. Anno demolished the reigning conventions of the mecha genre, combining eye-popping visuals, a tremendous sound-track, remarkable scripting and voice acting, and rich and complex characters, all tied together by one of the most subversive storylines ever created. Anno also pushed beyond the boundaries of Cold War science fiction, by reappropriating a number of the greatest US science fiction narratives of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (e.g. Robert Wise' film classic *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1947) as well as William Gibson's cyberpunk classic *Neuromancer* (1984) in a distinctively East Asian context. Most striking of all, *Evangelion* generated a micropolitics of gender worthy of its post-Cold War geopolitics.

While the classic action-adventure anime of the 1980s such as *Dirty Pair* (1985) or *Bubble Gum Crisis* (1987) did occasionally feature strong female characters, *Evangelion* features a number of powerful and self-aware female characters, with no real precedent in the anime culture. To top it all off, Anno concluded the series with a mind-bending finale which sparked a genuine national scandal, very much as the final episode of Patrick McGoochan's magnificent spy parody and counter-cultural thriller, the TV series *The Prisoner*, which instigated a near-riot at BBC headquarters back in 1967.

Visually speaking, the Gainax production team set new standards for animation, shot design and editing, deftly integrating CGI (computer-generated imagery) with hand-drawn cel animation, while employing a wealth of framing techniques equal to anything in the video canon.

The sound-track, often the least developed element of the anime genre, is positively riveting, thanks to excellent voice acting and Shiroh Sagisu's stylish musical score. While there were outstanding TV series before *Evangelion* – most notably, *The Prisoner* and Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Decalogue* (1987) – what Anno did which no other artist had ever done before was to tap into the geopolitical unconscious of East Asia's burgeoning media culture, thereby creating an aesthetic vocabulary capable of expressing the social contradictions of the East Asian region.

This is encoded in the basic storyline of *Evangelion*, which begins by reappropriating the Cold War fiction of the invasion of Earth by mysterious aliens. These aliens are strange creatures called “angels”, seemingly bent on destroying the human species, and they can only be defeated by the Evangelions, or giant robots. However, these robots can only be piloted by a select group of fourteen-year old children – including the main protagonist of the series, Shinji Ikari. Making things even more complicated, Shinji Ikari's father, Gendou Ikari, turns out to be the main scientist responsible for the construction of the robots.

In the hands of any other director, this scenario could easily have devolved into the most obnoxious xenophobia, racism and patriarchy imaginable. All too many anime series depict mecha jocks and kimono dolls facing off against wicked tyrants or evil space aliens – i.e. symbolically re-fighting World War II, only in a situation where Japan finally gets to be on the winning side. Anno will utterly demolish this self-serving narrative fiction, by critiquing Japan's indigenous neo-nationalism as well as its antipode, the uncritical celebration of US-style consumerism. Where mainstream anime transforms the personal into the technological, Anno turns the technological into the geopolitical.

One of the key examples of this is Anno's reappropriation of the so-called “service shot” of mainstream anime, from the standpoint of an East Asian corporeality. Service shots are

images of anime characters in vaguely suggestive or sexually charged poses, which are typically bought and sold by anime fans. In the opening thirty seconds of episode 12, we witness a flashback to the central trauma of Misato Katsuragi's childhood: the explosion of the first angel in Antarctica, which leads to the death of her father. The scene then returns to the present, where Misato is dressing herself in front of a mirror. Here, Anno reappropriates transforms the voyeuristic male gaze on an unclad female body into something else: into a recognition of Misato's scar, a.k.a. the corporeal trauma of the atomic bombings. This scar turns out to harbor an authentic geopolitical content. One of the most typical articles of clothing in the service shot is the bikini. Strange as it sounds, bikinis really do have something to do with atomic weapons: the bikini was invented by a French clothing designer in honor of Bikini Atoll, the scene of a notorious H-bomb test in 1954. The strength of the H-bomb far exceeded what the designers had expected, and the fallout landed on a nearby Japanese fishing vessel named *The Lucky Dragon*, killing several crewmembers. The result was a political scandal in Japan and a wave of anti-American sentiment. That same year, a young director named Inoshiro Honda rode that wave to cinematic immortality, by creating one of the first multinational allegories of all time, the very first (and very best) *Godzilla* movie.

What eclipses *Godzilla* as the corporeal symbol of thermonuclear destruction, on the other hand, is the *Godzilla*-like body of the Evangelions, which gradually evolves from a mere robotic appendage into a self-aware cybernetic organism, and finally into powerful symbol of East Asian economic integration. Anno quotes from two major sources here, the first being the artificial intelligence or AI narratives of cyberpunk (particularly William Gibson's *Neuromancer*), and the second being the cybernetic warriors of Hayao Miyazaki's 1986-1994 manga *Nausicaa* (genetically engineered monsters which nearly destroy the Earth).

What is ultimately at issue is the passage from the US-dominated or Americentric era,

when Japan regarded the US as its cultural model and economic mentor, to a situation where East Asia has slowly but surely caught up with and in certain respects surpassed its erstwhile US mentor.<sup>4</sup> The transition to the post-American epoch is subtly encoded in the original Japanese title of the series, “Shinseiki Evangelion”, which literally means, “Gospel of the New Century.” Although Anno quotes from a wide variety of mystical, religious and theological texts, symbols and icons in the course of the series, ranging from Shintoism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and several varieties of mysticism, Anno has a decidedly secular purpose in mind here. The gospel in question is not a religion per se, but a globe-spanning belief system which has certain characteristics of an organized religion, but which is primarily concerned with the control of technology and human labor-power.

One of the key clues is the English version of the title, “Neon Genesis Evangelion”. Anno not only cites a wide variety of English words and terms throughout the series, he also endowed each specific episode with a dual Japanese and English title – titles which occasionally diverged in playful and provocative ways. As it turns out, “neon genesis” refers to a key mantra in William S. Burroughs’ classic science-fiction novel, *Nova Express* (1964), which reads: “Explosive bio advance out of space to neon”. This line was one of the first great anticipations of the early video culture, wherein the Cold War space race touches base, however briefly, with Information Age biology (or put more crudely, Americanization begins to turn into globalization).

As it turns out, the gospel in question is not globalization per se, but that quasi-mystical belief in the innate perfection of the global market forces otherwise known as neoliberalism. It should be noted that East Asian neoliberalism is a very different beast from its US or European analogues. For one thing, all of the East Asian states play a huge role in the economy. They not only spend a great deal of money on science and education, they also employ some of the most

advanced industrial policies in the world.

One of the results was the creation of world-class public infrastructure: Japan has one of the safest, fastest and most efficient railway systems in the world, South Korea is the most wired nation in the world, China has some of the busiest port facilities in the world, etc. For another, Japanese big business is characterized by vast interlocking networks of shareholdings, trade links and credit facilities, called “keiretsu” (the original Japanese word is an adjective, meaning roughly “parallel” or “related”, but economists often use it as a noun). Since 1995, the main financial centers of the keiretsu have undergone a massive series of fusions and consolidations, creating three superbanks: the Bank of Tokyo-Mitsubishi (the linchpin of the Mitsubishi and UFJ keiretsu), Sumitomo-Mitsui Bank (the linchpin of the Sumitomo and Mitsui keiretsu), and Mizuho Bank (the linchpin of the Sanwa and Daiichi Kangyo keiretsu). These banks are part of vast industrial networks, which trade and invest all across East Asia.<sup>5</sup>

It’s important to stress that Anno is highly critical of East Asian big business, and several episodes of *Evangelion* are scathing satires of the corporate turf battles, corruption scandals and political imbroglios of keiretsu capitalism. Yet Anno does not stop there, but pushes this critique towards a still broader critique of multinational capitalism. This is the genesis of one of the most amazing sequences in animation history, Shinji Ikari’s 4-minute dream-sequence at the conclusion of “Episode 16: Splitting of the Breast,” where the body of the Evangelion is transformed from a site of national technology into the incubator of a multinational subjectivity.

In this clip, Shinji Ikari, one of the pilots of the Evangelions, is trapped inside of one of the angels. At the last second, when his life-support systems are at the point of failing, Shinji’s dreams awaken the Evangelion, which comes to life and tears apart the angel from within. Instead of Godzilla’s fiery destruction, the rebirth of the Evangelion ushers in a profound mutation of urban space – the displacement of the downtown office towers (a reference to

Japan's busted real estate Bubble) and the technologies of the Japanese keiretsu by vast gouts of biological material. This is the stylized version of an autonomous, post-American subjectivity – an East Asia which can think and act for itself, without following orders from Washington DC, but also an East Asian subject capable of self-reflection.

Since the mid-1990s, the history of East Asia has been a history of autonomization. Japan was instrumental in bailing out Southeast Asia during the latter's 1997-1998 crisis. Since then, the region's economies have integrated at an astounding rate, to the point where East Asia trades more with itself than with the US or the EU. One of the most interesting features of this autonomization is the rise of intra-Asian aesthetic forms – anime has been spreading across East Asia as a form, particularly in South Korea, where the government is heavily promoting animation, media and online videogames as growth industries.<sup>6</sup>

The price East Asia paid for this autonomy, to be sure, was ever-increasing dissatisfaction and disillusionment with the US, which lost its privileged status as the economic, political and cultural role-model for the region. Anno hints at this moment via the catastrophe of Second Branch of Nerv, located at a secret base in the US state of Nevada, which is apparently destroyed during a test experiment. This is a fairly explicit reference to the post-Cold War scenario of Valve Software's *Half Life* (1998), the single greatest PC videogame of the 1990s, which portrayed a similar catastrophe at a mythical Black Mesa Research Facility somewhere in Arizona (Valve's game designers even paid subtle homage to the mecha, in the form of Gordon Freeman's signature hazard suit). Anno completes the reference, by informing us that the catastrophe occurred during the installation of a mysterious "S2 engine", designed and manufactured in Germany. This mobilizes the geopolitical reality of the supercharged East Asian and EU machine-tools industries, which utterly dominate the global machine-tool market, against the speculative fiction of the Wall Street rentiers.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, the rise of the European Union to superpower status is one of the most significant subtexts of Evangelion. In fact, one of the most significant characters of the story, Asuka Langley Sohryo, is half-German and half-Japanese, and Anno quotes a wide array of European cultural documents, ranging from German words to an absolutely mind-boggling citation of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, far too delightful to spoil for those who have never seen the series.

Perhaps the most remarkable story of all, however, is the diffusion of Anno's cultural innovations throughout the larger realm of anime culture. Hayao Miyazaki will build on the trope of Asiazilla in that powerful symbol of an ecological or proto-East Asian collectivity, the Shishigami or Forest Spirit of *Princess Mononoke* (1997) and the River-Spirit of *Spirited Away* (2001) – the rewriting of the quasi-sentient God-warriors or Ohmu of Miyazaki's manga *Nausicaa* into one of Anno's humanized Evangelions. Anno's vision of an East Asian micropolitics is carried still further by the other great anime director of our time, Satoshi Kon, whose 2001 film *Millenium Actress* transformed a childhood scarf into a complex symbol of historical memory. But where Anno pastiched fifty years of post-WW II animation and Cold War history, Kon quotes from seventy years of Japanese cinema, citing everything from the early silent films to the domestic comedies of the 1950s, and finally the Toho thrillers of the 1960s and 1970s. The main character of the film, Chiyoko, is a fictionalized superstar actress who searches for her whole life for a missing painter, a Leftist rebel who we learn was murdered by the military police of the Japanese Empire during WW II (ironically, Chiyoko herself never finds this out). This is both a subtle gender-bending of the authentic superstar actor of postwar Japanese cinema, Toshiro Mifune, whose collaborations with Akira Kurosawa have become the stuff of legend, as well as a profound meditation on the fate of Japan's national cinema industry, whose life ebbs away – just like Chiyoko – but not before being reborn in the expanding universe of video.

## Endnotes

1. Anime has become a multinational and multi-billion-euro business. The 2003 market for anime DVDs in Japan is estimated at ¥73.8 billion, or 572 million (roughly 30% of the total Japanese DVD market). Hatakeyama, Shuhei. "Old Anime Characters Come to Life." *Nikkei Weekly*. June 28, 2004. 32. Broadcasting rights are another source of income: Tsutomu Sugiara, director of the Marubeni Research Institute, estimated that the broadcasting rights for Japanese anime in the US were worth \$495 million in 2002, while \$4.5 billion worth of toys featuring anime characters were sold in the US. Fowler, Geoffrey A. "Japan's World Beaters," *Far Eastern Economic Review 2003* (49). The Tokyo Metropolitan Government did a study of the anime industry, and concluded that Japan's anime, manga, and toy industries collectively raked in ¥1 trillion in annual revenues in 2003, or roughly 7.75 billion. Eds. "Fans from far and wide make pilgrimage to Tokyo." *Nikkei Weekly*. June 28, 2004. 32. For the sake of comparison, it's worth noting that the entire US film industry pulled in \$10 billion of box office receipts in 2003.

2. Even today, the Hollywood movie industry is much more adept at transforming comic strip characters into live-action films (e.g. the Superman and Spiderman franchises), instead of the other way around. Despite superior resources, Disney's animators have not been able to match the creativity of specialized US animation houses such as Pixar (*Toy Story* and *Finding Nemo*). Instructively, the most innovative works of US animation come from the television industry rather than the major Hollywood studios (e.g. Matt Groening's *The Simpsons* and Stephen Hillenburg's uproarious *SpongeBob Squarepants*).

3. This accelerated development was not limited to anime. In the field of cinema, the specifically Chinese vectors of the Hong Kong "wuxia" or martial arts thrillers of the late 1960s were

successively transformed into the Americanized iconography of the Bruce Lee blockbuster, and finally into the multinational choreography of the John Woo action epics of the late 1980s. Somewhat further afield, East Asia's videogame culture experienced a similar cycle of neo-national imitation, international renovation and multinational innovation in a slightly more abbreviated time-frame (arcade classic *Space Invaders* appeared in 1978, Nintendo launched its *Supermario* franchise in 1985, while Shigeru Miyamoto created the classic *Legend of Zelda* interactive gameworlds in the 1990s).

4. For a fuller account of this transformation, see my essay, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Geopolitics online at <http://www.efn.org/~dredmond/Geopolitics.html>

5. A list of East Asia's leading business groups is available online at <http://www.efn.org/~dredmond/keiretsu.html>

6. In 1995, the Korean government reclassified Korean animation as a manufacturing rather than a service industry, enabling it to qualify for a 20% tax break. In 1997, the Korean Government imposed a 70% domestic programming requirement for children's animation. By 2001, there were eleven university programs in animation in Korea. Yu, Kie-un. "Global Division of Cultural Labor and Korean Animation Industry." *Animation in Asia and the Pacific*. Ed. John A. Lent. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001 (37-60).

7. Gardner Publications (<<http://www.gardnerweb.com/consump/produce.html>>) publishes a series of excellent and comprehensive annual reports on the state of the world machine-tools market. The US position is catastrophic. This is important, because machine-tools are the DNA

of any economy – the tools which produce all other goods and services, from computers to cars.

Multiyear data illustrating the scale and scope of the meltdown of the US machine-tools industry

is available here: <<http://www.efn.org/~dredmond/WorldMTools2003.html>>.