

## Animation Studies – Animated Dialogues, 2007

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### Superflat Eschatology Renewal and Religion in anime

“For at least some of the Superflat people [...] there is a kind of traumatic solipsism, even an apocalyptic one, that underlies the contemporary art world as they see it.”

THOMAS LOOSER, 2006

“Perhaps one of the most striking features of anime is its fascination with the theme of apocalypse.”

SUSAN NAPIER, 2005

“For Murakami, images of nuclear destruction that abound in anime (or in a lineage of anime), together with the monsters born of atomic radiation (Godzilla), express the experience of a generation of Japanese men of being little boys in relation to American power.”

THOMAS LAMARRE, 2006

As *anime* scholar Susan Napier and critics Looser and Lamarre suggest, apocalypse is a major thematic predisposition of this genre, both as a mode of national cinema and as contemporary art practice. Many commentators (e.g. Helen McCarthy, Antonia Levi) on *anime* have foregrounded the ‘apocalyptic’ nature of Japanese animation, often uncritically, deploying the term to connote annihilation, chaos and mass destruction, or a nihilistic aesthetic expression. But which apocalypse is being invoked here? The linear, monotheistic apocalypse of Islam, Judaism, Zoroastra or Christianity (with its premillennial and postmillennial schools)? Do they encompass the cyclical eschatologies of Buddhism or Shinto or Confucianism? Or are they cultural hybrids combining multiple narratives of finitude?

To date, Susan Napier’s work (2005, 2007) is the most sophisticated examination of the trans-cultural manifestation of the Judeo-Christian theological and narrative tradition in *anime*, yet even her framing remains limited by discounting a number of trajectories apocalypse dictates.<sup>1</sup> However, there are other possibilities. Jerome Shapiro (2004), for one, argues convincingly that the millennial imagination, as a subset of apocalyptic thought, is closer to the Japanese spiritual understanding of heroic mythology. Elsewhere Thomas Looser (2007) reflects upon 1990s Japanese media and art and interprets the obsession with apocalyptic images from the Superflat school and Gainax *anime* as a preoccupation with the postmodern crises of capital and its limits.

To develop this thesis the following essay reads key *anime* sequences not covered in Napier’s lengthy critique through various strains of apocalyptic discourse, namely *Spriggan* (Dir: Kawasaki Hirotsugu, 1998) and *Appleseed* (Dir: Aramaki Shinji, 2004), while referencing others in the genre (e.g. *Steamboy*, Dir: Otomo Katsuhiro, 2004 and *Metropolis*, Dir: Rintaro with Otomo Katsuhiro, 2004). It considers the utopian teleology of the chaotic, transitional period each narrative heralds (the ‘middest’ as Frank Kermode describes it) that creates a pathway to a new order, or returns balance to a corrupt and moribund world, often through trans-humanist,

<sup>1</sup> See Susan Napier, *Anime from Akira to Howl’s Moving Castle*. Throughout this essay I concentrate chiefly on chapter 13: ‘Waiting for the End of the World: Apocalyptic Identity’ (249-274). An example of Napier’s confusing discussion of apocalypse can be found in the following passage from her essay ‘The World of Anime Fandom in America’. In Frenchy Lunning (2007) (ed.) *Mechademia: Emerging Worlds of Anime and Manga*, Vol. 1. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 47-63, where she states ‘Many of Studio Ghibli’s films have at least a metaphorical apocalyptic subtext, but the possibility is always one of at least the *possibility* of hope and redemption on the part of ordinary human beings’ (p. 58). Yet this dualism this is precisely what is entailed in apocalypse thought and action-hope and redemption alongside chaos and destruction, where violence enables the passage of transition to a new, harmonious state of being.

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technological hybridity or psychic/supernatural human evolution.<sup>2</sup> While catastrophic imagery of wholesale destruction and vengeful violence is certainly present in these works this article will consider the often ignored, complementary apocalyptic themes of regeneration and renewal that are drawn from both Japanese and Western mythic or religious traditions.

### Anime, eschatology and secular apocalypse

“‘Transcendence’ is the state by which Japanese spirituality is posited on a mortal plane devoid of Judeo-Christian morality [...] the ‘being’ of a person (which can be one’s soul, mind, blood-line, weapon, limb or organ) is always caught in modes of transition. Acts of transformation, reconstitution, replication and attaining consciousness are all indications of transcendences.”

PHILIP BROPHY, *100 ANIME*

One of the most consistent and perceptive analysts of *anime*, Philip Brophy, has produced pioneering work on aesthetics and form, in particular recuperating the work of Tezuka (*Tetsuan Atomu/Astro Boy*) for Western audiences, and demonstrates a critically nuanced and sensually (aural and visual) sophisticated appreciation of *anime* as art, commercial product and as transnational culture. Over the past 15 years Brophy has demonstrated how the influence of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki can be traced throughout *anime*’s post-war development and aesthetic sensibilities – from the ocular flash contained in *kawaii* cartoon eyes to the radiating beams and explosive detonations of energy weapons in *mecha* (Brophy & Ewington). Yet Brophy also underplays the importance of regeneration and renewal in what he repeatedly describes as the ‘apocalyptic’, ‘post-apocalyptic’ and ‘hyper-apocalyptic’ in Japanese animation.<sup>3</sup> Similarly other writers, like Brophy, foreground the post-nuclear Japanese experience as radically informing the thematic, aesthetic and formal concerns of *anime*, including its apocalyptic dimension.<sup>4</sup> However, these authors rely predominantly on secular Western understandings of apocalypse to connote and conflate what is essentially an *eschatological* perspective (i.e. the study of finality). Collectively, the critical concern of these analysts is in the destructive, explosive and mutational form and theme of the medium and its national-historical contexts (and, importantly its seduction and/or phenomenological appeal).

Susan Napier (2005), on the other hand, while embracing the cultural impact of the atom bombings, also recognizes the origins and re-visioning of indigenous Japanese variations on apocalypse, and at least foregrounds the possibility of transcendence or rebirth. Her complex reading of the most popular genres of *anime* finds them dominated by apocalyptic visions (p.251). Napier also acknowledges “one of the basic paradoxes is that apocalyptic destruction is both feared and welcomed” (2005, p.253) but doesn’t expand on this millennial desire for retribution and annihilation, one that is in fact embraced by Brophy’s eloquent and lyrical discourse but can be traced back to Susan Sontag’s seminal essay ‘The Imagination of Disaster’, Frank Kermode’s *Sense of an Ending*, Norman Cohn’s *Pursuit of the Millennium* as well as Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Balance’ and ‘harmony’ are vital to the understanding of Japanese art and culture and perform a deep structural platform for aesthetic expression.

<sup>3</sup> Brophy’s excellent and poetic BFI handbook, *100 Anime*, for example, is full of abridged summaries of major works frequently described as apocalyptic, post-apocalyptic or hyper-apocalyptic (*Ai City*, *Akira*, *Barefoot Gen*, *Doomed Megalopolis*, *Giant Robo*, *Roujin-Z*, *Demon City Shinjuku*, *Fist of the North Star*, *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, *Space Adventure Cobra*, *Steamboy*, *Urotsukidoji*, *Violence Jack*).

<sup>4</sup> I am in no way attempting to discount the veracity of these authors’ scholarship, or homogenize their critical work as ‘secular’. While this may seem a pedantic (or semantic) issue, the continued figuring of *anime* in terms of Judaeo-Christian theological tradition is deeply problematic and imprints a Western reading and epistemology on Japanese (no matter how globalized) cultural production.

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Yet by principally accentuating the secular apocalyptic nature of *anime* narratives, most critics and theorists articulate a nihilism or ambivalence concerning the catastrophic destruction rendered in these works which negates the traditional dual nature of apocalyptic *telos* – to restore harmony for a millennium or transcend human time and space into a divine realm. Equally significant is the discounting of Japanese religious influences and traditions that inscribe both the aesthetic composure and sensibility of *anime*'s form and content. Limiting the exploration of *anime* to the application of Western apocalypse in this way forecloses analysis of the remaining organizing principles of this chiliastic theology, such as the role and figuration of messiah and antichrist, the battle of Armageddon, saving of an elect, day of judgment and the afterlife. These tropes are evident in *anime*'s hybrid iconography and appropriation of this Western master narrative of legitimation, recirculated within the globalized medium of international animation. Indeed, much *anime* explores, if not challenges the perceived postmodern malaise (Kumar, 1995) by envisioning 'hope' in the form of *surviving* apocalyptic change, from planetary renovation to species evolution/hybridisation, to individual psychic and emotional transcendence.

### Hybrid Apocalypse, Masse or Mappo?

Many commentators on Japanese society stress the fundamentally secular nature of daily life and culture.<sup>5</sup> Reischauer and Jansen recognise the importance of religion "in the Japan of old" but suggest the type of secularism extant within the West "dates back at least three centuries in Japan" (2005, p. 203). Religious thought in post-war Japan remains essentially hybrid, combining Confucianism, Buddhism and Shintoism. Just as Kumar and Kermode determine that Judeo-Christian apocalyptic tropes and traditions are evident in the secular West, there remain lingering, centuries-old traditions of Shinto (animistic worship of the nature and environment, whether animate or inanimate objects), Buddhism (transmigration of the soul, salvation and fulfilment in paradise) and Confucianism (ethical values informing moralities of governance, education, and loyalty to family and employer). Christianity, impacts Japanese society to a far lesser degree (under two per cent of the population), however, it retains a large influence on the educated elite.<sup>6</sup>

Increasingly Japanese are attracted to popular movements assuming "new religions" status, of which several hundred have achieved official recognition and now claim membership in the tens of millions (Reischauer and Jansen, 1995). Most are themselves hybrid with elements drawn from older Shinto, Buddhism and Chinese folk rites. Ironically, the thousands of shrines across the islands, domestic altars, and public festivals, performative marriages with Christian or Shinto ceremonies and elaborate Buddhist funerals, all contribute incongruously to the daily *secular* life of the 70-80 percent of Japanese who "do not consider themselves believers in any religion" (Reischauer and Jansen, p.215).

Susan Napier does explore and acknowledge, to varying degrees, the Japanese religious undercurrents of apocalyptic approximation. Indeed, of the three principal modes of *anime* that she delineates, both the Elegiac and Carnival have clear relevance to the third mode, the Apocalyptic. Yet, by 2005 Napier finds an "absence of major apocalyptic series or film" *anime*, curiously discounting *Metropolis* (2001) as "retro apocalypse" and nihilistic (Napier, p. xv).<sup>7</sup> It is odd in this context that Napier addresses neither *Appleseed* nor the 'steam-punk' *Steamboy* (Dir:

<sup>5</sup> See Kitagawa, *Religion in Japanese History*; Reischauer & Jansen, *The Japanese Today*; and Aoki & Dardess, *As the Japanese See It*.

<sup>6</sup> "Christians are strongly represented among the best-educated, leading elements in society and have therefore exerted a quite disproportionate influence. Another factor is that Christianity, as an important element of Western civilization, has attracted general attention. Most educated Japanese probably have a clearer concept of the history and basic beliefs of Christianity than they do of Buddhism" (Reischauer and Jansen, *The Japanese Today*, p. 213).

<sup>7</sup> Indeed, *Metropolis* is no more "retro" than Miyazaki's earlier *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* (1986).

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Otomo Katsuhiro, 2004), two significantly ‘apocalyptic’ *anime* of recent years. Indeed the retrospective yearning, nostalgia and sadness over the transient nature of things evident in these productions is best reflected in the *mono no aware* sentiment articulated by Shapiro and other observers. While Napier does consider “the medieval notion of *mono no aware*” as historically informing the contemporary sense of Japanese apocalypse, particularly the Elegiac mode as a “bitter awareness of a lost past” (p. 255), it is surprising that its articulation is not applied to *Metropolis* and *Steamboy*. Both are clearly apocalyptic elegies (as well as contemporary allegories) of a melancholic future-past, far removed from the “odor free” cultural context she identifies in Miyazaki’s nostalgic early works.<sup>8</sup>

Just as several critics (Zamora, O’Leary, Norris) of postmodern Western eschatology observe, Napier finds colloquial slippage from the original meanings of apocalypse and its contemporary “common understanding” which she describes as “something on the order of global destruction” (pp.251-52). Fully aware of its original Greek meaning as ‘revelation’ or ‘uncovering’, Napier emphasizes that this context of disclosure remains present “even though it is lost to conscious usage [...] so many of our images, ideas, and stories about the end of the world continue to contain elements of revelation” (p. 252). More significantly, as a process intrinsic to apocalyptic discourse, she asserts:

In many works of anime, much of the narrative tension is not from “waiting for the end of the world” but from the revelation of how and why the world should end. Given the distance between Japanese religion and Christianity, it is fascinating that present-day Japanese notions of the end of the world echo much in Revelation (Napier, p.252).

Amongst these traces she includes exaggerated visions of death and desire, messianic figures offering revenge fantasies and a hostility towards history and temporality.

Napier suggests that the process of animation itself contributes to “developing a distinctively Japanese notion of apocalypse”, which partly draws from the Buddhist doctrine of *mappo* with its concept of “a fallen world saved by a religious figure” and based on the ‘latter days of the Law’, the final 1000-year phase of decadence and decline following the Buddha’s death (Napier, p.252). Yet Japanese historian of religion, Kitagawa, recognizes that this apocalyptic heritage and lineage is a more extensive and complex one, where the:

yearning of the Japanese people to restore the idealized state of the golden days, coupled with the notion of the identity of religion and politics (*saisei-itchi*), has often developed a messianic fervor, especially during political crises. The ethnocentric, messianic restoration implicit in the indigenous religious tradition of Japan received further stimulus from the apocalyptic notion of Buddhism known as *mappo* (the coming of the age of degeneration of the Buddha’s Law) as well as from the “immanent theocratic” motif of Confucianism, as exemplified by the messianic motif of Nichiren’s teaching in the thirteenth century, respectively. Many observers sense the similar ethnocentric, messianic motif in [...] many other postwar new religions that present the “old dreams” of Japan as the “new visions” of the coming social and political order. (Kitagawa, 1990, p. 339)

In this way, the Superflat movement, or ‘superplaner’ animation style, evokes an arguably reactionary move to simplify the complexities of postmodern life via the compression of dense cultural forms into a new hybrid flatness that is pure surface.<sup>9</sup> Following Okamoto Taro’s decree

<sup>8</sup> On the “culturally odourless” nature of Japanese *kawaii*, see Napier’s reflection on Iwabuchi Koichi. Susan Napier 2006, ‘The World of Anime Fandom in America’, in F Lunning (ed) *Mechademia: Emerging Worlds of Anime and Manga*, vol. 1, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, pp. 47-63.

<sup>9</sup> For Lamarre, the superflat and superplanar anime style, “implies that something is not simply flat but very, very flat-complexly flat. To make something look superflat, you have to begin with layers that introduce the possibility of depth and then crush it [...] Depth comes right to the surface even as it serves to direct attention to the character. Foreground and background become equally striking. This is the basic idea of superflat: no element within the image is more important than any other element. The result is a visual field without any hierarchy among elements [...] When everything comes equally to the surface”. Thomas Lamarre 2006, ‘The Multiplanar Image’, in F Lunning (ed) *Mechademia: Emerging*

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that ‘art is explosion’, for the superflat apocalypticists, its rendering becomes entirely flat (exemplified in Mirukami’s *Time Boken* cartoon-like mushroom cloud series), yet it remains paradoxically and complexly multiplanar. As Lamarre (2007) offers: “Surprisingly, however, are the recurring images of explosions, space battles, planetary destruction [...] In other words, superflat anime is not in opposition to action, or to genres of space war and futuristic military action” (p. 133)

While Napier recognizes the importance of apocalyptic cults in Japan, that she finds evident since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, other commentators have shown how millenarian movements and ideologies can be traced to the 10<sup>th</sup> century, if not before, with various charismatic shamans and messianic cult leaders appearing to the present day.<sup>10</sup> In Japanese history, as much as its representation in *manga* and *anime*, such sects and cults emerged regularly and, as with the West, frequently espoused radical ideology announcing the end of days. Most famously in recent Japan, Aum Shinrikyo, the messianic cult led by Ashara Shoko responsible for the 1995 sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway, was preparing for the end of the world and its members were avid consumers of “apocalyptic manga and anime” (Napier, p.8). Indeed, six years earlier, with the international film release of *Akira*, following its successful *manga* serialization, a doomsday cult is depicted at the margins of the narrative.<sup>11</sup>

Writing in *Atomic Bomb Cinema: the Apocalyptic Imagination on Film*, Jerome Shapiro finds the Buddhist *mappo* tradition in Japanese cinema and *anime* complemented by another arcane institution, *masse*. Conceptually, the latter is closer to an apocalyptic narrative than the former: “*masse* describes the complete end of the world, and the beginning of an entirely new one” (Shapiro, 2002, p.257). This is an important distinction in terms of both *Spriggan* and *Appleseed* and qualifies the Japanese apocalyptic further as there is not so much a continuity or salvation of an elect in this schema, as in Western tradition, but the closure of one narrative and the beginning of another. In *Spriggan*, a human machine hybrid (i.e. cyborg) attempts to annihilate all life on the planet and start afresh with newly designed creatures, whereas in *Appleseed*, artificially augmented human clones (bioroids) are created to harmonize warring homo sapiens but are themselves positioned to be the inheritors of Earth once humanity is ‘euthanazed’.

There should be no surprise in these apocalyptically ‘bricolage’ plots. Shapiro (2002), for example, strongly emphasizes the impact of Post-Meiji modernization and influence of Western mythologies and narratives in contemporary Japanese cinema and *anime* which he perceives as another form of social ambivalence, ambiguity and cultural hybridity: “Almost paradoxically, the Japanese are infatuated with the new, disdain anything outdated, and are not sentimental about revising, amending, or discarding ‘tradition’” (p. 257).

What Japanese films exhorting the apocalypse achieve distinctively is “a passion, both serious and playful, for living in accord with the natural world-in all its beauty and terror” (Shapiro, pp. 255-56). The notion of playfulness is a serious one for Shapiro and one largely missing from Napier’s textual readings, and can be found equally in *mono no aware*, a point Shapiro takes eminent Japanese film scholar Donald Ritchie to task over (and by implication Napier) as fundamentally misreading this Buddhist tradition (Shapiro, pp. 264-67). Equally, the influence of traditional, pre-cinematic modes of art such as Haiku (championed by Gerald Vizenor) requires

*Worlds of Anime and Manga*, vol. 1, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, pp. 135-136.

<sup>10</sup> See Kitagawa *Religion in Japanese History*, Hall *Apocalypse Observed* and Stone (Ed.) *Expecting Armageddon*.

<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed analysis of *Akira*’s millennial cult and an expansion on this essay, see Mick Broderick 2008. ‘Animating Apocalypse: Millennial Expression in Japanese Film’, in John Wallis & Kenneth Newport (eds), *Apocalyptic Texts in Popular Culture*, Equinox Publishing, London (forthcoming).

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the skilled reading/mastery of interpretation. As in the hermeneutics required for biblical exegesis in such rich apocalyptic texts as Revelation, appreciating Haiku requires a ‘transcendent oneness’ in the act of contemplation that seeks to harmonize and find balance in any reading. Yet harmony and balance also informs Western theological interpretation and practice. As Frank Kermode argues, following Helmut Gerber’s assertion that “genuine decadence *is* a renaissance”, apocalyptic transition requires the balance of both decadence and renovation or renaissance, and is often indistinguishable and/or at least contemporaneous (Kermode 1995, p. 258).

In *anime* such as *Metropolis* and *Steamboy*, the apocalyptic narratives are infused with hubris and entropy, where the former affect impels the construction of Babel-like edifices that serve rapacious ambition and demagoguery though these are ultimately destroyed by rebellion and in retribution. If there is a latent sadness and sensitivity towards things evident in their passing (*aware*), it is in the exploitation, expendability and the perceived loss of innocence associated with modernity’s nascent technological ascendancy, one largely wasted by military-industrial misadventure and protofascist ideology. Innovative energy sources are monopolized, whether *Steamboy*’s late 19<sup>th</sup> Century super-pressurized water or the early 20<sup>th</sup> century fissile elements of *Metropolis* deployed for global domination.<sup>12</sup> Ultimately apocalyptic, transformative and transmutational power corrupts and almost always is emblematically represented in *anime* via the hybrid, cyborgian form of human-machine ‘becoming’.



Fig. 1 – *Metropolis*. © 2001 Tezuka/Bandai Visual/Dentsu.  
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Shapiro (2002) further delineates the Buddhist canon: “*masse* signifies an age of moral decadence, and in ancient times it also meant a retributive event that guides humanity”, but unlike Judeo-Christian apocalypse, it assumes an eschatological stature, not Revelation’s consummation of history into a single, linear teleology. “Rather than connoting rebirth or the battle of good and evil, *masse* simply denotes punishment for crimes rather than sin. *Masse* does not include a cosmic reorganization [...] rather the world ends, and then something else takes its place” (Shapiro, p.341, n.19). In this way, *masse* complements the concept of *mono no aware*, in that it embodies a sense of sorrow for the loss and transience of all things. According to Shapiro, it also “expresses a profound sympathy which is more difficult to define” (p.264).

Both *Metropolis* and *Steamboy* as exemplars of Thomas Looser’s (2007) attribution of the “positive, productive function” of the Superflat movement in its embrace of the apocalyptic. Just as *Steamboy* is inspired by Victorian England’s Crystal Palace World Exhibition and the science fiction writings of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells, the opening epithet in *Metropolis*, reads simply:

<sup>12</sup> In *Metropolis*, the city’s central and dominating Ziggurat disguises an enormous weapon system that fires ‘Omotanium’ energy at the sun causing massive fluctuations in the solar fusion reaction which leads to the irradiation of the earth’s surface. Conversely, *Steam Boy* deploys superheated steam to catastrophically superfreeze central London.

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“every epoch dreams its successor – Jules Michelet”. While this can reference the nostalgic, post-war *manga* imagination of *Metropolis* creator Tezuka (based on the Fritz Lang film, then unseen by the artist), it is equally relevant for the contemporary, post-millennial *anime* generation, revised by animator-artists Rintaro and Otomo. For Looser it is no coincidence that this apocalyptic *anime*/Superflat cultural production occurs at the end of the *Showa* era with the death of emperor Hirohito, and the start of the *Heisei* era: “The very name Heisei contains the idea of productive ending. Literally the culmination or completion of peace, the word was meant to indicate an ostensibly successful completion of Japan’s postwar policies. Even if the period is constructed negatively, it may be read as one that nonetheless still points hopefully to something else” (Looser, p. 94)

Even here we find the ubiquitous amalgam of Judeo-Christian apocalyptic with *manga* and *mecha*. When the über-industrialist of *Metropolis*, Duke Red, secretly builds a robot girl (Tima) in the form of his dead daughter she unwittingly becomes an instrument of catastrophic change as a superhuman cyborg that complements the enormous Ziggurat/weapon-system when she is installed upon its throne. Tima instantly merges symbiotically with the machine’s operating system via tentacular cables and wires (reminiscent of Tetsuo in *Akira*). One character witnessing the transformation fatalistically quotes Biblical scripture: “and so God’s wrath descended upon the Tower of Babel” while the cavernous control room morphs momentarily into a massive crucifix, with Tima at its centre which alludes to the giant antediluvian being, Lilith, in *Neon Genesis Evangelion* based on Judaic folklore. The religious symbolism is complete when she ascends the Ziggurat throne and rises on a sphere, recalling the iconography of the Virgin Mary atop a globe.



Fig. 2 – *Metropolis*. © 2001 Tezuka/Bandai Visual/Dentsu.  
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In retribution for humanity’s ill-treatment of the robot underclass, Tima unilaterally decides humanity’s fate:

Destruction of the human race will begin through irradiation and the use of multiple weapons systems. This will be complete in 17 hours, and 27 minutes.

Through the usual intercession of a selfless *anime* hero, Tima is prevented from unleashing global calamity but effectively destroys the Ziggurat, the despotic designs of Duke Red along with the centre of the *Metropolis*. An apocalyptic reprieve ensues, like the prophesied Biblical interregnum between millennial adversaries, providing the potential for harmony and balance to be restored, however evanescent.

Hence apocalyptic *anime* and the Superflat aesthetic is well suited to interrogating this transcendent feeling, momentarily closing the rupture between what *is* and what *will* be, linking the *here* with ‘what lies beyond’. In order to further demonstrate these influences in greater detail

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I have selected two major Japanese animated productions, *Spriggan* and *Appleseed*, both from serialized *manga* origins that engage thematically with apocalyptic concerns but which have yet to receive significant critical attention. Unlike the soteriological impulse of Western apocalypse, the advocates and potential instigators of Armageddon in *Spriggan* and *Appleseed* neither seek the salvation nor the perpetuation of humankind. These *anime* entertain narratives of *mappo* and *masse* as myths of decadence and decline, which are ultimately rejected in each film with the messianic intervention of deliver-heroes. For all of its failures, moral exhaustion and its capacity for self-destruction, humanity is saved or granted a reprieve in these productions by rejecting false gods and prophets, or by embracing advanced transhumanist ideals that complement and compensate for human flaws.

### Spriggan

This OAV (original *anime* video) was also released theatrically in a number of international territories and is a curious amalgam of many hybrid thematic and iconographic references to biblical apocalypse. As in many *anime*, such as *Akira*, *Spriggan* is set in a future realm not too indistinguishable from today. It is a world under ecological threat where humankind seems pre-ordained for extinction, punished in a quasi-biblical, technological deluge that conflates Buddhist *masse* tradition with Old Testament prophecy to encompass renewal or evolutionary progress.

After the death of a classmate as an unwilling suicide bomber under post-hypnotic command who has the words “Noah will be your death” scrawled across his chest, Yu Ominae, the impulsive and eponymous ‘Spriggan’ confronts his supervisor, Mr Yamamoto of ARKAM, a covert global intelligence organization. As a high school senior, Yu is the youngest spy working for ARKAM and is later revealed to be a genetically enhanced product of military experimentation and indoctrination. Peering out of his office window at the myriad skyscrapers before him, the camera pans upward while Yamamoto quotes from Old Testament scripture, his pale cigarette smoke slowly ascending and dispersing in a neat visual metaphor of transcendence and transformation:



Fig. 3 – *Spriggan*. © 2001 Tezuka/Bandai Visual/Dentsu.  
All rights reserved.

“And the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great and His heart was filled with grief. And the Lord said ‘I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the Earth. And behold, I myself am bringing floodwaters on the Earth to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life and all that is on the Earth shall die’.”

This ponderous sequence works typologically to recall and anticipate the catastrophic deluge, both as historical myth and an antediluvian prophecy of future calamity. It is the *Spriggan*’s cryptic introduction to a battle that will take place atop Mt Ararat in Turkey, where one of two



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competing secret armies has located the Ark in a battle for access. As Norman Cohn has comprehensively demonstrated, the near universal mythologies of flood act as a precursor to Biblical apocalypse (Cohn, 1999). Punitive Deluge is a mini-narrative of end-time that demonstrates rebirth and suggests something cyclical, yet is contained within Judeo-Christian theology as a linear and teleological movement. Arguably both Shinto and Buddhist purification rituals employing water contribute this rich tradition of deluge mythology, especially given the archipelago's ongoing assault by tsunami and typhoons (Kitagawa, 1990).

In his appropriately titled book, *Strange Weather*, Andrew Ross (2001) suggests the mythic resonances of deluge (and other 'violent' acts of Nature) is due to their ubiquitous effect. Indeed, as Ross maintains, such anthropomorphising of nature and spectacular weather continues from the pre-modern into the post-modern world, as we find in *Spriggan* and other *anime*. The biblical Flood attains the dimension of micro-apocalypse, or a rehearsal for the complete point of *eschaton*, with the apocalypse, in the immanent future. Hence, even seemingly linear and singular myths of decline and rebirth hold cyclical and repeated motifs, that exegete Northrop Frye calls 'type' and 'antitype' (Frye, 1983, p.25).

Such mythologies are germane to *Spriggan*. In a clandestine Pentagon operation, the US Machine Corps sends a telekinetic child cyborg, Colonel MacDougall, and two appropriately named assassins, Fat Man and Little Boy, on a 'black op' to gain control of the Ark, having obtained a triangular entry key from another alien artifact excavated from elsewhere. Inside the ARKUM laboratory atop Mt Ararat the diminutive Col. MacDougall forcibly wrests control from an elderly scholar-scientist, Dr Meisel. After briefly downloading/absorbing Meisel's linguistic computer data, MacDougall translates the alien glyphs for those present, explaining that the Ark is a giant machine controlling the Earth's weather by manipulating ozone and carbon dioxide in the upper atmosphere and adjusting the global intake of ultraviolet radiation:

"I am the Lord of the sky. He who awakens me shall have dominion over that which enfolds the earth, the mighty shield that protects all. When evil runs rampant on the Earth I will change the blessings of heaven to the curses of hell and the children of God shall be once more destroyed and created anew".

Inside the Ark, Dr Meisel, Margaret and the child cyborg MacDougall locate the giant machine's alien operating system, known as 'Noah'. The sequence is a stunning one. As the scientists decipher the central control panel, a cavernous hemisphere of rotating Mandela and arcane hieroglyphs radiate across a massive internal canopy, resembling an astronomical and astrological map of the cosmos. All present are in awe of the sublime spectacle unfolding before them. MacDougall enthuses:

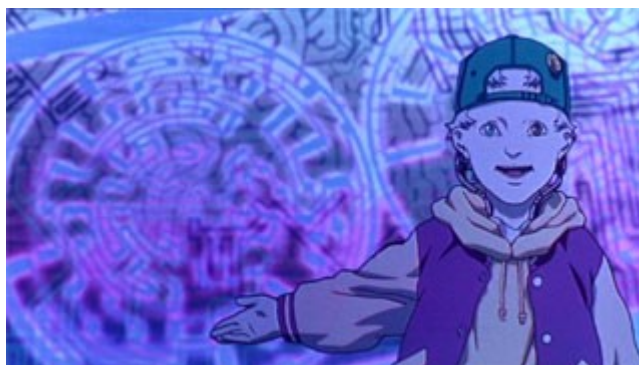


Fig. 4 – *Spriggan*. © 1988 Studio 4°C/TBS/Bandai Visual.  
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“It’s incredible! With the Cold War over, the greatest single threat to the Earth is destruction of the environment. Acid rain, ozone depletion, global warming – with Noah in our hands we could eliminate all of these problems in a heartbeat.” This sequence is intercut with Spriggan Ominae in the twilight periphery surrounding the Ark’s core, trying to locate the three protagonists while traveling through a liminal dimension that bends and distorts time and space. In this weird, quantum realm he encounters enormous dinosaurs, frozen in stasis, alongside scores of other creatures both reptilian and mythological and fantastic.

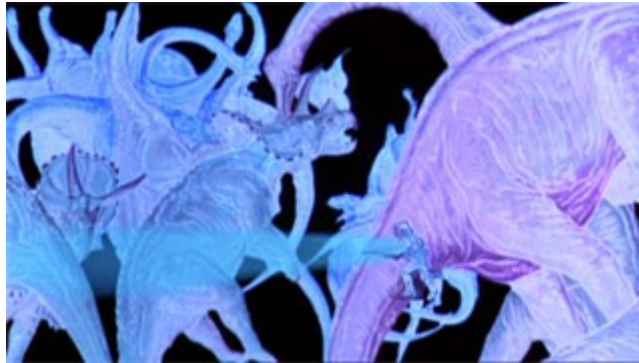


Fig. 5 - Spriggan. © 1988 Studio 4°C/TBS/Bandai Visual.  
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MacDougall continues: “I don’t doubt that Noah could have helped create the ice age that destroyed the dinosaurs, but I always felt that it might have had another function beside simply changing the atmosphere [...] I don’t think those creatures were just collected by Noah, I think they were *created* here. I think they are experimental prototypes for the next generation of animals to walk the earth.” As Ominae searches deeper into the alien zone the creatures appear more incredible and bizarre and MacDougall’s scientific exposition attains a millenarian rant. “Noah doesn’t just control the weather, it’s a *creator* of life! [...] it might even be possible that the entire human race began here in the Ark of Noah. Forget about saving the old world doctor, together you and I can create a *new* one [...] The entire human race is a *mistake* of history doctor. We have the chance to correct God’s only creative *failure* [...] He’s giving us the chance to *correct* all that is wrong in the world”



Fig. 6 - Spriggan. © 1988 Studio 4°C/TBS/Bandai Visual.  
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Unappeased by Meisel’s categorical refusal to cooperate, MacDougall activates the Ark in retribution: “I’ve just triggered the global warming function doctor. In minutes hurricanes and typhoons will begin forming in unprecedented numbers. The polar ice caps will melt and the levels of the ocean will begin to rise. At last, the *second* flood has begun! It’s the end of the world as you knew it...” The three watch the global climatic rupture from within the heart of the Ark as

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a montage of satellite views of spiraling storms, ice sheets tearing asunder, flooded cities and giant tsunamis forming, MacDougall adds: “Why wait forty days and nights when you have tidal waves”.

But in a selfless act of messianic heroism Spriggan Ominae manages to intervene and rescue Meisel and Margaret, temporarily overcoming MacDougall who initiates the Ark’s self-destruct sequence destabilizing the “alien time/space stasis” that maintains the massive structure. The machine implodes in a massive climatological inversion resembling hurricane, tornado and collapsar into which all matter (including the maniacal McDougall) is sucked, disappearing at the event horizon.



Fig. 7 - *Spriggan*. © 1988 Studio 4°C/TBS/Bandai Visual.  
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The sublime atmospheric contortions and turbulence subsides. Despite widespread destruction the process of ecological apocalypse is averted. MacDougall-anti-christ, false prophet and deceiver – is vanquished and annihilated. The film concludes with two Spriggans (Ominae and his French counterpart) united after escaping the Ark. The pair has prevented the wannabe cyborg deity from obliterating *homo sapiens* and replacing them with his new creations.

### Appleseed

If *Spriggan* succeeds in retelling and reinterpreting biblical mythology of decadence, decline and deluge by conflating a postmodern secular narrative with apocalyptic and millennial tropes and characters, the more recent *Appleseed* instantly foregrounds its literally apocalyptic agenda with an introductory title and passage from *Revelations* 12:4.

And his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and did cast them to the earth; and the dragon stood before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as it was born.<sup>13</sup>

At first this passage appears unrelated to the *mecha* fury of urban battle we are about to witness, rendered by live motion-capture within 3D CG, as well as the segue within minutes from the maelstrom of Armageddon to the utopian city of Olympus.<sup>14</sup> Yet the New Testament quotation foregrounds the centrality of the female protagonist in an apocalyptic battle between forces of entropic human genocide and those who would protect the ‘future perfect’ by making things anew. Significantly, *Appleseed*’s characters and locations also draw from classical Greek

<sup>13</sup> In the accompanying DVD audio commentary, director Aramaki Shinji explains that although the film begins with this biblical quote, “it was not absolutely necessary here but it had atmosphere, and it was phrase that put everything into place, and I had strong feelings about it.”

<sup>14</sup> As Arakami outlines in the director’s commentary, the visceral and kinetic violence of the opening sequence is deliberately chaotic and confusing, to disorient the viewer: “You don’t really get a good sense of what’s going on”.

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myth and literature in nomenclature and its overall dialectical narrative interrogation of historical, progressive decline and decadence which, while tangential to Judeo-Christian apocalypse, is far closer to concepts of *mappo* and *masse*.

The opening sequence establishes the catastrophic, post-holocaust terrain inhabited by guerilla fighters and their mechanized military opponents. A lengthy firefight ensues inside the shell of a decaying multi-story building where resistance fighter Deunan Knute is captured by the elite ESWAT (Extra Special Weapons and Tactics) team airdropped in to the ruined city. Knute awakens to find herself in the new ‘utopia’ of Olympus, a majestic 22<sup>nd</sup> century metropolis populated by genetically engineered human-hybrid clones called ‘bioroids’ that now govern the remnant functioning world. One of the next generation of bioroids, Hitomi, introduces the bewildered Knute into the socio-political history of the city: “In Olympus, mankind has finally achieved a state of utopia, in a fair and balanced society”.<sup>15</sup>



Fig. 8 – Appleseed. © 2004 Geneon/Tobo. All rights reserved.

Maintaining this utopian existence, however, requires a form of biological Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) as deterrent. Atop of Daidalos, a massive ringed metal and glass structure that houses the enormous Intelligence Network ‘brain’ that oversees Olympus, nick-named Gaia, is ‘D-Tank’ containing a genocidal virus that if ever released, would eliminate all bioroids. Resigned to this ever-present threat, Hitomi laments: “I know it’s man’s need for self-preservation [and] it’s vital to maintain a balance between us; that’s why Gaia also monitors the emotional effect of bioroids on humans”. She explains that Gaia is a self-expanding network that monitors all aspects of daily life in the city: “Particularly the bioroid interaction with humans”



Fig. 9 – Appleseed. © 2004 Geneon/Tobo. All rights reserved.

<sup>15</sup> As Jerome Shapiro reminds us, “In Japanese philosophy and culture, especially its aesthetics, *balance* is a fundamental principle. Balance, however, is something fluid, dynamic and transient”, Shapiro 2002, p. 265.

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since “humans are ruled by unstable emotions. Their inherent anger often leads to war but in bioroids emotional reactions are suppressed. We harbour no anger or jealousy towards other people and that’s how we’ve been able to keep the peace.”

Arriving inside the giant complex Hitomi introduces Knute to the Olympus Elders, seven nonagerians who hover about the transparent domelike container of Gaia’s fluctuating neural plasma, like a giant version of the Dr Onishi’s scientific display monitoring the god-child in *Akira*.

Hitomi relates that the will of Olympus is decided through a form of Socratic dialectics involving “debate between Gaia and the seven elders”.<sup>16</sup> One by one, the elders explain Gaia’s function and the genocidal Olympus fail-safe mechanism. Gaia is a “collection of the wisdom and acumen of the scientists who designed it”, a machine, perfect in its stability that will never waver, with no capacity for human sentiment. “By adding our seven minds to its collective understanding of humanity we give Gaia’s thinking a measure of flexibility”.



Fig. 10 – *Appleseed*. © 2004 Geneon/Toho. All rights reserved.

However, all is not well in paradise. At first *Appleseed*'s utopian community appears like post-millennial elect but smoldering interspecies conflict suggests this is only a brief apocalyptic interregnum of relative peace prior to an imminent and decisive battle. After a terrorist attack by rebel factions of *human* soldiers decimates the bioroid's preservation technologies inside the heavily fortified Daidalos, the Olympus parliament convenes in emergency session. One elder informs the assembled council that the genocidal attack on bioroid life-extension “imperils the future of humanity as well”. Announcing to the chamber that Gaia has willed that all reproductive functions will be permanently restored to the bioroids, the humans present (mostly regular army) are incensed. Speaking simultaneously to the parliament and live to all Olympians, the Elder trumpets with emphatic confidence: “Bioroid reproductive capabilities will be restored and they will evolve into a new race of man and create a shining paradise for us all”. But this millennial prophecy only masks a more insidious plot hatched by the elders.

An unwitting pawn in an apocalyptic game, Deunan Knute retrieves vital data and revives it for the expedient and complicit Elders. Bioroids, they explain, as a new form of life could help us save humanity: “Man was doomed, but coexistence gave us all a glimmer of hope. Even so, the human race could not suppress its violent nature. Mankind despises those that are different. Once again man has succumbed to hatred and anger [...] and he no longer has the ability to

<sup>16</sup> These old men are deeply ambiguous if not duplicitous characters, and revealed to be complicit in several homicidal schemes, ranging from individual murder (Knute's mother, Dr Gilliam), through to 'speciesscide'. The seven may also allude to the myth of the assault on Thebes - it's seven gates and the seven soldiers who led an army against the city. The allusion is further strengthened in the *anime* when the seven spider-like defence robots are activated by the Elders to destroy D-Tank and usher in the end of *homo sapiens*.

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maintain this planet”. Echoing the terminal prognosis of Colonel MacDougall in *Spriggan*, the Elders attempt to justify to Deunan their devious manipulations via apocalyptic logic and rhetoric: “Gaia has made an accurate prediction, that the human race is doomed to annihilate itself and destroy the world in three generations. Deunan, *our* time has passed. The human race must step aside [...] if the world is to survive we have no choice but to relinquish the future to the bioroids”.

The decrepit men next reveal the truth about D-Tank, contradicting Hitomi’s earlier ‘fail-safe’ narrative of bioroid genocide, like an updated genetic Doomsday Device recalling *Dr Strangelove* (Dir: Stanley Kubrick, 1963):

When the tank is destroyed the virus will make the entire human race permanently infertile. We swore that no human life would be taken. And so it won’t - instead we will slowly close the book on human history. The last chapter will be the euthanasia of mankind [...] even utopia could not quell man’s need for violence. Once again he became embroiled in a global war and reduced the world to ashes. And now Olympus too has been marred by the sins of humanity [...] The bioroids will create a new species, and mankind will be eradicated from the planet.

Deunan protests that the Elders deceived her and manipulated Gaia’s data, forcing it to make a spurious decision. Unrepentant one elder asserts with dogmatic certainty: “It is humanity’s destiny [...] we accept the fate of our race and intend to perish along with the rest”, but just as another is about to press the red doomsday button releasing the infertility virus, the bioroid Prime Minister, Athena, enters with her personal guard and aborts the global genocide. She reminds the Elders of the bioroids’ primary function: “To ensure the survival of the human race”, ironically confirming the previous public prophecy by her seemingly defiant intervention: “We are no longer the bioroids you created but members of a *new* race”.

*Appleseed* concludes with this triumphant declaration. Partly by design and possibly by chance, the superior bioroids are shown to have already attained ‘enlightenment’, advancing to a higher realm of (co)existence with *homo sapiens*. In this brave new world, under the watchful eye of the artificial intelligence network Gaia, human women and female bioroids unequivocally usurp the exhausted ideology of patriarchy moments before it set about unilaterally extinguishing all human life.

### An Ending


According to apocalyptic scholar Malcolm Bull (1995):

Popular-secular apocalyptic feeds on the same images of nuclear holocaust, ecological catastrophe, sexual decadence and social collapse that inspire contemporary religious millenarianism. But unlike the religious variety, secular apocalyptic – which is found in many areas of popular culture, but most notably in science fiction, rock music and film – is not usually intended to influence public opinion in favour of social or political objectives such as nuclear disarmament or environmental regulation, but in many cases the language of apocalyptic is deployed simply to shock, alarm or enrage (pp. 4-5).

Japanese animation has frequently been accused of exploitation and gratuitous excess. Yet what any number of *anime* are successful in achieving is rendering and evoking the ‘inconceivable’. Instead of halting at Armageddon’s denouement, apocalyptic *anime* glimpses beyond the cataclysms of radical renovation. The demolished metropolis, felled buildings, spent ordinance, devastated urban populaces and planetary topographies riddled with explosive craters, smoking fissures, molten frameworks, and blasted terrains from heaving overpressure; the cacophonies of battle, mass evacuation, blinding light, searing rays, nuclear detonations, psychic energy pulses and the corresponding silences of affect – these are the chaotic processes that

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announce and produce the violent but necessary *transition* from one state of existence to the next, often as evolutionary development, or as a counterforce to nihilistic agendas, or to *usurp* and *prevent* entropy, hubris or the destructive interventions from internal or external parties.

Regardless of the recent, modern preponderance of secular apocalypticism that critics such as Malcolm Bull target, *anime* texts that adopt apocalyptic, messianic or millenarian tropes frequently do so as an organising principle of their hybrid narratives as well as aesthetic processes. The glib or cynical postmodern self-reflexivity Bull finds amongst cultural circulation is largely eschewed in *anime*. There is no apocalyptic MacGuffin here, momentarily trotted out to expediently explain or justify or motivate plot and character.<sup>17</sup> The films discussed above are nuanced and sophisticated interpretations that engage in ‘revelation’ while adopting the poetic, linguistic and iconographic excesses of biblical *écriture* applied to the specifics of the superplanar animated film medium, Japanese tradition and a globalized market. 

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<sup>17</sup> MacGuffin is a term Alfred Hitchcock coined to describe essential but superfluous plot exposition that gave context for the plot direction and seemed important but merely serves as a catalyst for action/themes of much more interest to the filmmaker and audience (e.g. jealousy, surveillance, murder, sexual dysfunction). Shapiro, finds that nuclear plots are often little more than MacGuffins in the majority of what he has called ‘atomic bomb cinema’, yet he recognizes that some bomb films deploy apocalyptic narrative to, as Kermode would have it, make sense of the end. See Shapiro 2002, pp.60-62.

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