Malte Frey

Cyber-Transcendence and Immanence as a Religio-Spiritual Phenomenon in Cyberpunk Anime

Abstract

This article argues that Western cyberpunk narratives often suggest a technologically invoked transcendence, a cyber-transcendence, which represents a new ontological sphere and offers catharsis in dystopian scenarios. While Japanese cyberpunk anime also explore the idea of cyber-transcendence, the clear distinction between immanence and transcendence often becomes blurred. Aesthetic concepts invoking transcendence can be linked to the awe-inspiring *kami* (deities) of Japanese Shinto, which are intertwined with the immanent sphere of reality rather than external to it. In Western cyberpunk, cyber-transcendence seems to provide the sense of depth that Paul Tillich labels the "dimension of religion", in contrast to postmodernist meaninglessness. Cyberpunk anime provide an understanding of transcendence as a religious dimension that exists within reality.

Keywords

Cyber Transcendence, Anime, Postmodernism, Dimension of Depth, Sublime, Japanese Shinto

Biography

Malte Frey works and lives in Düsseldorf, Germany. He started his ongoing dissertation on societal structures and therein proclaimed concepts of subjectivity as depicted in the technologically organized societies of postcyberpunk anime, in 2020 at the University of Fine Arts Münster, Germany. In 2018, he graduated from University of Münster in protestant religious education and in fine arts from the University of Fine Arts Münster, followed by working as an artist and exhibiting his paintings in numerous exhibitions.

Since then, he mainly focuses on his scholarly work, specializing in media-specific visual analysis in anime on the one hand and posthuman studies within the framework of (post-)cyberpunk fiction on the other. He is driven by a profound interest in the culture surrounding anime and manga as well as concepts of non-Western traditions, starting from a semester at the Fine Arts College of Shanghai University in 2015/16.

Visual fiction rooted within the cultural environment of Japan is rich with cyberpunk narratives, particularly in the medium of anime (Japanese animation). The cyberpunk genre originally emerged within US-American literature and film with novels like William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) and movies like Blade Runner (Ridley Scott, USA 1982). However, US-Cyberpunk had a significant impact on Japanese audiences due to its japanoid imaginary.[1] Since then, but even before, a wide variety of visual cyberpunk narratives in the form of anime have been published in Japan.[2]

This article argues that Japanese cyberpunk fictions incorporate religious elements and suggest the existence of a transcendent sphere invoked by technology, which I refer to as "cyber-transcendence". This sphere appears to exist beyond the immanent realm of the physical world and offers the promise of escape or even salvation from the often-dystopian settings depicted in cyberpunk fiction. In a book published in 2012, media scholar Jiré Emine Gözen, through an extensive study of Western cyberpunk literature, finds that a majority of US-cyberpunk fiction implies the presence of this type of transcendence:

> Sometimes more, sometimes less strongly, the last pages often seem to suggest that the final frontier of human death will be overcome and life of the soul or the spirit beyond death is possible. This is often made possible by technological means in the form of digitizing of the consciousness, but other scenarios are proposed, portraying transcendence as the next step in humanity's evolution.[3]

The phenomenon of cyber-transcendence can be regarded as a religious element that provides meaning in the otherwise meaningless postmodern societies of cyberpunk. Transcendence, religion and postmodernism are concepts rooted within the Western cultural environment, which has been shaped by the philosophical traditions of Platonism, Cartesianism, Christianity and the Enlightenment. Those concepts, however, only fully reached Japan after the country was forcefully opened in 1853, after roughly 250 years of isolation.[4] Cyberpunk anime may therefore provide a different take

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1   Sato 2004, 339–341.
2   For example, see Brown 2010.
3   Gözen 2012, 208, translation mine.
4   Shimada 2000, 137–150.

on cyber-transcendence and, in turn, on the Western concept of religion itself, linked to transcendence and Christianity. This dual approach is especially interesting because of the long-established relationship between Western and Japanese cyberpunk.[5] The anime analyzed here suggest an understanding of transcendence as remaining connected to and entangled within the immanent sphere.

To support my argument, I will first consider the motives and concepts linked to cyberpunk's cyber-transcendence in the Western context of postmodernism. Building on this step, I then focus on three cyberpunk anime classics and on their religious references and visual concepts invoking cyber-transcendence. It will be apparent that the visual construction of cyber-transcendence is linked to concepts of Western aesthetics that can also be found, however, in religious concepts of Japanese Shinto.

Western and Japanese Cyberpunk

Cyberpunk's incorporation of technology is one of the genre's main characteristics. Its origins can be traced back to the United States of the late 1970s and early 1980s. A new generation of sci-fi authors emerged, breaking away from stereotypes of classical sci-fi. The latter generally features expeditions into extraterrestrial areas where the spaceship functions as an enclave of humanism, with scientists exploring alien worlds using technology as a tool for their endeavors. In contrast, cyberpunk worlds are set on Earth in the not-so-distant future, and the protagonists are outsiders, criminals, and critics of the system. The world is controlled by hyper-capitalist conglomerates and human beings are altered as cyborgs through technological enhancements. Consequently, the concept of a specific human nature, which is often affirmed in classical sci-fi, is deconstructed in cyberpunk.

Classical sci-fi is rooted in humanism and its moral implications since the Enlightenment. Cyberpunk, however, questions these beliefs while deconstructing the notion of an unalterable human nature; humanist moralism, which views technology as a mere tool, cannot keep pace with the rapid technological changes in today's society and the individuals within them.[6]

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5   For the relationship between Japanese and US-fiction see Sato 2004; Tatsumi 2006.
6   I borrow from Gözen's analysis (2012, 111–122) and also bring my own findings into this description.

I argue that uncertainty is the outcome of this rapid change. Therefore, a need for reassurance arises. This need, I believe, is met with the motive of cyber-transcendence.

Technology and its integration into society have played an important role in the Japanese cultural environment since 1945, leading to Japan becoming the third-largest economy in the world.[7] This could be one reason why US cyberpunk authors used japanoid images to depict a technological future in their narratives. Kumiko Sato analyzes how Japanese audiences suddenly found their country portrayed as the future in Western narratives of the 1980s.[8] It would be incorrect to assume, however, that US cyberpunk gave rise to Japanese cyberpunk. In fact, narratives involving the physical incorporation of technology have existed in Japan since the mid-twentieth century.[9] Additionally, Saito (formerly Sato) argues that while US cyberpunk heroes tend to embody masculinity, representing the ideal Western male, Japanese cyberpunk often features female cyborg heroines.[10] Consequently, it is not straightforward to draw a clear distinction between Japanese and US cyberpunk in terms of definitions, as we find more an entanglement rather than a separation of two distinct genres.[11]

Nevertheless, since Japanese cyberpunk is evidently created in a non-Western context, it offers a different perspective on cyberpunk themes compared to US cyberpunk or perhaps even expands on them. Anime is arguably the medium that provides the most diverse range of visual cyberpunk fiction. While the Matrix movies by the Wachowskis (US, 1999–2003) may be seen as the pinnacle of cyberpunk in Western culture, there is still a plethora of ongoing cyberpunk fiction in Japan through anime. I will now develop

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7   For further reading, I suggest Sato 2004; Tatsumi 2006, 155–170. Japan as an economy is only surpassed by the United States and China: Global PEO Services, *Top 15 Countries by GDP in 2022*, https://tinyurl.com/mt9tcrtm [accessed 20 November 2022].

8   Sato 2004, 339–341.

9   The most famous example would be the TV-series or anime Astro Boy (JP 1963–1966). After his untimely death, the boy Tenma is reborn as an android with extreme powers, granted by technology.

10   Saito 2020, 153.

11   Tatsumi contends that through the fusion of multiple Western concepts as well as an original philosophical and cultural tradition within Japan, the country within (US-)fiction has become an "globalist theme park" (2006, 177), a playground for things and concepts to collide, stripped of their cultural and historical context. While this might be true for at least US-cyberpunk fictions, one should be wary of making any essentialist claims over any cultural space.

my argument about religiously connoted cyber-transcendence in Western cyberpunk and postmodernist theory. Subsequently, I will analyze classic cyberpunk anime to explore how cyber-transcendence is visually portrayed and the implications that arise from Japan's non-Western context.

Transcendence in Western Cyberpunk: A Postmodern Necessity?

Undoubtedly, elements of religion(s) or spiritual connotations exist in cyberpunk fiction. Gibson's novel *Neuromancer*, considered one of cyberpunk's foundational texts alongside Blade Runner, prominently features Japanese names, words, and corporate labels. The novel concludes its narrative with the merging of two immensely powerful AIs, Neuromancer and Wintermute, forming an entity or even deity that appears to be omnipresent and omnipotent within the virtual realm of the Internet, which is cyberspace. Gibson's subsequent novel *Count Zero* (1986) contains numerous godlike entities within cyberspace who seem to have followed the AIs' fusion and now spawn religious movements. They guide the technology-infused girl Angie towards a certain kind of fulfillment or even salvation. In the final novel, *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988), a new cyberspace emerges, not bound by earthly human technology but situated in an alien galaxy, presenting a new ontological sphere. In this sense, all three novels close with a notion of transcendence in relation to technology, creating a space that transcends and surpasses the familiar reality. However, the narratives do not provide definitive closure but rather evoke a sense of new endeavors that lead further away from the dystopian settings. In this sense, cyber-transcendence represents a realm that explicitly surpasses the dystopian world through technology, encouraging us to hope and wonder. I argue that this quality can also be found in religion, particularly in Christianity.

Accordingly, one of the most well-known cyberpunk movies, The Matrix (the Wachowskis, US 1999), contains a multitude of religious and spiritual connotations. Biblical names and terms like Nebuchadnezzar, Trinity or Zion permeate the narrative, which itself could be labelled as religious: Neo and his comrades often make a pilgrimage to the Oracle, who seems to possess insights into a particular kind of truth, despite being a machine and, therefore, an enemy to humans. Furthermore, scholars have identified traces of Buddhism and Japanese Shinto in the movie, which is not surprising consid-

ering the strong influence of the anime Kōkaku Kidōtai (Ghost in the Shell, Mamoru Oshii, JP 1995) on the Wachowskis' work.[12]

The main plot of The Matrix's revolves around the search for truth behind a seemingly false material reality, resonating with metaphysical concepts such as Plato's allegory of the cave and Cartesianism in general, emphasizing an ontological divide between here/there, I/you, inside/outside, and, of course, truth/appearance. Yet the narrative of the entire Matrix trilogy does not reach a definite resolution but rather hints at a form of transcendence through the image of a metaphysical-seeming sunrise, which serves as the conclusion of the third movie, Matrix Revolutions (the Wachowskis, USA 2003). This positively denoted image can be read as a metaphor for hope or a fresh start, suggesting that the war between humans and machines miraculously has come to an end. It possesses a transcendent quality because the sunrise seems to surpass the immanent struggles of war and alludes to a realm that lies beyond, albeit without any specific definition. Neo's role as a savior within the technological realm of the Matrix appears to form the foundation of this cyber-transcendence. Yet again, the open end suggests an ongoing endeavor. The catharsis appears to lie elsewhere, in a new story, in a new beginning.

Both narrative complexes mentioned here seem unable to find closure because the realm of transcendence is never explicitly defined. Gözen, drawing on the work of numerous scholars, argues that cyberpunk fiction is closely tied to postmodernism.[13] Jean-François Lyotard famously argued that the perhaps predominant feature of postmodernism is its loss of "grand narratives" like religion, which provide meaning or sense.[14] This loss is also apparent in the theories of Marshall McLuhan and Jean Baudrillard, traces of which Gözen finds in cyberpunk fiction. Within the scope of this article, the theories can merely be briefly touched upon and extremely simplified:

McLuhan contends that media shape human conduct and, therefore, reality. Following the eras of oral transition, manuscripts, and then book printing, now the age of electricity arises. Electricity, along with the data transfer it enables, leads to the collapse of space and time. While humanity expanded rapidly in physical space, electricity creates a global network of data, resulting in the compression of the world into a "global village".

12 Gramatikov/Zimmermann 2013, 290–291.
13 Gözen 2012, 34–39, 267–269.
14 Lyotard 1985, 37.

Concepts such as nationalism and individualism subsequently fade. McLuhan argues that the restructuring of experience through this new medium inevitably engenders a certain conservatism, as old ways offer certainty amid the growing uncertainty of the new.[15] This supports my assertion that cyberpunkesque deconstruction and the erosion of established structures may prompt a need for (re-)affirmation in times of uncertainty.

According to Baudrillard, there has been a shift in the relationship between the signifier and the signified from the Renaissance to the Industrial Revolution and finally to the age of simulation. In the Renaissance, nature served as a reference for signification. However, during the industrial era, production became the reference for new production, rendering nature unnecessary as a source of truth. In the age of simulation, information signs signify new signs without any connection to a reference. Instead, signs themselves construct reality, rather than representing it. As a result, there is no fixed form of reality.[16] Consequently, as asserted by Gözen, "physical as well as metaphysical reference systems ultimately disappear. Signs do not refer to contents or reasons but rather to surfaces and to themselves. Meaning and differences, critique, reason and concepts like good and evil disappear."[17]

The disappearing of meaning can also be observed in the theories of postmodernist philosopher Frederic Jameson, who considers "depthlessness" as one of the significant characteristics of postmodernism. In hyper-capitalist consumer society, everything becomes style and commodity, lacking historical roots and remaining superficial.[18] Jameson contends,

> Now reference and reality disappear altogether, and even meaning – the signified – is problematized. We are left with that pure and random play of signifiers that we call postmodernism, which no longer produces monumental works of the modernist type but ceaselessly reshuffles the fragments of preexistent texts, the building blocks of older cultural and social production, in some new and heightened bricolage: metabooks which cannibalize other books, metatexts which collate bits of other texts.[19]

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15 McLuhan 2011; Gözen 2012, 220–223.
16 Baudrillard 1991, 77–120; Gözen 2012, 270–278.
17 Gözen 2012, 276, translation mine.
18 Jameson 1991, 6, 9, 12, 20.
19 Jameson 1991, 96.

Given the close connection between cyberpunk fiction and postmodernism, the absence of meaning in an uncertain reality can be considered a notable characteristic of the genre. As a result, the lack of meaning, stemming from capitalist superficiality and depthlessness, appears to be countered by a quest for something meaningful: a (cyber-)transcendent truth.

The renowned Protestant theologian Paul Tillich employed the term "depth" to counter a shallow and superficial way of life. According to Tillich, existential questions of meaning – concerning the origins and purpose of one's existence, and how to negate the limited time given – are questions that delve into the dimension of depth. The loss of this depth leads to a superficiality that fails to address these profound questions about life. Tillich argues that the dimension of depth is a religious dimension, but not confined to a specific religion like Christianity. Rather, the nature of religion is "the being of the human, insofar as one considers the meaning of one's life and existence in general".[20] This dimension of depth can be considered a distinctive aspect of religion in itself. Therefore, the phenomenon of cyber-transcendence in cyberpunk can be seen as an expression of a religiously understood dimension of depth, countering a postmodernist loss of sense and meaning.

The soteriological quality attributed to technology might be traced back to the profound impact that the growing prominence of technology had on everyday life in the 1980s. In his *Time Magazine* article from 1983 "A New World Dawns", Roger Rosenblatt credited the computer with liberating attributes, enabling a departure from the constraints of industrialization.[21] Consequently, it is reasonable that technology, both in science fiction as a whole and specifically in cyberpunk, is often linked to religious elements, offering the promise of catharsis and even salvation.

This aligns with the heterogenous movement of transhumanism, which actively emphasizes the positive role of technology for humanity. Transhumanism seeks to enhance and augment the human body through practical applications of bio- and nanotechnology, envisioning a new level of humanity and even evolution. Some transhumanists aim to overcome mortality through concepts like mind uploading or at least extend a healthy existence to the greatest extent possible.[22] The themes of enhancement

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20 Tillich 1962, 8, translation mine. See also Tillich 2015, 51–61.
21 Rosenblatt 1983.
22 Sorgner 2021, 9–12.

and altering human subjects through technology permeate cyberpunk narratives. Theologian Elaine L. Graham argues that transhumanism perceives "science as salvation", leading to a "religion of technology".[23] Cyberspace then becomes a "sacred place", a "religious place".[24] Similarly, theologian Mark Coeckelbergh suggests that transhumanism grapples with what Tillich referred to as the "ultimate concern": the concepts of finality and death. In attempting to conquer death or at least extend human lifespan, transhumanism's engagement with technology could be characterized as religious.[25] The presence of transhumanist themes in cyberpunk, therefore, may account for the phenomenon of cyber-transcendence.

However, in cyberpunk worlds, technological advancements often lead to postmodernist alienation instead of liberation within hyper-capitalist environments. In this regard, cyberpunk fiction aligns with the theoretical discourse of critical posthumanism, which challenges the humanist ideal of an autonomous and essentialist subject by examining humanity's interactions with technology.[26] Critical posthumanism is an academic movement that deconstructs structures of discrimination. Transhumanism wants evolution, posthumanism aims to deconstruct. In cyberpunk's hyper-capitalist worlds, technological deconstruction of the autonomous subject is accompanied by various socioeconomic dependencies, resulting in ongoing discrimination. Cyberpunk, in this sense, should be understood as a criticism of the system without providing solutions. As technology alone cannot bring about salvation within the immanent realm, another layer – the "dimension of religion" and transcendence – is attributed to technology.

Graham further argues that the worldview of transhumanism, which posits that technology brings progress and salvation, implies a kind of religion of technology and ascribes a sense of sublimity to technology.[27] Many theorists, according to Graham, claim that there is a "will for *transcendence* of the flesh as an innate and universal trait".[28] This desire can be linked to the Platonic or Cartesian ideals of rationality. Consequently, this understanding leads to the notion of cyberspace as a realm of pure information devoid of

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23 Graham 2002, 155.
24 Graham 2002, 169.
25 Coeckelbergh 2018, 83.
26 Ranisch/Sorgner 2014, 8.
27 Graham 2002, 155.
28 Graham 2002, 165, italics Graham's.

the body. Therein Graham sees an affirmation of a "culture of death" that prevails in Western tradition.[29] The concept of the autonomous-essentialist subject, whose soul can transcend the physical body, is deeply rooted in Western culture and Christianity, but it may not hold the same sway in non-Western contexts.[30] While Japan is recognized as a technologically progressive cultural environment in everyday life, Japan scholar Jaqueline Berndt refers to the observations of Japanese literary critic Naoyo Fujitsu, who asserts that the discourse of Japanese science fiction, in comparison to the North American, does not share transhumanism's techno-euphoria aiming for immortality.[31] Therefore, it is worth exploring how cyber-transcendence is constructed in non-Western cyberpunk anime narratives.

Japanese Cyberpunk: Transcendence as the Collapse of Borders

If we consider that Japanese cyberpunk, including cyberpunk anime, is intertwined with the themes of US cyberpunk, it is reasonable to expect some traces of the Western postmodern condition and its lack of meaning in Japanese cyberpunk as well. This assumption is supported by Takayuki Tatsumi's observation that the portrayal of Japan in Gibson's *Neuromancer* may have been a misperception, but "it was this misperception that encouraged Japanese readers to correctly perceive the nature of postmodernist Japan".[32] Tatsumi, in particular, has argued that the postmodern condition, as seen and developed within the Western cultural sphere and cyberpunk fiction, resonates with the cultural environment of Japan, which he describes as a "semiotic ghost country".[33] This notion captures the condition of signifiers being detached from their original context, resulting in meaninglessness and depthlessness as described by Jameson.

I will now closely examine how cyber-transcendence, along with its religious dimension of depth, is visually portrayed in cyberpunk anime. To do so, I will focus on three classic cyberpunk anime: Mamoru Oshii's famous GHOST

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29 Graham 2002, 172, 231.
30 Sato 2004, 339.
31 Berndt 2020, 412.
32 Tatsumi 2006, 111.
33 Tatsumi 2006, 47.

IN THE SHELL, as it strongly influenced the Wachowskis' creation of THE MATRIX; Katsuhiro Otomo's AKIRA (JP 1988); and Ryūtarō Nakamura's series SERIAL EXPERIMENTS LAIN (TV Tokyo, JP 1996). It will become evident that the Western aesthetic category of the sublime is employed to invoke a sense of transcendence, and this category appears to resonate with concepts within the Japanese cultural environment and religion. Notions of an immanent spirituality, distinct from Western traditions of transcendence, will become apparent.

GHOST IN THE SHELL (1995)

The protagonist of the movie is Motoko Kusanagi, chief of police unit section 9. Only her brain remains organic, as the rest of her body has been completely cyberized, and even her brain has been technologically enhanced, making her a "full body cyborg". This grants her superhuman abilities, but also increases her socio-economic dependencies, for example on her employer: if she were to quit her job, she would have to give back classified memories that are crucial for her sense of identity. The uncertainty regarding the composition of what she calls her "essential core" and the question of her humanity lead to an existential crisis.

An encounter with Puppetmaster, a weapons program that gained self-awareness in the Net, offers a solution. Through merging with Puppetmaster, Kusanagi undergoes a transformation, becoming a new being with seemingly limitless access to the Net, thereby liberating herself from bodily and socio-economic constraints. Thus, Kusanagi is technologically granted salvation.

The merger is accompanied by hovering helicopters appearing as angels in Kusanagi's vision, and Puppetmaster is depicted with a halo earlier in the movie (fig. 1).

Consequently, the character has been described as "a Divine Being"[34] or a "Sky God",[35] alluding to the messianic qualities portrayed by Puppetmaster. This is further highlighted by Puppetmaster quoting from 1 Corinthians 13 to Kusanagi in the middle of the movie. For that matter, GHOST IN THE SHELL appears to draw from a Christian religious background and symbolism, which is not surprising considering that director Mamoru Oshii once considered joining a Christian seminary.[36] Unlike other anime that occasionally

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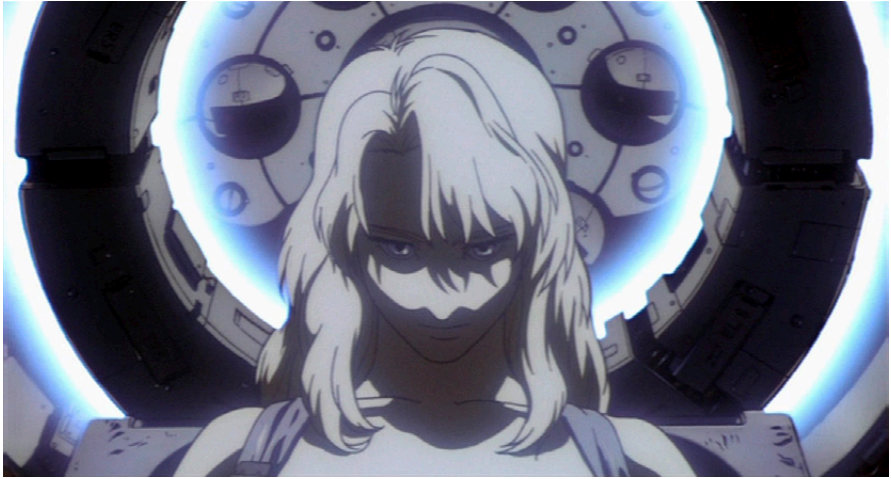34 Gardner 2009, 51.

35 Gardner 2009, 52.

36 Ruh 2004, 9, 134–137.

Fig. 1: Puppetmaster appearing as spiritual being through a halo-like lamp in behind, Gʜᴏꜱᴛ ɪɴ ᴛʜᴇ Sʜᴇʟʟ (Mamoru Oshii, JP 1995), 00:47:36.

employ Christian references for exoticism or marketing purposes, Brian Ruh argues, Oshii utilizes Christian symbolism as a serious tool for exploring deeper character developments in his films.[37] The technological life form Puppetmaster is thus endowed with transcendent qualities connected to Christian concepts.

However, notions of Shinto can be found in the anime too. Shinto is widely recognized as the indigenous religion of Japan, characterized by animistic and de-anthropocentric concepts. However, it is important to note that the categorization of Shinto as a distinct religion emerged in the 19th century, primarily for the purpose of constructing a national identity, particularly in contrast to religious and philosophical concepts from the West. Prior to this categorization, the boundaries between Buddhism, Confucianism, and various Shinto practices were not always clearly delineated. In 1868, Shinto was politically institutionalized as the national religion. Today, concepts and practices of Shinto are not limited to Japan but have spread globally. Shinto is understood as a socio-religious framework within the Japanese cultural environment and has gained recognition in other parts of the world as well.[38]

37   Ruh 2004, 52–53.
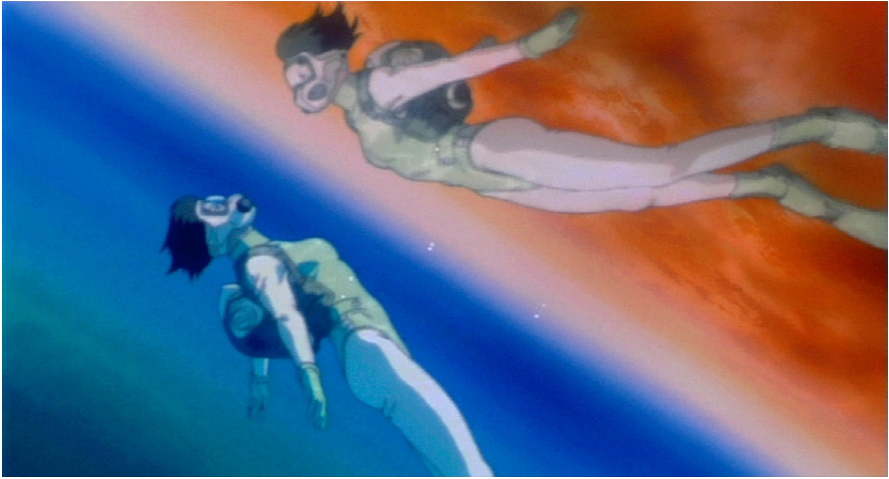38   Rots 2017, 29–45; Shimada 2000, 137–150.

Fig. 2: Kusanagi breaking the ocean's surface from below, Ghost in the Shell (Mamoru Oshii, JP 1995), 00:27:18.

The initial sequence of the movie incorporates a multitude of references to Shinto. As the construction of Kusanagi as a cyborg is depicted, the accompanying music includes elements reminiscent of traditional Shinto music with the instruments *kagura zuzu* and *wakaido*. The *kagura zuzu* is a short staff with twelve bells that is used at dances and with shrine music. *Wakaido* are traditional Japanese drums that in the movie prominently make their way into the acoustic foreground of the song. Both instruments are tied to "Shinto rituals used for spiritual worship", and Andre Malhado argues that these instruments add a "mystic veil" to the construction of Kusanagi as a cyborg.[39] Additionally, the lyrics describe a wedding in Old Japanese.[40] Other instances of Shinto symbolism are apparent throughout the movie: Kusanagi's white bathing suit aligns with Shinto's color symbol for purity (fig. 2).

The sequence can be seen as a *misogi*, "a water-purification ceremony, in which participants also wear traditional white under water".[41] The most important substance in such a ceremony is salt, which can be found in the sea water Kusanagi bathes in. Her reaching the surface of the ocean from the

39 Malhado 2021, 177.
40 Drillmaster/Shindo 2017, 20.
41 Okuyama 2015, 78.

ocean's depth can be interpreted as a symbolic birth or even a baptism. This sequence is also connected to Kusanagi's being a cyborg, since diving puts her in mortal danger because of her weight. Without a certain device she would sink and drown. For that matter, this situation as well as the Shinto symbolism suggest a certain crossing of the border between the physical and transcendence (death). Kusanagi being a technologically altered cyborg is thereby linked to the spiritual and religious context of Shinto.

What makes this anime interesting in terms of cyber-transcendence is not only its clear references and religious symbols. Rather, the movie distinctively suggests a technologically rendered transcendental sphere. Following the analysis of Japan scholar William O. Gardner, the anime creates a "Cyber sublime".[42] The sublime, as an aesthetic category, can be traced back to Immanuel Kant, who described it as the experience of encountering something so vast and incomprehensible that it invokes awe and even terror. This may be a sight of nature that reminds individuals of their own limitations in the world, leading to both admiration and fear. Kant defines the sublime thus: "The feeling of it is sometimes accompanied with some dread or even melancholy, in some cases merely with quiet admiration and in yet others with a beauty spread over a sublime prospect."[43] In the anime, the otherwise invisible data stream that pervades the world is made visible, Gardner argues, by means of the city imagery, resembling Hong Kong, Shanghai, or Tokyo. Its details and vastness would hint at an even richer realm behind it – the data realm which is invoked by the category of the sublime.[44]

Interestingly, the predominant direction of view in the movie is from bottom to top. The characters, and viewers with them, stand on the ground, looking up to the sky and the somewhat fading skyscrapers, which seem strangely clean and futuristic in contrast to the detailed and somewhat dirty ground level (fig. 3).

The construction of those sequences inspires contemplation and awe for the upper sphere, which thus gains significance as a sphere of the *longed-for*, the *hoped-for*, the sphere one seeks to *escape to*. Often featuring a bright, sky and tiny figures shown from behind in front of the immense over-structures, the movie's aesthetics can be connected to those of 19th-century

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42 Gardner 2009, 45.

43 Kant 2011, 16.

44 Gardner 2009, 45–50.

Fig. 3: The city's dirty and detailed ground level in front of futuristic skyscrapers, Gʜᴏsᴛ ɪɴ ᴛʜᴇ Sʜᴇʟʟ (Mamoru Oshii, JP 1995), 00:33:54.

Romanticist paintings. In the era of industrialization, there was a desire for nature and for some mystic unification with the world in contrast to the rapidly growing rationalization of the emerging industrial production. After the Enlightenment, there was an absence of satisfying concepts of meaning outside of religion, and a longing for and mystification of nature seem to have emerged because of it. Many of Romanticism's paintings show depictions of nature, occasionally with human figures from the back, contemplating the overwhelming existence they find themselves in.[45] Most famous, perhaps, are the paintings of German painter Caspar David Friedrich like *Felsenriff am Meeresstrand* (1924, *Rocky Reef on the Beach*) or *Der Mönch am Meer* (1808–1810, *The Monk at the Sea*). Sometimes, even metaphysical beings like angels appear, as in Thomas Coles' *The Voyage of Life: Old Age* (1842). All of these paintings are united by a quality of the sublime as described by Kant. Through this aesthetic resemblance to Romanticist paintings, Gʜᴏsᴛ ɪɴ ᴛʜᴇ Sʜᴇʟʟ succeeds in creating a sublime experience, an awe- and terror-invoking feeling towards the sphere of the data realm that invisibly lies behind the detailed sceneries of the film's city, New Harbor.

This longing for something beyond the immanent can be connected to the Western notion of transcendence and is invoked by the category of the
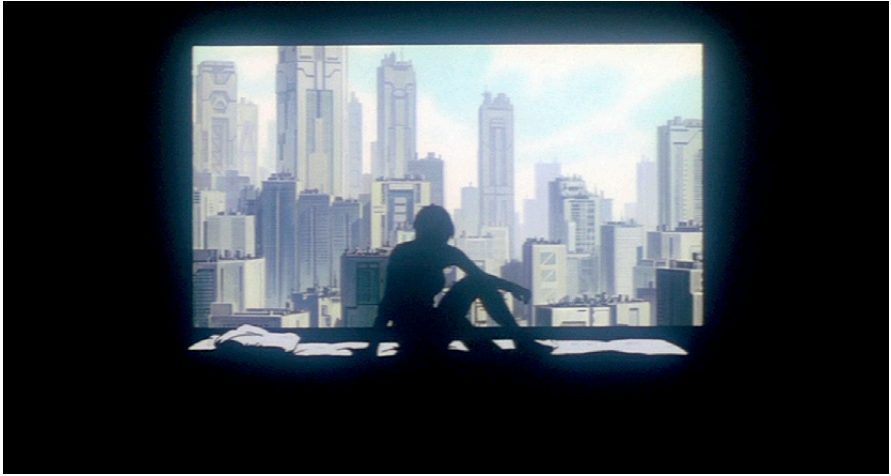
45 Gorodeisky 2016.

Fig. 4: Kusanagi contemplating the high-rise city buildings, Ghost in the Shell (Mamoru Oshii, JP 1995), 00:07:22.

sublime. This is most strikingly visible in Kusanagi's blacked-out flat, where she contemplates the distant city and sky (fig.4).

Her silhouette enhances the sublimity of the cityscape, for, as media scholar Thomas Lamarre argues, silhouettes emphasize the background.[46] The upper city and the sky become the objects of Kusanagi's (and the viewer's) Romanticist longing. In this sense, I agree with Gardner's analysis. Furthermore, just as Romanticist paintings mystify and perhaps even deify nature by evoking experiences of the sublime, the aesthetic resemblance in Ghost in the Shell allows for the assertion that the sphere of the data realm gains significance as a transcendent realm with even eschatological qualities. The data realm, visualized through the upper sphere of the city and its envoy Puppetmaster, thus become a religious space, a place of cyber-transcendence.

It must be stressed that the concept of the awe-inspiring sublime is something that can be found within the Japanese cultural environment as well, specifically in the Shinto concept of *kami* (deities). Thomas P. Kasulis observes that "the word *kami* refers to any wondrous, awe-inspiring presence in whatever form, regardless of whether it is beneficial or harmful to humans".[47] According to Kasulis, the concept of awe of the world remains at the very

46 Lamarre 2009, 18.
47 Kasulis 2018, 52, emphasis in the original.

core of Shinto and cannot be reduced by reason; instead "the awesome must be accepted as part of the world in which we live".[48] As a result, *kami* are intertwined with the natural and spiritual world, making a clear distinction between these realms seemingly impossible.[49] It is also the reason why I argue that the awe-inspiring character of the *kami*, entangled with the entire world, resembles the Kantian concept of the sublime. Therefore, the notion of the sublime in Romanticism, and even the idea of transcendence evoked by the sublimity of nature, can be found in the beliefs of Shinto. In this regard, the existence of Japanese paintings from the 13th century that praise the spirituality of nature in accordance with Shinto beliefs does not come as a surprise.[50]

In GHOST IN THE SHELL, Shinto practices are connected to visible actions, such as Kusanagi's diving or her initial construction, because Shinto focuses on awe *within* the world. By linking the protagonist to the realm of the spiritual, her longing to escape the immanent sphere becomes apparent. Shinto, however, does not provide a concept of surpassing the immanent world; instead, it emphasizes connection to it.[51] Christianity, by contrast, strongly proclaims a transcendent sphere that is superior to the immanent one. This may explain why Puppetmaster, as an envoy of the data realm that promises salvation from socio-economic dependencies, is attributed with references to Christianity. Transcendence, as clearly ontologically distinct from immanence, is not a concept upheld within Shinto.

Further, Kusanagi herself does not achieve such liberation. Similar to THE MATRIX or *Neuromancer*, the anime offers an open end that suggests that in attaining the sphere of cyber-transcendence, Kusanagi has found a way out of her identity crisis. She is somehow liberated from socio-economic dependencies. Her new form is that of a child, with her brain containing the fused identity of Kusanagi and the Puppetmaster transferred into a new cybernetic body. The final sequence shows her standing over the vast expanse of the city, stating, "The Net is vast" (fig. 5).

Thus, in connection with the experience of the sublimity of its vastness and in contrast to the oppressive immanent sphere, the transcendent quality of the Net is ultimately established. It can be argued that access to the Net resembles an act of salvation, since it is provided by Puppetmaster and

48 Kasulis 2004, 12.
49 Kasulis 2018, 53.
50 Violet 1984, 119–120.
51 Kasulis 2004, 165–167.

Fig. 5: Kusanagi, as child, standing over the vast expanse of the city, Ghost in the Shell (Mamoru Oshii, JP 1995), 01:14:21.

not achieved by Kusanagi herself. This contradicts the transhumanist pursuit of enhancement, as it is based on humanity's own capabilities. Kusanagi, however, is unable to overcome her identity crisis on her own.

Finally, this transcendence still appears to be grounded within the immanent realm. While Kusanagi/Puppetmaster is not transferred to a disembodied realm but remains in a corporeal form, overseeing the city from an elevated perspective yet still embedded within the urban structure, the notion of transcendence in Ghost in the Shell seems to differ from that of Western cyberpunk. In contrast to The Matrix and *Neuromancer*, where transcendence appears to be detached from the immanent capitalist sphere, in Ghost in the Shell, Kusanagi/Puppetmaster is thrown right back into it.

AKIRA (1988)

Akira is widely regarded as the anime that paved the way for anime's global recognition as a medium, also for an adult audience. With its blatant violence and complex storyline, it opposes the traditional Western view of animation as media for children.[52] The story revolves around the teenage boys Kaneda and Tetsuo. The latter, through technological experiments, gains supernatu-

52   Napier 2005, 5; Furniss 2017, 393.

Fig. 6: Mother Miyako and her followers preaching in the streets, Akira (Katsuhiro Otomo, JP 1988), 00:42:58.

ral powers, which ultimately lead to an epic display of destruction. Religion also plays a role in the narrative. Most notably, the character Mother Miyako symbolizes Shinto practices in the movie, evident through her white Shinto priest attire (fig. 6). Her fellowship appears to be technophobic, advocating for a "back to the roots" approach to attain some form of salvation from the otherwise dystopian scenario portrayed in the film. Clearly, the religious followers perceive technological progress as a potential threat.

Tetsuo, along with the titular character Akira, gains his telekinetic powers through military technological experiments on children. However, the children become uncontrollable, and Tetsuo rebels against his former handlers in an anarchistic manner, as there seems to be no place in society for him or other teenagers. The movie culminates in ultimate destruction caused by Tetsuo and Akira, reminiscent of the atomic catastrophes of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Nevertheless, the ending is not devoid of hope, as a new world or universe emerges from the annihilation, promising a brighter future or, at the very least, a place for Tetsuo and others like him. In this sense, technology, even when beyond human control, appears to hold the potential for a new future and perhaps even salvation for the otherwise despairing society of young people.

Theologian Franz Winter argues that the manga *Akira*, with its similar story, captures the overall apocalyptic expectations of the 1980s while also

Fig. 7: Destruction caused by Tetsuo and Akira, resembling a nuclear catastrophe, Akira (Katsuhiro Otomo, JP 1988), 01:51:07.

offering salvation in the end.[53] Winter suggests that Japan's economic success can be attributed to the working ethic of the Japanese population, but comes at a cost. In the 1980s, a younger generation broke away from the work ethic of the older one.[54] Susan J. Napier contents that Japan's dominant economic rise in the 1980s and the significance of technology, which is connected to the postwar growth of the country, in Akira reflect a newfound self-confidence towards the formerly dominant Western world.[55] The techno-phobia of the traditional Shinto religion, as depicted in Akira, fails to provide a solution to the sense of the apocalyptic. Instead, technology presents a new world. Accordingly, as we see Mother Miyako and her followers sliding down to death as the city is destroyed by Tetsuo's superhuman powers, her claim dissipates with her.

It is the destruction that stands out the most in Akira (fig. 7). Its detailed animation has been the object of multiple inquires,[56] especially the richness of

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53 Winter 2018, 204. Winter refers to Napier 2005, 39–48.

54 Winter 2018, 202.

55 Napier 1993, 336–351.

56 Most prominently, the anime has been analyzed by US-scholars Susan J. Napier and Christopher Bolton: Bolton 2014; Napier 1993; Napier 2005, 39–48.

details in the collapsing buildings and the multitude of figures moving through the frames, which is still astonishing. I argue that this richness of destruction functions in a similar manner to the detailed city in GHOST IN THE SHELL, as discussed by Gardner. Likewise, the sheer size of the falling buildings and the overwhelming apocalyptic scenario succeed in evoking the feeling of the sublime. It is a terror that one might feel, and it is awe-inspiring because of the detailed animation, which does not allow for one to grasp everything all at once.

In combination with the cathartic end of the movie, the destruction that has led to this outcome serves as a signifier for the disruptive potential of the new, which is technology. In AKIRA, technology is a tool owned and embraced by the younger generation, enabling them to escape the older, more static, and more rigid societal norms. The new, however, is not located within society. Rather, it is placed in a new ontological realm, which is cyber-transcendence, invoked through a sense of terror and awe. Drawing a connection to the concept of the awe-inspiring *kami*, as argued by Kasulis, both the destruction and the creation of the new universe are attributed godlike qualities.

SERIAL EXPERIMENTS LAIN (1996)

This moment of awe is explicit in the cyberpunk anime series SERIAL EXPERIMENTS LAIN too. The narrative focuses on the ontological difference between the real world and the virtual world. A human man becomes the god of the latter by digitizing his consciousness. However, as the series later discloses, there seems to be a "real God", portrayed as the father figure of the protagonist, a young girl called Lain (fig. 8). This God appears to be present not

Fig. 8: Lain together with her father (God) in a transcendent-seeming space, SERIAL EXPERIMENTS LAIN (TV Tokyo, JP 1996), episode 13, 00:17:55.

only within the real or the virtual world but everywhere. It is this God who finally reassures Lain of her own existence, which she doubts as she appears to be merely a program.

The series delves into the complex interaction between the virtual and real world and explores the immersive influences the virtual has on the real. By questioning whether the real is only an instantiation of information already present in the Net, the series reverses the usually established hierarchy of the real over the virtual. This leads to a complete collapse of meaning, as Lain cannot be certain what it means to exist in the first place. Like Kusanagi in Ghost in the Shell, Lain questions her own existence. However, the collapse of the virtual and the real further results in her questioning the very nature of reality itself. Nothing seems to be real anymore, as all foundations for certainty are lost. Yet again, assurance is provided by a deity: in the final episode, as Lain experiences her worst identity crisis, a voice reaches out to her and says, "Come to me!" Lain is then shown at the bottom of the frame, bathed in a bright orange light emanating from above (fig. 9).

She then encounters "God" in the form of her father. The sequence of Lain engulfed in light once again evokes the feeling of the sublime and awe, emphasized by the smallness of her figure in the frame. The light, resembling patterns of the Northern Lights, conjures associations to nature and the sense of something greater than oneself. This can be connected to compositions prevalent in Romanticism and the ever-present awe-inspiring *kami*.

However, it is one deity that ultimately leads Lain to salvation. Serial Experiments Lain, in this sense, most strongly suggests a godly revelation in the Christian sense through the figure of the father and God's invitation to come

Fig. 9: Lain being called upon from above, Serial Experiments Lain (TV Tokyo, JP 1996), episode 13, 00:17:33.

to him. In an interview, screenwriter Chiaki J. Konaka stated that he was raised in an Anglican household but does not regard himself as a Christian.[57] Thus, it can be argued that the knowledge of Christian concepts Konaka supposedly possesses has had a strong impact on the conceptualization of the series' narrative. In the series, however, God transcends also the virtual, encompassing all, which includes Lain, who indeed appears to be a program. Her final position within the world remains unclear at the end of the series. Lain seems to exist neither within the physical nor in the transcendent realm. The boundaries have collapsed for her, suggesting a more immanent account.

Concluding and Critical Remarks

All three anime offer different accounts of cyber-transcendence while employing the aesthetic category of the sublime, resembling 19th-century Romanticism and the *kami* of Shinto, to achieve this. Furthermore, notions of Christianity can also be found intertwined within the narratives. This may be related to the personal interests of Mamoru Ohsii and Chiaki J. Konaka, both of whom became acquainted with Christian concepts earlier in their lives. What all anime have in common is the goal of eluding the postmodernist society. All characters seem to strive for meaning and a dimension of depth which, according to Tillich, can be regarded as a sphere of religion. Cyber-transcendence, in this sense, seems to be something which can offer such meaning. The transhumanist endeavor to enhance humanity ultimately cannot offer salvation, as the protagonists cannot intentionally reach whatever they long for. Instead, technology gains self-awareness or autonomy, offering salvation and maybe even evolution, with humanity no longer at the center of things.

The narratives nonetheless differ in important ways: Ghost in the Shell concludes with the protagonist reaching the seemingly transcendent realm, only to be reintegrated into society again, albeit in a different position. Akira's transcendence, by contrast, exists outside of the old realm, signifying a process of growth and evolution. Further, while Ghost in the Shell incorporates notions of Shinto, Akira explicitly abandons them. Therefore, Akira's transcendence can be considered closely tied to a Western understanding of transcendence as something external. Like Ghost in the Shell and Serial

57 Seraphita 2015.

Experiments Lain, clearly exhibiting notions of Christian transcendence, Akira also presents the idea of surpassing the immanent sphere. Apart from its potential exotic appeal to Japanese audiences, the Christian concept of surpassing the immanent sphere proves useful in countering the entanglement of immanent and transcendence as traditionally understood in Shinto. Serial Experiments Lain, similar to Ghost in the Shell, focuses on the crisis of the individual in the postmodernist and technologized world. Still, the series does not recognize technology as the means to salvation and to transcendence. As Lain's whereabouts remain unclear, the series seems to favor an intertwining of transcendence and immanence, leading to a more relational ontology.

As Coeckelbergh suggests, an immanent spirituality may be better suited to addressing the problems that arise in an increasingly technologized world.[58] Simultaneously, Graham proposes that equating religion with transcendence presents a problem.[59] If the religious realm is solely one of transcendence, then religious immanent practices may seem insignificant. However, religion cannot be understood solely as something transcendent. We may think of rituals, of prayers, of going to a church or temple or shrine, of the feeling of the sublime when we walk within nature, or of the feeling of safety when we are near our loved ones.

In a certain sense, religiously connoted cyber-transcendence functions as a literal *deus ex machina*. Rather than solving or overcoming problems, it simply allows them to be cast aside, resembling escapism as seen in Akira. By completely abandoning the existing immanent sphere and linking salvation to a transcendent realm, struggles of alienation and shallowness cannot be truly resolved, but are merely set aside.

And yet, Ghost in the Shell and Serial Experiment Lain hint at a religious quality that is focused not entirely on a transcendent realm, but also on ongoing interaction and relations within the immanent sphere of society. The concept of the sublime, which can be understood as equivalent to the ever-present awe- and terror-invoking *kami*, portrays cyber-transcendence as a sphere that both humbles humanity's position and calls for an interactive engagement. Only then can a dimension of depth be attained, encompassing not only "the being of the human, insofar as one considers the meaning of one's life and existence in general",[60] but also "becoming" in general.

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58 Coeckelbergh 2018, 88.
59 Graham 2002, 174.
60 Tillich 1962, 8, translation mine.

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