Chapter 3

Metamodernity, American Transcendentalism and Transhumanism in Japanese Anime

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ABSTRACT: Recent theorists of cultural studies have noticed the emergence of metamodernity as an ideal type, categorized by an oscillation between postmodern deconstructivism and modern idealism, into a form of transcendentalism. I argue in this chapter that this type of transcendentalism, informed by the historical American Transcendentalist Movement, is the emerging ideal called "Transhumanism". I use a case study of five Japanese anime to demonstrate how transhumanist, metamodernist, and transcendental thinking often recur in key core plot points and narratives found within. I further suggest that meditation on the major themes in these anime, especially those of metamodernity and transhumanism, is necessary if we are to understand our place in the world today and into the future.[1]

KEYWORDS: American Transcendentalism, Anime, Ergo Proxy, Hegemony, Metamodernity, Meta-Subjectivity, Neon Genesis Evangelion, Psycho-Pass, Serial Experiments Lain, Sword Art Online, Transcendentalism, Transhumanism.

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Introduction

Anime, or Japanese television and film animation, is rich with examples of transhumanist thinking. Mostly found in the science fiction genre, these examples of metamodernist transcendental imagination often are pervaded

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by an undertone of dystopian reality, an enslavement of the subjective self in favor of the emerging collective individuation, and a rapture from the human condition.

While many may think of *The Matrix* as the seminal example of this major thrust in the popular imagination, it appears as though Japanese culture has been an early adopter of a critical stance towards utopian technocracy—which is largely headed by the technofascist social-engineering class universal—to the statist world hegemony (called by some algorithmic governmentality).[2]

While transcendental thinking has been explored at length through literature related to the American Transcendentalist Movement, and its logical predecessor in European Romanticism, there is a new emerging transcendental epistemology. This new type of extremely transcendental logic has developed in relation to syncretic East/West international culture and manifests metamodernist idealistic incarnations of the neoliberal world order. I argue that this unique type of transcendental thinking is found at the syncretic core of the metamodern popular culture and mass media (hegemony)—through pop culture (e.g. anime), the internet and virtual reality—as reflected in Japanese culture. I will use a case study of five anime to demonstrate this. Transhumanism is the best term to capture the essence of these ideas reflected in these anime.

Transhumanism

There is undoubtedly a rich historical background influencing the contemporary discourse surrounding the term "transhumanism". I define "transhumanism" as "the aspiration of a socio-ontological bodily human individual to a state of transcendence through technological advancement". This type of thinking is not new to human epistemology.[3] Indeed, it was quite prevalent in Renaissance humanist ideology, Pietist discourse in Early Modern Swabia (which influenced Hegel[4]), the pursuit of secular reason and human advancement in the Enlightenment, the early Industrial Revolution and the Luddite movement (negative example), early 2000s social engineering, otaku

[2] Antoinette Rouvroy, "La Gouvernementalité Algorithmique: Radicalisation et Stratégie Immunitaire du Capitalisme et du Néolibéralisme?", *La Deleuziana* 3 (2016), 30-36; Fatemeh Savaedi and Maryam Alva Nia, "<null> me <null>: Algorithmic Governmentality and the Notion of Subjectivity in Project Itoh's Harmony", *Journal of Science Fiction and Philosophy* 4 (2021): 1-19.

[3] David Noble, *The Religion of Technology* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1997).

[4] Glenn Alexander Magee, *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

culture (reality as a large database).[5] Nothing new here, only a *new application*. In this contemporary metamodernist epistemology, AI, alternate or virtual reality, internet culture and computer programming are emphasized as the vessel by which the human epistemology is taken into a "higher" plane of reality.

The first terminological innovations broaching the topic of transhumanism, such as "posthumanism", were explored in the Josiah Macy Foundation conferences on cybernetics held in New York City from 1946-1953.[6] The term "transhumanism" itself was coined in 1957 by Julian Huxley, who focused on "realizing the inherent potentialities in man".[7] This terminology was later taken up by philosophers such as Bostrom, More, Vita-More and Kurzweil, who sought to define an all-encompassing epistemology.[8] Operating under the framework of "Humanity Plus" (or H+) and "Extropy", they, among others, founded the World Transhumanist Association in 1998.[9] They then released the "Transhumanist Statement" in several iterations. They rewrote it twice after its initial release in 1998, once in 2008, and once more in 2020.[10] Emphases of these manifestos and their associated framework are the extensions of the human lifespan artificially, the eradication of disease, the elimination of suffering, the augmentation of human intellectual, physical and emotional capabilities, space colonization, and super intelligent machines, among others.[11]

There are certainly many critics of this perspective, including philosophers such as Francis Fukuyama and Hava Tirosh-Samuelson. Many cite the inherent threat transhumanism poses to egalitarianism, existential security

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[5] Azuma Hiroki, *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

[6] Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, "Transhumanism as a Secular Faith", *Zygon* 47.4 (Hoboken: Wiley, 2012): 710-34.

[7] Julian Huxley, "Transhumanism", *Ethics in Progress* 6.1 (2015): 12-16.

[8] Nick Bostrom, "Transhumanist Values", in *Ethical Issues for the 21st Century*, ed. Frederick Adams. (Charlottesville: Philosophical Documentation Center Press, 2003), 1-12; Max More, "The Overman in the Transhuman", *Journal of Evolution and Technology* 21.1 (2010): 1-4 and Natasha Vita-More, "Transhumanist Art Statement", *Transhumanist Art* 01st January 1982: https://web.archive.org/web/19980523093459/http://www.extropic-art.com/transart.htm.

[9] Gregory R. Hansell and William Grassie, eds., *H± Transhumanism and Its Critics* (Philadelphia: Metanexus Institute, 2011).

[10] Natasha Vita-More, "The Transhumanist Manifesto", *Humanityplus.org*. (2020): https://www.humanityplus.org/the-transhumanist-manifesto . They renamed it from "statement" to "manifesto".

[11] Bostrom, "Transhumanist Values".

and democratic idealism.[12] They also criticize the project as one seeking to reproduce naïve Enlightenment values of universal rationalization, including utilitarianism. They also point out the contradictory nature of the epistemology itself, e.g., critical cultural transhumanists vs. technologic posthumanists.[13]

Transhumanism is undoubtedly an eschatological epistemology that sees itself as humanity's only hope. However, by unleashing the pandora's box of technological advancement, our species has little choice—but to try to get ahead of it and control the implicit chaos—before it inevitably destroys us (what Verdoux calls "rational capitulationism").[14] There is also little doubt that the ethical underpinnings of this epistemology are hinged on a distinctly utilitarian logic, which has been suggested to be deeply flawed by many thinkers, e.g., Nietzsche thought this was a "slave morality".[15] Finally, transhumanism seems to have a latent fatalism to it—for all its hope for humanity—it is largely an epistemology of fear. The moral urgency of saving lives seems to outweigh any cost—and this is the same type of rhetoric used to justify the War on Terror or the Patriot Act—as well as countless other human rights abuses across history.[16]

Regarding my own perspective, this chapter owes large inheritance to the poststructuralist thinkers of the last five decades, such as Foucault, Derrida, Habermas, Herman and Chomsky, Deleuze and Guattari, among others.[17] They inevitably have a negative view of any ideal, such as transhumanism.

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[12] Cf. Francis Fukuyama, "Transhumanism", *Foreign Policy* 144 (2004): 42-43; Philippe Verdoux, "Transhumanism, Progress and the Future", *Journal of Evolution and Technology* 20.2 (2009): 49-69 and James Hughes, "Contradictions from the Enlightenment Roots of Transhumanism", *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 35.6 (2010): 622-40.

[13] Cf. Tirosh-Samuelson, "Transhumanism as a Secular Faith", 710-34 and Hughes, "Contradictions from the Enlightenment Roots of Transhumanism", 622-40.

[14] Verdoux, "Transhumanism, Progress and the Future", 49-69. Cf. the ethical and pragmatic dilemmas of this predicament in William H. U. Anderson, ed., *Technology and Theology* (Wilmington: Vernon Press, 2020).

[15] Stefan Lorenz Sorgner, "Nietzsche the Overman, and Transhumanism", *Journal of Evolution and Technology* 20.1 (2009): 29-42.

[16] Bostrom, "Transhumanist Values".

[17] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1991); Jacques Derrida, *Rogues* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005); Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1991); Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988) and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

The importance of deconstruction as a method is clear when discussing emerging Weberian ideal types such as transhumanism or metamodernity.[18] As such, this section is largely derived from philosophically informed subjective deconstructivism and its interaction with perceived externality. This method *requires* deep communication only available through the use of personal voice and, at times, colloquial delivery. Thus, an epistemological analysis follows accordingly.

The nature of every socio-philosophical work is derived from the social conditions in which it originated, so subjective epistemology is undoubtedly at work within the formation of this chapter. As such, I am an enacted receptor—Cooley's "looking glass self" or Goffman's "dramaturgical actor"—of the socio-ontological consequences of the neoliberal discursive and linguistic hegemony.[19] Thus reproduces it, albeit in a fragmentary and, perhaps, Gramscian subaltern way.[20]

To the reader, it is an internally processed stimulus from the external, and to the subjective, it is an externalizing measure. Regardless of the extreme consequences of the theory of mind, I must consider this contribution as one mutually shared by hypothetical parties of individuals that form a social constitution of reality. This idea is what I and others have co-developed into the term *meta-subjectivity*, or *the autopoietic production and structuration of social reality through intersubjective discourse and narrativity*.[21]

How can we determine the socio-ontological validity of a definitional coinage such as "transhumanism"? One could argue that it comes down to the *intersubjective agreement* (Hegel) of subjectivities to give recognition through cognitive processes the validity of the existence of an ideal type, or Jungian "archetype".[22] Socio-ontological frameworks are formed precisely through

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[18] Max Weber, *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958).

[19] Charles Horton Cooley, *Human Nature and the Social Order* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1902) and Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Publishing. 1959), respectively.

[20] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, edited and translated by Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: ElecBook, 1999).

[21] Harrison S. Jackson, "*Ex Machina*: Testing Machines for Consciousness and Socio-Relational Machine Ethics", *Journal of Science Fiction and Philosophy* 5 (2022): 1-17; Harrison S. Jackson, "The Carceral Appropriation of Communications Technology Through the Imaginal", *Philosophy and Social Criticism* (Forthcoming).

[22] Cf. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. V. A. Miller. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); Weber, *Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and Carl Jung, *The Archetypes and The Collective Unconscious, Collected Works* Vol. 9. (Princeton: Bollingen. 1981).

these discursive processes of the linguistic reproduction of ideal types—which, of course, often have little bearing on the actual objective nature of reality—or what is "truth" anyway?[23] It most often finds itself impacting the incarnation of human organization, specifically Schmitt's "the political fighting collectivity", meaning the way in which humans organize themselves into collective bodies such as "the community" or "the state".[24] These are higher-ordered socio-ontological beings that determine their own endogamous identities through discursive practices (see Skocpol's state autonomy theory).[25]

The question then becomes: "What is the contemporaneous metamodernist push to define transhumanism?". It is undoubtedly a response to the logical consequences of the neoliberal cultural hegemony and social engineering capital—which manufactures international consent and discursive conformity of all subjectivities—through control of the mode of linguistic domination.[26] Mainly, individual subjectivities have noticed the encroachment of the despotic signifier in especially the field of social surveillance and linguistic reproduction (auto-correct functions and natural language processing, or *algorithmic governmentality*), brought about by the advent of the omnipresent panopticon.[27] Transhumanist thinkers would do well to recognize the reproduction of the oppressive capitalistic mode within their own ideality.

This surveillance and linguistic domination system creates and reproduces a synaptic system that incorporates the whole of cyber society as *its own ontological individual,* much like Adam Smith's invisible hand, Deleuze and Guattari's despotic signifier, Marx's alienation, or Tocqueville's "bureaucracy that turns citizens into subjects".[28] Regardless of whether the subjective

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[23] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish.*

[24] Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1976).

[25] Theda Skocpol, *Bringing the State Back In* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

[26] Cf. Herman and Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent* and Foucault, *Discipline and Punish.*

[27] Cf. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*; Rouvroy, "La Gouvernementalité Algorithmique"; Savaedi and Nia, "Algorithmic Governmentality and the Notion of Subjectivity in Project Itoh's Harmony" and Foucault, *Discipline and Punish.*

[28] Cf. Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Amsterdam: Metalibri, 2007); Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*; Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1959) and Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1969).

bodily individual human objects to the existence of this process, it still exists and is present in the day-to-day reproduction of social ontology. This reproduction forms its own subjective collective individual, capable of its own self-awareness, self-determinism and agency. While many may be skeptical to this claim, sociologists such as Hannan and Freeman and their organizational ecology theory have been demonstrating for decades that organizations seek out self-interest and self-reproduction in much the same way that bodily individuals do.[29] So it may not be such a great leap to suggest that an AI could perform a similar function without "human input".[30]

Thus, to the claims of the transhumanist thinkers, I am a wary agnostic. Whether or not the abstract ideals of transhumanism are practically obtainable is not within the purview of this chapter. Although the authorial subject guesses that the same reality we are subject to will continually be reproduced—regardless of intentionality or medium—much like Nietzsche's eternal recurrence.[31] I ultimately respond that true enlightenment likely comes from our acceptance and comprehension of *samsara* (cycle of birth, death and rebirth).

Metamodernism

While largely relate aesthetic arts, the term "metamodernism" must be brought into discourse surrounding the humanities and social sciences if we are to understand just how and why postmodernism "died".[32] The rampant cynicism by which the postmodernists were known for has given way to a new form of epistemology, entirely focused on a bastardized hybridization (perhaps Hegelian/Fichtean synthesis) of modern optimism and postmodern cynicism.

Taking the postmodernists to their logical conclusions, metamodernists reject the implicit nihilism found within postmodern meta-analyses and instead embrace a culturally relativistic sense of optimism and self-affirmation. A core analysis of this is provided by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker.[33]

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[29] Michael T. Hannan and John Freeman, "The Population Ecology of Organizations", *American Journal of Sociology* 83.5 (1977): 929-84.

[30] Thus, the need for ethical treatment of AI and transhumanist beings. The ethical questions are found in numerous anime, particularly in the Cyberpunk genre, e.g. *Ghost in the Shell* canon. See Jackson, "*Ex Machina*".

[31] More, "The Overman in the Transhuman", 1-4.

[32] This might be a bit of an overstatement since it is apparent that postmodernism is still very active in academia and reflected in all kinds of pop culture.

[33] Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism", *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture* 2 (2010): 1-12. These two scholars have been at the forefront of the metamodernism discussion, especially in relation to Cultural Studies and the arts.

> Ontologically, metamodernism oscillates between the modern and the postmodern. It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern notes on metamodernism irony, between hope and melancholy, between naivete and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity. Indeed, by oscillating to and fro or back and forth, the metamodern negotiates between the modern and the postmodern. One should be careful not to think of this oscillation as a balance however; rather, it is a pendulum swinging between 2, 3, 5, 10, innumerable poles. Each time the metamodern enthusiasm swings toward fanaticism, gravity pulls it back toward irony; the moment its irony sways toward apathy, gravity pulls it back toward enthusiasm. Both the metamodern epistemology (as if) and its ontology (between) should thus be conceived of as a "both-neither" dynamic. They are each at once modern and postmodern and neither of them. This dynamic can perhaps most appropriately be described by the metaphor of metaxis. Literally, the term metataxis (motajy´) translates as "between".[34]

Thus, I regard metamodernism and its relative terminology as one deriving from this contemporary oscillation between comparative deconstructionism and transcendental idealism.

The work of Vermeulen and van den Acker is not the only contribution to this theoretic coinage. There have been many other theorists that have come at this new emergence in a systematic way, e.g., Gibbons, Vermeulen; Pruitt; Rowson; Severan; Josephson Storm.[35] Other theoreticians have breached the realms of specific topics like religion, politics or race.[36]

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[34] Ibid., 6.

[35] Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen, ed, *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth After Postmodernism* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017); Daniel Joseph Pruitt, "Popular Culture as Pharmakon: Metamodernism and the Deconstruction of Status Quo Consciousness" (MA Thesis: The Graduate School at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2020); Jonathan Rowson, "Metamodernism and the Perception of Context: The Cultural Between, the Political After and the Mystic Beyond", *Perspectiva* 26th May 2021: https://systems-souls-society.com/metamodernism-and-the-perception-of-context-the-cultural-between-the-political-after-and-the-mystic-beyond/; A. Severan, *Metamodernism and the Return of Transcendence* (Windsor: Palimpsest Press, 2021); Josephson Storm and Jason Ānanda, *Metamodernism: The Future of Theory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 2021.

[36] Michel Clasquin-Johnson, "Towards a Metamodern Academic Study of Religion and a More Religiously Informed Metamodernism", *Theological Studies* 73.3 (2017): 1-11; Hanzi Freinacht, *The Listening Society: A Metamodern Guide to Politics, Book One*

Up until this point, though, an application of metamodernity has not been specifically written—within a context of social theory or on, cultural hegemony, or on anime and its context—regardless of its origins in aesthetic and literary theory. This chapter is an attempt to correct this deficit so far. Metamodernism as an ideal form—undoubtedly has a large contribution to social theory—and anime is undeniably a paramount example of this metamodernist trend. Both are an attempt to find meaning within the aftermath of postmodern deconstruction and a goal of striking contemporary relevance.

There is undeniably a connection between the idealistic "modernity" highlighted within metamodern discourse and the inheritance of American transcendentalism. My argument is that this synthesis is transhumanism—which takes aspects of the transcendental movement—and substitutes the natural "other" with the artificial or "technological".

Transcendentalism in a United States Context and Cultural Hegemony

The major contributions of the American literary "Transcendentalism" movement found in the nineteenth century will facilitate an understanding of the correlation between transhumanism and metamodernism. Transhumanism theory is largely derived from a rapturous intent found within the bodily subjective individual, and to ignore the intellectual inheritance of American transcendentalism is to invalidate its impact on generating this metamodern idealist movement.

While early American transcendentalists such as Emerson or Thoreau found themselves displacing their subjectivity into the generalized other of "nature", metamodernist individuals find themselves displacing their will into the generalized other of "technology".[37] Thus it is the heritage of American transcendentalism that gives a foundational bedrock to Silicon Valley's metamodern technologic aspiration of rapture (through algorithmic governmentality). I will now attempt to make those connections.

Emerson, one of the seminal intellectuals of the American transcendentalism movement, believed that nature was everything external to us, meaning not just the natural world but also art, other individuals, etc. In order to become

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(Frederikssund: Metamoderna ApS, 2017) and James Brunton, "Whose (Meta)modernism?: Metamodernism, Race, and the Politics of Failure", *Journal of Modern Literature* 43.3 (2018): 60-76.

[37] Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, "Second Treatise: 'Guilt,' 'Bad Conscious', and Related Matters", in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Maudemarie Clark and Alan Swensen (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998). Nietzsche's definition of will largely derives from a subjective individual's ability to maintain a promise over the passage of time.

the highest self, each individual had to experience the mysteries of the universe on their own, through self-reflection immersed in the natural world, which offered a greater understanding of the divine order of reality that society could not provide on its own.[38] This externalization of the means by which enlightenment was achieved by the individual has a notable internal/external mechanism, in which the self seeks enlightenment through an interaction with the "other", with a strong requirement of self-reflection and reliance.[39] This is undoubtedly a reproduction of Cartesian, and thus Aristotelian dualism, imported through Enlightenment rationalism.[40] There are naturally striking similarities found in transhumanism today, where individuals view the dualistic ability to transcend through technology as the means to enlighten themselves.[41]

In Henry David Thoreau's influential work *Walden*, we also can pick up similar threads of this intellectual inheritance.[42] Reflecting on the dubious legacy of "civilized" life, he calls individuals to cast off the shackles of society and to embrace self-reflection in nature. While Thoreau is highly skeptical of technological advances bringing about the enlightenment of the individual, he still externalizes this enlightenment through the context of God and nature and a rejection of the present circumstance.

While there is not enough room to review other Transcendentalist writers such as Whitman, Hawthorne and Peabody, all focus on several common core tenets to the American Transcendentalist movement: a triumph of the individual over themselves, often through the natural "other", an enlightenment through self-determination, and a greater understanding of reality through mediated experience and reflection outside traditional means. These core ideas were passed down to and enshrined within American society, the logical consequences of which can be seen in the ideal type of "individualism",

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[38] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature* (1836), *American Transcendentalism Web*: https://archive.vcu.edu/english/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/emerson/nature.html.

[39] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance" (1841), *American Transcendentalism Web*: https://archive.vcu.edu/english/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/emerson/essays/selfreliance.html.

[40] Cf. Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1996): https://yale.learningu.org/download/041e9642-df02-4eed-a895-70e472df2ca4/H2665_Descartes%27%20Meditations.

[41] Some examples would be *Ghost in the Shell*: Directed by Mamoru Oshii with Screenplay by Kazunori Itō (Shochiku 1995); Tsutomu Nihei, *Blame!* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1997-2003) and *kaiju* ("giant monster") anime like *Attack on Titan*: Directed by Tetsurō Araki et al. with Screenplay by Yasuko Kobayashi et al. (NHK 2013-present).

[42] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; Or, Life in the Woods* (The Project Gutenberg eBook of Walden, 1995): https://www.gutenberg.org/files/205/205-h/205-h.htm.

touted by meritocracy, Manifest Destiny and contemporary identarian discourse, to name a few. Often considered one of the key ideological principles of American society, the impact of transcendentalism on contemporary cultural manifestations is too large to ignore.

The innovation of transhumanism to the intellectual inheritance of transcendentalism, though, is not the identification of the enlightening "other" with nature but with technological advance. Through a rejection of the contemporary circumstance and an embracement of the cultural other—both transcendentalism and transhumanism seek an illumination moderated, a mediated subjective transcendence—through self-reflection. After the deconstructive process of postmodernism, metamodernity has sought to reassert a pragmatic idealism by seeking meaning within the past as it applies to the present.[43] Since interaction with nature has largely been deprived of us through the relations (mode) surrounding late-stage capital, it is no longer a pragmatic retreat. Metamodernists have few other choices than to externalize transcendence (and the cultural inheritance of transcendentalism itself) into the technological process.

A note of key importance to the legacy of this train of thought is as follows. Contemporary U.S. "pop-culture" dominates neoliberal cultural and trade hegemony. So this would mean that transcendentalism has been transposed into transhumanism in nations outside of the United States. Much like Ritzer's "McDonaldization" thesis on globalization, this inherited American transcendentalism is given a unique character in each of the countries it is present.[44] It is my speculation that this common, transnational transcendental inheritance produces neoliberal transhumanism, which can be likened to the syncretic dialectic idealism latent within metamodern epistemology. See Figure 1 below for a visual depiction of this dialectic phenomenon.

This is an *international* movement encouraged by international capital, social engineering technocrats, and technofascists. Japan, then, is certainly no stranger to this process.

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[43] Cf. Vermeulen and van den Acker, "Notes on Metamodernism", 1-12 and Severan, *metamodernism and the Return of Transcendence*, 56-57.

[44] George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization Thesis* (London: SAGE, 1999).

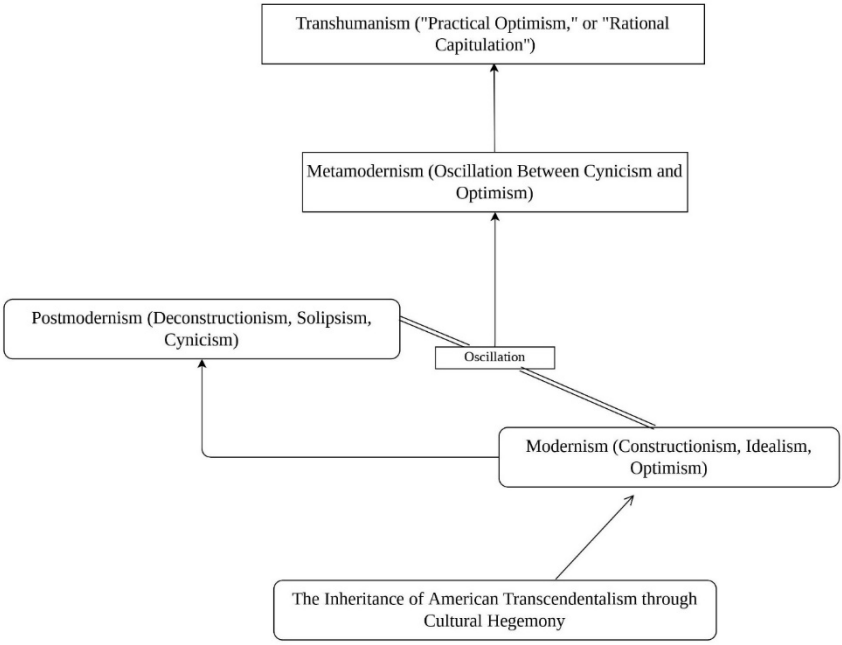

Figure 3.1. Dialectic Diagram of Transcendentalim, Metamodernity and Transhumanism. Source Steven Foertsch.

A Note on Japanese Hegemonic and Contextual Considerations

How far does the Western cultural hegemony go? It is undoubtedly under contestation at this very moment, given the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine and Russian attempts to form an "antifascist" block in union with China, India, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia, etc.[45]

The state of Japan, where I center my historical and socio-cultural analysis, is currently under a semi-feudatory status to the United States. This is largely the historical byproduct of years of Western-inspired social reforms, such as the

[45] See the "First International Anti-Fascist Congress" held by Russia in 2022. These recent trends to form an Anti-Western influence block largely stem from the Russian response to the expansion of NATO by the United States. This is likely to keep the military alliance relevant after the collapse of the Soviet Union. See "1st Anti-Fascist Congress Attended by Military Attaches from 26 States—Defense Ministry", *TASS* 02nd September 2022: https://tass.com/defense/1501587.

Meiji Restoration and the U.S. occupation of Japan after World War II.[46] Here Japanese leaders willfully chose the United States as an occupier over the USSR (much to the contrary belief that Japan surrendered because of the atomic bomb).[47] Much of this legacy is entirely military and economic, e.g, the United States currently operates at least seven known military bases in Japan.[48]

Japan's number one trade partner, however, is not the United States but China.[49] Many of the United States' East Asian clients are in a similar circumstance—and it is difficult to gauge the level of *cultural* influence China may have on its trade partners—especially those from the same geographic location and cultural lineage. Japan is undoubtedly inclined to "free market capitalism", much like fellow US client South Korea is. But is Japanese culture equally as "submissive" to Western neoliberal hegemony? Is this Chinese trade influence assisting Japanese culture in articulating criticism of its "occupier"?[50] Or perhaps this critique is entirely native to the postmodern and metamodern Japanese condition?

The propagation of anime and its assessment of the neoliberal order must be considered in this context. Can Japan still be counted as a transmitter of neoliberal cultural hegemony?[51] Japanese anime symbology has had an especially large influence on the younger generations of the "West", indeed, even in Russia and China.[52] This influence is certainly evident in

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[46] Christopher Bolton, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay and Takayuki Tatsumi, *Robot Ghosts and Wired Dreams: Japanese Science Fiction from Origins to Anime* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

[47] Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs, "Did Nuclear Weapons Cause Japan to Surrender?", *Carnegie Council* (2022): https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/education/008/expertclips/010.

[48] Between 1965-1990 and during the "East Asian Miracle", Japan as well as other East Asian economies experienced a rapid growth. Many Americans were concerned that Japan would overtake the United States as the first economy in the world. This was foiled by the "paper tiger" Asian financial crisis in 1997-98, which stymied Japanese economic growth. While it is speculative as to why this growth was reigned in, the new "economic threat" in American eyes is China, which is projected to overtake the United States as the world's largest economy by around 2030.

[49] Chosun Ilbo, "China's Economy Could Overtake U.S. Economy by 2030", 05th January 2022: http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2022/01/05/2022010500491.html.

[50] Of course, it could just as easily be simply financial or "business".

[51] Steven Foertsch, "Children of the Mind and the Concept of Edge and Center Nations", *Journal of Science Fiction and Philosophy* 5 (2022): https://jsfphil.org/volume-5-2022/children-of-the-mind-and-the-concept-of-edge-and-center-nations/.

[52] Susan Napier, "Why Anime?", *Japan Spotlight* (March/April, 2004): https://www.jef.or.jp/journal/pdf/cover%20story%206_0403.pdf and Susan Napier, "The World of Anime Fandom in America", *Mechademia: Second Arc* 1.1 (2010): 47-63.

metamodernist internet discourse and can be easily seen in pro-gaming groups and individuals, streaming or content creation circles like Hololive Production or "virtual YouTubers" ("Vtubers"), and virtual reality chatrooms like VRChat. But the question then becomes, perhaps to echo Gramsci, "is this subaltern"?[53] Or is it simply a reproduction and reification of the Western neoliberal cultural hegemony?

Is dystopian transhumanism in Japanese culture, particularly found in science fiction anime, a sign of resistance or conformity to the neoliberal cultural hegemony? Resistance to technocracy is obviously not just a uniquely American or European phenomenon.[54] Also, social engineering algorithmic governmentality is pervasive in contemporary Japanese society—and this makes sense—since the majority of Japanese exports are focused on technology.[55] Perhaps this trend in Japanese animation is simply a reproduction of the cultural hegemony inherited through Westernization models and its feudatory status. Many historical accounts certainly seem to suggest as much.[56] In the end, it is inconclusive that the Japanese people reproduce these narratives, discourses, and symbols willingly or unconsciously. It could very well be the case that Japanese assertions against technofascism are tapping into the residual East/West divide, fueled by past and present cultural influence from China.

Anime Case Studies

I have traced out my argument above and now want to demonstrate its viability (or potentiality) through case studies of five well-known anime.[57] The lens through which these will be examined is metamodernity, transcendental thinking, and transhumanism. While informed by cultural studies, my analysis is developed largely in spirit with post-structural philosophers who reflect on mass media such as Foucault, Derrida, Habermas, Herman and

[53] Cf. Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks.*

[54] See television shows such as Black Mirror or online RPG video games such as Cyberpunk 2077.

[55] Rouvroy, "La Gouvernementalité Algorithmique"; Savaedi and Nia, "Algorithmic Governmentality and the Notion of Subjectivity in Project Itoh's Harmony".

[56] Bolton, Csicsery-Ronay, Tastsumi, *Robot Ghosts and Wired Dreams.*

[57] This analysis owes large inheritance to content analysis methodology derived from cultural studies, especially on work that has covered anime in the past. Cf. Bolton, Csicsery-Ronay, Tastsumi, *Robot Ghosts and Wired Dreams*; Susan J. Napier, *Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation* (New York: Palgrave, 2001). See also Ian Condry, "Anime Creativity: Characters and Premises in the Quest for Cool Japan" *Theory, Culture, and Society* 26 (2009): 139-63.

Chomsky.[58] It does not focus on anime production like is found in Condry or otaku culture.[59] This analysis focuses directly on the philosophical content itself as reflected in narratological choices, plot progression and symbolical usages. The goal is to demonstrate the transhumanist underpinnings implicit within these case studies of postmodern and metamodern Japanese content.

Neon Genesis Evangelion

Neon Genesis Evangelion (NGE or EVA) originally premiered on TV Tokyo in 1995.[60] It has garnered an incredible amount of influence in popular anime culture over the years, being one of the seminal examples of the "mech anime" revival of the 1990s. NGE's widespread appeal has led to twenty-six episodes, six movie adaptations, light novels, manga and video games. It set the standard for the future of the industry in so many ways—artistically, thematically, symbolically—and specifically for *mecha*. My primary focus will be on the anime series—with samples from movie adaptations—in order to explore the relevant themes.

Shinji Ikari is a fourteen-year-old boy who is thrust into life-and-death battles by his father, Gendo Ikari. Gendo is the director of a military research group named Nerv—whose objective is to combat the invading "Angels" on behalf of humanity—ever since the "Second Impact" (a global catastrophe). Angels are alien beings who came from space in order to wipe out humanity for their sins. These Angels are nearly indestructible due to their impenetrable force fields called "AT Fields".

Gendo, for a variety of reasons (including selfish metaphysical reunification with his deceased wife), enlists Shinji to fight these Angels in a machine called an "Evangelion Unit". These machines are the only hope for humanity—because they can create and penetrate the AT fields of the Angels—enabling humanity to destroy them.

Shinji is not alone, however. He has several peers fighting Angels alongside him. The enigmatic Rei Ayanami, a closed-off and quiet girl who pilots Unit 00, and Asuka Langley Soryu, a proud, fiery and abrasive prodigy who pilots Unit 02. Together they take down multiple Angels, occasionally getting injured along the way. Although outnumbered and often outgunned, defeating the

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[58] Cf. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*; Derrida, *Rogues*; Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*; Herman and Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*.
[59] Cf. Condry, "Anime Creativity: Characters and Premises in the Quest for Cool Japan"; Napier, "Why Anime?", wp. and Napier, "The World of Anime Fandom in America", 47-63.
[60] *Neon Genesis Evangelion*: Directed by Hideaki Anno with Screenplay by Hideaki Anno (TV Tokyo 1995).

Angels would mean defending the world from the Third Impact and total destruction.

The background of the Evangelion Units (Evas) is then slowly revealed to the main characters and the viewer. The Evas are pilotable mechas (cybernetic robots). They were produced by the labs of NERV by combining Angel genetics and Particle-Wave Matter with human souls (pilots). Even more horrifying, the original vessels for the Angels are Shinji and Asuka's own mothers. It is this "soul connection" that enables them to pilot the Evas. It is also unveiled that Rei Ayanami is the exception. This is because she is actually a clone of Shinji's mother fused with a part of the body of the Angel Lilith (counterpart to Adam). Lilith is being kept in the basement of Nerv in a crucified state in order to be used as source material for evas.

Lilith is the progenitor of all of humanity, which is called the "Lilin". The Lilin are actually a single Angel themselves—who possess the Fruit of Knowledge diffused—throughout the entire species of individuals. They are doomed to an existence of loneliness and separation from their fellow Lilin. After Shinji defeats the last Angel, a mysterious organization called Seele, the funding agency of Nerv, commands Gendo to trigger the "Human Instrumentality Project", the final purpose of the Evangelion project.

By triggering the Third Impact willfully, Seele seeks to advance humanity to a stage where it no longer feels this separation: essentially, for all of humankind to be reunited within the Angel Lilith. This realignment would lead to a transcendence never before experienced by humanity: it would become an immortal god with a human soul. The tool to do this is Shinji Ikari and Evangelion Unit 01, who are thus crucified by Seele-controlled Evas.

Shinji is instrumentalized in this way to usher in the Third Impact, which is successful. Being at the center of the impact, however, gives Shinji incredible power to decide the ultimate fate of the Lilin. Shinji grapples with the meaning of being human, which is plagued by feelings of isolation. He soon makes a breakthrough, and reunites with the others, who congratulate him for his success in breaking down the barriers between human beings.

Depending on which episode or movie watched, the success of instrumentalization is unclear. In some cases, Shinji rejects instrumentalization in favor of a separate existence fueled by love and misunderstanding. This ambiguity is enough for our purposes, however, which are to analyze the transcendent themes underlining *Neon Genesis Evangelion*.

There are clearly overt Christian themes in *Evangelion,* which directly hint at the state of transcendence latent within the human species. This is not unlike the American transcendentalist thinkers who viewed the human condition as

one to be honed through transcendental experience and natural interaction with the Christian God.

Even with the overt Christian symbology and narrative—such as crucifixion, Adam and Lilith, Angels, the Spear of Longinus or the Holy Lance that pierced the side of Christ, Fruit of Knowledge, etc.—the interest lies in *how* Shinji managed to achieve godhood. Note the term "Human Instrumentality", which may be based on the original Japanese "補完 (*hokan*). *Ho* translates literally to "supplement, supply, make good, offset, compensate, assistant, learner" and *kan* to "perfect, completion, end".[61] There is an indication within this term that humanity is not complete and needs to undergo a transformation in order to achieve perfection. The vessel to do this is a mechanized suit fused with Angel and human life, an Eva.

The direct connections to transhumanism, as previously defined in this essay, seem clear. Shinji, an awkward and insecure fourteen-year-old boy, with the help of a mechanized suit imbued with special transcendental properties (one of which is his immortal mother incarnated in the Eva unit), manages to overcome his shortcomings and attain godhood. The instrumentalization of all of humanity through this one mechanized vessel gives birth to a single immortal being—a combined humanity and an Angel with a human soul—which will advance humanity itself to the next stage of transcendence.

Serial Experiments Lain

Serial Experiments Lain is an anime television series that was released in 1998.[62] It appeared right before the true consequences of the internet were culturally realized. Given this context, this anime was startlingly ahead of its time and predicted many of the logical outcomes that a truly interconnected world would undergo.

Following the story of a junior high school girl named Lain Iwakura, Lain slowly descends into a technologic mystery that unravels the very fabric of her reality. Beginning with the suicide of a classmate Chisa Yomoda, Lain receives a message (email) from this classmate on "The Wired". The Wired is the name for the internet in this anime and is assumed to be omnipresent. Lain's friend Chisa, claims that she abandoned her physical body to integrate with The Wired. She also claimed to have met "God" there.

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[61] "Human Instrumentality Project", *Evangelion Wiki*: https://evangelion.fandom.com/wiki/Human_Instrumentality_Project.

[62] *Serial Experiments Lain*: Directed by Ryutaro Nakamura with Screenplay by Chiaki J. Konaka (TV Tokyo 1998).

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The line between what is reality and what is fiction quickly starts blurring together as Lain chases this mystery further into The Wired. She soon discovers that The Wired is actually the invention of a genius (Masami) whose control of it makes him god-like. He did this through experimentation with children and integration of the psychic capabilities of the mind into the functioning neural network of The Wired. It is then revealed to both Lain and the viewer that Lain herself is a byproduct of this experimentation—an autonomous sentient artificial intelligence—that can function both in The Wired and in the "real" world. The "god" of The Wired then attempts to (violently) convince Lain to return to The Wired exclusively to completely eliminate the demarcation between The Wired (Virtual Reality) and Reality.

After defeating the god of The Wired, Lain then comes into her own power in this process—essentially in complete control of The Wired as a god—and thus a complete influence on reality itself. Notable in this power is the ability to erase or create memories in individual minds linked to The Wired. Meditating on this newfound ability, Lain chooses to delete her presence from reality completely, save for an observational role. In the end, Lain flouts spacetime, achieves immortality and exercises near omnipotence through her integration with The Wired.

The connections to transhumanism found within the metamodern state are pronounced in *Serial Experiments Lain*. A socially awkward and isolated teen girl discovers her true self within the internet and through the avenue of technology, achieves enlightenment and ascendance to godhood. This is not unlike the transcendentalist search for the true self through the medium of nature. Themes of death and rebirth, self-discovery and transcendence flood its symbols and images. While the anime is quite often disturbing and dystopian, the final episode leaves the viewer with a feeling of resolution and sublimity. All the hardships experienced by Lain up until that point have been settled through technology—with the infinite power of a god now in her hands—to do with as she pleases.

Ergo Proxy

Released in 2006 with only twenty-three episodes, *Ergo Proxy* is by far one of the bleaker settings in which I explore transhumanism.[63] It is set in a post-apocalyptic wasteland, where the remnants of humanity are sheltered in, or reliant on, domes entirely run by "AutoReivs". The world outside the domes is irradiated and almost entirely uninhabitable for biological life.

[63] *Ergo Proxy*: Directed by Shuko Murase with Screenplay by Dai Satō (Wowow 2006).

AutoReivs are a type of android that mostly serve the needs of the human population and can no longer biologically reproduce without human assistance. Meanwhile, the government of one of these domed cities, called Romdeau, has been conducting experiments on "proxies", a human-like beings with near godlike power. They are said to contain the key to the survival of the human species. A virus starts spreading within the AutoReivs called the "cogito" virus, which gives them self-awareness. Revolts begin to spring up as a result.

The series follows two main characters in Romdeau. Re-l Mayer is an investigator searching for clues about murders related to the cogito virus. Vincent Law is an "immigrant" connected to the mystery of the proxies. As the two dive deeper into the origins of the cogito virus and the secret of the proxies, they realize the cogito virus is connected to the presence of the proxies. They meet humans living just outside the dome of Romdeau—and later travel outside Romdeau to other domed cities—which are in varying states of decay. There they meet other proxies with a variety of temperaments, most verging on insanity. Through battling them, Vincent Law discovers that he is actually a proxy himself. Indeed, he is the important "Ergo Proxy" created by the first proxy (Proxy One) as the "proxy of death".

Re-l and Vincent both learn that the proxies were immortal and near-omnipotent creations of the fragments of humanity after a nuclear exchange. In "Project Boomerang", the remaining humans created proxies for the expressed purpose of rehabilitating the Earth and creating habitable pockets so that humanity could return. In the meantime, these humans left the Earth for space, destined to return in the far future (thousands of years). Proxy One then reveals to Ergo Proxy the nature of this role and his hatred of it. Romdeau, with ongoing cognito riots and without the support of a proxy, begins to collapse.

After a confrontation between Proxy One and Ergo Proxy that ends in Proxy One's death, the sun reemerges from the blackened-out sky. Proxies are not meant to survive in the sunlight, and Vincent must flee. Vincent and Re-l escape with friends from the collapsing Romdeau. In the distance, there is a spacecraft, which could hint at the original humans' return to Earth.

Transhumanism in this context is the escape from a post-apocalyptic hellscape into the relative human paradise of the domes. Humanity outside the domes was depicted in episode seventeen as blind, gaunt and virtually unable to reproduce in large numbers. Humanity on Earth was entirely beholden to the whims of the proxies, godlike entities who determined every aspect of their lives. Immortal and immensely powerful, these beings were tasked with rehabilitating the Earth—but ended up having existential crises of their own—much like the AutoReivs and their cogito virus. Ultimately, it was unclear if the humans could exist on Earth once again (the return was

speculative). But the cogito virus, and the self-reflection of the proxies themselves, begot a new type of humanity not beholden to the biological consequences of radiation poisoning. If humanity never returned, the AutoReivs and the proxies would have continued to recreate something like human existence on Earth.

It was impossible for humanity to solve the problems it created without relying on the "other". Additionally, the emotional suffering of the proxies also hints at their latent function. Much like the meaning of the name "proxy", proxies were created to be the *literal proxy* of humanity in case it ceased to exist. As such, it receives transhumanist understandings of rapture, transcendence, godhood and immortality. These proxies were far superior to the human race in every way—and operated as gods of the Earth for thousands of years—a surrogate, an elegy, a new incarnation of a long dead species.

Psycho-Pass

Later than many of our cases, *Psycho-Pass* came out in 2012 and was immediately popular.[64] Its success with both critics and audiences alike led to many spinoffs, including three movies, multiple video games and novel adaptations. In this case study, I will focus on the TV anime and movie content; but themes discussed in this context are most certainly applicable to other mediums.

Psycho-Pass follows the story of rookie inspector Akane Tsunemori. He works for Japan's Ministry of Welfare's Public Safety Bureau in the Criminal Investigations Department in the not-so-distant future. The setting is after a global hegemonic realignment (and possible nuclear exchange). In this world, Japan is one of the few states that emerged stable and relatively intact, albeit with a new form of governmental oversight.

This form of computerized governmental oversight is called the "Sibyl System". Pervasive in all of society, the Sibyl System measures all citizen criminal potentiality and reports it to law enforcement officers. This "crime coefficient" determines whether someone is a "latent criminal", a label which regulates individual freedoms accordingly. If your "crime coefficient" is over a certain threshold, for example, law enforcement officers could arrest and detain, institutionalize or kill you according to the Sibyl System's judgement.

Operating within this system are the officers of the Public Safety Bureau. This bureau is comprised of teams of "inspectors" (who are not latent criminals) and leading "enforcers" (who are). On the spot decisions are made

[64] *Psycho-Pass*: Directed by Naoyoshi Shiotani and Katsuyuki Motohiro with Screenplay by Gen Urobuchi et al. (Fuji TV 2012).

through gun-like weapons called "dominators". These weapons have trigger locks directly linked to and determined by the Sibyl System and its crime coefficient matrix.

While the setting of this dystopian case is incredibly rich and well fleshed out, I will only focus on the transhuman characteristics found within this anime. Much of what follows is an exposition of many key plot points revealed to the viewer after at least one season of viewing (or within the side movies).

The main adversary in the first season is a man named Shogo Makishima, a criminal mastermind who nevertheless maintains a low crime coefficient ("criminally asymptomatic"). This quirk was the major plot point of multiple seasons, where the investigative team has to wrestle with the blind spots of the Sibyl System. Only later is it revealed to the viewer why this criminally asymptomatic problem exists in the first place.

The Sibyl System is revealed to the viewer and Inspector Tsunemori to be entirely comprised of the brains of criminally asymptomatic individuals. These individuals form a collective consciousness that calculates crime coefficients which regulate society and enforcement. Makishima was actually propositioned to join Sibyl; which he reacted to with subversion and violence (as do others in later seasons and movies).

The Sibyl System claims that by giving administrative power to the criminally asymptomatic, ethics and individual morality are put aside in favor of order and social stability. Ultimately, the Sibyl System promises individual criminals and murderers a chance to do "good" and achieve a form of omnipotence and immortality over the Japanese population in exchange for their individual agency and bodily form.

The connections to transhumanism are quite clear. Here is an instance where the criminally asymptomatic are given an option to essentially determine all of social reality for the Japanese people. The Sibyl System actively decides who lives and who dies, who is jailed as a latent criminal, and who can serve as an inspector. Sibyl dynamically determines careers for individuals, and in later seasons is revealed to have complete control of politics, the economy and the military (foreign interventionism). It exerts a near omnipotent influence. Sibyl is everywhere, in every camera, dominator and robot helper found throughout Japan. In this sense, it suggests Sibyl is nearly omnipresent in Japan.

By donating their brains to Sibyl, these individuals achieve a sense of transcendence from their bodily state: a conceivably immortal existence through hivemind, a collective personhood, with each individual as a single vote (much like cells in a body). While morally dubious, and the contestation

of many of the anime's ethical narratives, transhumanist thinking is alive and well within the extremely popular *Psycho-Pass* canon.

Sword Art Online

Sword Art Online, known by fans as SAO, has been remarkably successful in generating numerous iterations through various media. The original anime was released in 2012, and since then it has seen multiple seasons, spinoffs, light novels and films.[65] This canon is remarkably lengthy, so for practical purposes I will only focus on the core seasons of the anime SAO I-III (not including the spinoff *Alicization*).

The story of SAO follows an awkward young man named Kazuto "Kirito" Kirigaya, who is a player of *Sword Art Online*, a virtual reality video game that allows the user complete immersion through a helmet called "NerveGear". The first season focuses on Kirito's experience in Aincrad, a fictional world much like *World of Warcraft*, in which he and every other user is trapped. The game creator, Akihiko Kayaba, does this because of his ultimate beliefs and goals.

Kirito meets a fellow player in this world, named Asuna Yuuki, who he ends up marrying in game. Together they manage to find Kayaba's player character and defeat him, freeing almost all those trapped within the game. Asuna, however, is unveiled to be trapped in another version of the game called *Alfheim Online*. There she is held hostage by an obsessive villain, Nobuyuki Sugou, who wishes to marry Asuna against her will.

Kirito infiltrates and manages to foil Sugou's plans, and makes virtual world access available to all, restoring *Sword Art Online* and *Alfheim Online* to former players. A year later, a similar game called *Gun Gale Online* is experiencing murders related to the NerveGear, now called "AmuSpheres". Kirito is hired to solve these murders, and with the help of friend Shino "Sinon" Asada, they discover the three murderers; but one gets away.

Kazuto "found" himself within these virtual reality settings, and they quickly came to dominate his world and self-identity. In the outside world, Kazuto was just another normal person, but in SAO, he was "Kirito", a "beater" (a "beta" testing "cheater"), set apart by his unparalleled ability in game. This also applied to Asuna, who reached a high leadership level in multiple guilds with which she was involved. While often held against their wills, both found themselves and their self-identity through the medium of technology, where they distinguished themselves as beyond just a normal human.

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[65] *Sword Art Online*: Directed by Tomohiko Itō with Screenplay by Yukie Sugawara et al. based on the novels by Reki Kawahara (Tokyo MX 2012).

Multiple villains in the series, such as the original creator of SAO Kayaba or Alfheim's Sugou, often viewed themselves as a sort of deity within the world, with control over the life and death of their players. This is especially true for Kayaba, who sought to create a world free from impurities within the virtual. This course of thinking is incredibly transhumanist. Both the individual players manifesting themselves and the creators' aspirations of godhood serve to reify the contemporary application of transcendentalist themes today: the individual self is made better through the medium of technology, even if sometimes used for ill purposes.

Discussion and Conclusion

All the cases above demonstrate a clear transhumanist undertone but vary in application. Just as a reminder, "transhumanism" was defined earlier in the work as "the aspiration of a socio-ontological bodily human individual to a state of transcendence through technological advancement". The above cases of Japanese anime all conform to this definition in spirit, making it synonymous with transhumanist art.[66] They therefore reproduce the logical consequences of American Transcendentalism, metamodernist oscillations, and the hegemonic Japanese cultural context.

Most instances of transcendental transhumanist thinking within our cases focused, interestingly, on bildungsroman transformation or "coming of age" stories.[67] Multiple instances of this can be seen—from *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, *Serial Experiments Lain*—to *Sword Art Online*. This may hint at the nature of the anime medium as a young adult experience (*Shōnen*) but may also refer to the growing pains many are feeling throughout the rapidly accelerating pace of technological advancement.[68] There may also be correlations with masculinity renegotiations.[69] While the world changes, two things are asserted in these stories as ever-present: the self-realization and determination of the individual (linked to American transcendentalism and meritocratic mastery, and the medium of constantly shifting technology to achieve it.

Oftentimes empowerment through the medium of technology is seen as a praxis—the telos being the triumph of humanity—over its own biological

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[66] Vita-More, "Transhumanist Art Statement", wp.
[67] Napier, *Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke*.
[68] Verdoux, "Transhumanism, Progress and the Future", 49-69.
[69] Ian Condry, "Love Revolution: Anime, Masculinity, and the Future", in *Recreating Japanese Men*, eds. Sabine Früstück and Anne Walthall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 262-83.

limits.[70] The key focus on this idea is the unnatural extension of the human lifespan, either individual or species wide. Few anime within this case study have reflected on the necessity of the artificial extension of human life. Rather, they assert an implied form of immortality that is not debated on a moral level.[71] We can see this clearly pronounced in *Ergo Proxy, Serial Experiments Lain, Psycho Pass.*[72] It is quite remarkable that this trend is almost ubiquitous within our case study of anime, and it begets another conclusion.

Transhumanism and the immorality it promises contains a heavy implication of godhood—bringing together the traditional forms of omniscience, omnipotence and omnipresence (see particularly anime examples with internet components). Once the basic natural limitation on humanity (mortality) is overcome, it is only a brief step forward into the unknown to attain a supra-human or overman state of transcendence.[73] Whether or not this is attainable (or a slippery slope logical fallacy), the case studies demonstrate these very qualities in *Psycho Pass*, *Neon Genesis Evangelion, Sword Art Online, Serial Experiments Lain* and *Ergo Proxy*. The impact of the constant and continued presence of humanity's technological advance on its culture is evident within these anime.

All of these themes, the self-realization of the individual, the pursuit of immortality and the pursuit of godhood through technology, are directly related to our historical contexts of American Transcendentalism and metamodernist oscillation. American transcendentalism sought nature as the generalized other necessary for the realization of the self. Many of these themes are repeated in a clear way through transhumanism *simply by switching the medium from nature to technology*.

In metamodernity, we find an oscillation between modern idealism, associated with self-determination and practicality, and postmodern critical deconstructivism. I find these themes within the animes of the case study—where the transcendental pragmatism associated with metamodernity—conforms largely to the negotiation between these two paradigms. It manifests in transhumanist thinking—rapturous in intent—but seemingly

[70] Bostrom, "Transhumanist Values"; Huxley, "Transhumanism", 12-16 and Fukuyama, "Transhumanism", 42-43.

[71] See the ubiquitous ethical dilemmas and questions in Anderson, *Technology and Theology*.

[72] Bolton, Csicsery-Ronay, Tastsumi, *Robot Ghosts and Wired Dreams*.

[73] Sorgner, "Nietzsche the Overman, and Transhumanism", 29-42. For a response, see More, "The Overman in the Transhuman", 1-4.

Author Proofs

pragmatic in means.[74] The focus on the dystopian nature of technological advances in many of the anime examined may be likened to the influence of postmodernity. I also see a retrieval of the self and individual assertion of being within this anime sample, synonymous with the idealistic period of modernity. It is only through metamodernal analysis that we see these themes converge together to form a transhumanist metamodern perspective.

Given our cultural understanding of Japan, I conclude that Japanese anime is part of the process of creating and reifying this new turn into transcendentalism. Japanese anime is a forerunner of international neoliberal popular culture, and it is difficult to ignore. How this will all play out remains an open question. It will be interesting to see, however, how future generations of thinkers understand the issues in an age where technology comes to dominate more and more. One might even factor in Habermas' penetration of the lifeworld idea into the discussion.[75]

Likewise, it is impossible to predict Japan's cultural resistance or conformity to this common hegemonic culture to which it has contributed so much. While the influence of China on Japanese culture may be growing, Chinese culture, in general, is not overly suspicious of the expansion of technology into everyday life. Perhaps this hints at Japan's affinity with Western culture, especially when we regard American transcendentalist thinking found within the case study.[76]

One should note that this chapter has only provided a sample of anime that illustrate my main points. Several other anime comes to mind as a potential follow-up on the themes in this chapter. *Akira* or the *Ghost in the Shell* canon has a large quantity of material regarding transhumanism.[77] The anime genre of *kaiju* (怪獣 "strange beast")—such as *Attack on Titan*—is another example with transhumanist thinking. The genre of *kaiju* often uses technology as the only way humans can fight against such godlike monsters. Likewise, other

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[74] See "rational capitulationism" in Verdoux, "Transhumanism, Progress and the Future", 49-69.

[75] Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.

[76] An interesting comparative connection could be drawn from the South Korea—which is known for its capitalist-dystopian outlook within popular culture—particularly in film and television. Some examples could be found in *Squid Game*: Directed with Screenplay by Hwang Dong-hyuk (Netflix 2017-2021); *Parasite*: Directed with Screenplay by Bong Joon-ho (CJ Entertainment 2019); *Okja*: Directed with Screenplay by Bong Joon-ho (Netflix 2017) and *Oldboy*: Directed by Park Chan-wook with Screenplay by Hwang Jo-yun et al. (Show East 2003).

[77] *Akira*: Directed and Screenplay by Katsuhiro Otomo (Toho 1988).

mecha anime—such as *Mobile Suit Gundam* and *Code Geass*—demonstrate a clear connection to the ideas in this chapter.[78]

My conclusion is that the implications of Japanese anime go far beyond just mere entertainment. They exemplify complicated and holistic processes within the Japanese historical context, its inheritance of American transcendentalism and its production of metamodernity, and associated transhumanist thinking as cultural artifacts. As technological innovation continues to build upon itself in the future, social theorists and philosophers—must grapple with many difficult questions—just as the creators have in the artistic creation of their anime. What does it mean to be human? How can we overcome the limits of our human nature? How do we understand our reality in a constantly changing age? How do we become more than we are now? Ultimately, the response to these questions is crucial. The answers may determine the very construct of our social reality, now and into the future.

[78] *Mobile Suit Gundam*: Directed and Screenplay by Yoshiyuki Tomino (Nagoya TV 1979-1980) and *Code Geass*: Directed by Gorō Taniguchi with Screenplay by Ichirō Ōkouchi (JNN 2006-2007).

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