Nihilism in Japanese *Anime*

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In this article I try to show that one can use a conceptual framework on different kinds of nihilism, borrowed from Nietzsche, to understand certain themes in Japanese animated film, known as *anime*. First it is shown that Nietzsche provides us with a framework (the Apollinian and the Dionysian) applicable to all cultures, and then his distinction between different types of nihilism is explained, before briefly reconstructing the (relevant) history of Japanese culture and society. Against this background attention is then given to a number of *anime* films with the purpose of evaluating them as far as the appearance of nihilistic motifs in their narratives is concerned. Care is taken to show that, although the origins and appearance of nihilism in Japanese culture (as detectable in *anime* films) are different from its appearance in Western cultural forms, they do share certain features.
Key words: Nihilism, Nietzsche, Japanese, *anime*, film.

In hierdie artikel probeer ek aantoon dat 'n begripperaamwerk oor verskillende soorte nihilisme, van Nietzsche afkomstig, gebruik kan word om sekere temas in Japanese *anime* (geanimeerde film) te verstaan. Eerstens word daarop gewys dat Nietzsche se skema van die Apolliniese en die Dionysiese beginsels op alle kulture van toepassing is, en dan word sy onderskeid tussen verskillende tipes nihilisme verduidelik, voordat die (relevante) geskiedenis van Japenese kultuur en samelewing kortliks gerekonstrueer word. Teen hierdie agtergrond word dan aandag geskenk aan 'n aantal *anime* films ten einde hulle te beoordeel wat nihilistiese motiewe in hul narratiewe betref. Daar word geargumenteer dat, ofskoon die oorsprong en verskyning van nihilisme in Japanese kultuur verskil van die verskyning daarvan in Westerse kultuur, hulle ook sekere dinge met mekaar gemeen het.
Sleutelwoorde: Nihilisme, Nietzsche, Japanese, *anime*, film.

Nihilism – the belief that nothing has intrinsic value – has a long history of influence on human society, even without actual recognition of this fact by the society being influenced in this way at any specific time; the axiological effects of nihilistic prevalence can be witnessed readily by the examination of cultural artifacts, such as painting or, more accessible in the contemporary era, the media. Of course knowing how to identify nihilism, and for this purpose understanding nihilism and its various forms, are needed in this kind of examination and critique of artifacts. In this article a genre of Japanese popular film art (while all film can be viewed as art it is not necessarily 'high' or 'good' art), namely *anime*, will be investigated more closely for evidence of nihilism.

On a note of clarification, I here focus on the analysis of *anime*, in its capacity as a popular 'art', as a means of interpreting cultural undercurrents in Japanese society, as any popular medium could be said to serve as a vessel containing expressions of the axiological tensions inherent to its 'parent' culture. I say this to support my argument concerning (signs of) nihilism in Japanese culture. Some would argue that Japanese society is full of wholesome family values, which on the surface it is indeed (much like American culture), but when one engages with its art, including instances of popular art, one can bypass the saccharine façade presented by the society in which it originates, and perceive the qualities hidden behind the façade of conventional life, but evident in artifacts such as films, television programmes and literature. I would like to point out that in its applicability as an interpretive concept, nihilism is not particular to European society just because it was first explored by European thinkers, and that it can be applied to any human society in which questions of meaning or value are important – which, to my mind, would be any human society. The present article is predicated on this assumption, which is arguably a reasonable one.

The world of people, or society, is filled with value systems constructed and historically reproduced by the many and varied cultures and societies that have proliferated in the history

and geography of human existence. These value systems give the people that subscribe to them a formula for existence into which they easily fit. When Nietzsche wrote about nihilism (Nietzsche 1968: 7-24), Christianity, and by association Christian morality, was the most influential and pervasive set of constructed values in the society in which he lived. As a result of this Nietzsche stated that at that time a state of nihilism had been reached as a result of 'The end of Christianity – at the hands of its own morality (which cannot be replaced)…', '… the sense of truthfulness... is nauseated by the falseness and mendaciousness of all Christian interpretations of the world…' (Nietzsche, 1968: 7-10). Nietzsche believed that nihilism was prepared for by the Platonic and Christian belief that the world of time and space, inhabited by human beings, is not the 'true world', and is therefore stripped of value.

One can already see in this remark the basis for a comparison between Western and Japanese society – in the latter, too, one could find evidence that the world has been 'stripped of value' by the activities of an excessively technology-loving society, which replaced the earlier (pre-modern) society, with its rigid class structure. Signs of an awareness of such a 'stripping of value' of the world, in the specific form of nature, appear in the *anime* film *Spirited Away* (Miyazaki, 2001), especially in the scene-sequence where the heroine (a young girl trying to rescue her parents from imprisonment by spirits) has to clean or purify the spirit of the river, which first arrives in the shape of a sordid, formless, monstrous being. After she has cleaned it, it departs in purified form, but the tangled mess of mechanical junk that remains behind is a clear indication of Japanese consciousness of the devaluing effects of modern, industrial society on the natural world.

Because of the fact that I intend using Nietzsche's work on nihilism to interpret Japanese *anime*, and because some readers may disagree that a Western author can shed light on nihilism in an Eastern culture, I shall introduce a brief detour. It should be pointed out that all cultures lend themselves to being understood in terms of their formal and 'material' properties, respectively, or what Nietzsche (1967: 33) called the Apollinian and the Dionysian principles. To be more precise, the Apollinian element in a culture represents, for Nietzsche, 'beautiful illusion' or appearance, clear images, restraint, and the 'principle of individuation' (1967: 35-36). By contrast the Dionysian element in culture stands for something that destroys the clear Apollinian form and individuality of things, which explains why Nietzsche associates it with intoxication and a 'mysterious primordial unity' (1967: 37).

According to Allan Megill (1987: 38-41), for Nietzsche it is 'an absolute necessity of culture' (p. 41) that the barbarism of a society where the Dionysian reigns unbridled, be tempered by the Apollinian 'plane of illusion'. This is what makes the difference between living in a state of culture as opposed to a state of nature. I understand this to mean that all cultures exist on the basis of a kind of 'balance' between the Apollinian formal principle of clear individuation (which is also that of reason as far as it creates forms by means of which it can grasp an underlying reality), and the Dionysian principle of the fusion between individuals in the name of a more fundamental reality and natural 'unity' – in nature all individual things are 'one'. Megill (1987: 39) says that Nietzsche's distinction between these two things, which is also a distinction between illusion (Apollo) and reality (Dionysus), has a nihilistic aspect to it, because the Apollinian makes reality bearable. In its pure state, Dionysian reality (intoxication, ecstasy, but also immediate pain and suffering) would be unbearable; the Apollinian element of illusion and rational forms makes it bearable, but at the cost of falsifying reality (hence the nihilism). I would argue that, in these terms, the nihilism in Western culture as well as in Japanese culture today (as evident in a variety of cultural artifacts) can be linked to an exaggeration of the Apollinian element at the cost of the Dionysian, which somehow provides an awareness of an 'underlying reality'.

In Japanese culture, as I will argue, their animist religion (Shinto) as well as Buddhism (which professes a respect for all living things) can be seen as a reminder of a 'primordial unity' between humans and nature. In addition to what I shall argue about the relevance of the collapse of the Japanese cast system for the appearance of nihilism, their love of technology, on the other hand, is an expression of the Apollinian element; the more it obscures the Dionysian, the more nihilistic a culture would be. The influence of Christianity or the value system linked to it on nihilism in Western culture is not something I am claiming has anything directly to do with Japanese nihilism; rather I am using the model to draw a parallel with the change in the most influential value system in Japanese society at the time (namely the 'samurai' cultural values), and the rather speedy change to a newer, 'modernist'(technological progressionist even) set of societal values.

Another consideration that one can refer to in order to counter the criticism, that Western thought cannot be used to understand the Japanese, is the abundant evidence of the influence of Western culture on Japanese culture, which shows that the latter culture cannot be regarded in isolation. Names of mythical or historical Western origin in anime series, including 'Olympus' (the name of the last great human city in *Appleseed;* 2004), the 'Babylon Project' (the project to save the city from the rising sea's in *Patlabor***;** 1989), *Gaia* (used in various *anime* to refer to the 'spirit' of nature) and 'Knight Sabres' (*Bubblegum Crisis*; 1989) cannot be mistaken as far as their origin goes. Not that this should be surprising. There are many instances that reflect the mutual influence between Japan and the West – for example, scholars on globalization, 'critical multiculturalism' and postmodern culture, such as Iwabuchi (see 1994), elaborate on the debate concerning Japan's cultural status in relation to the West, highlighting the different positions regarding its supposed 'otherness', as well as Japanese scholars' critical contributions to the debate. What seems to me to be relevant for this article, is the fact that some of these Japanese scholars referred to by Iwabuchi (1994: 12), for example Ishihara Shintaro, claim that Japan is future-orientated and will have a shaping role to play for 'the next age, a more human age beyond western modernity' (something which, I would claim, is already fictionally apparent in some *anime* creations). This, to my mind, indicates an element of what I shall refer to later, on the basis of Nietzsche's work, as 'active nihilism' on the part of the Japanese, which means that one can see in their culture active attempts to create new values to replace ones that are defunct, or in a sense 'inhuman', or are associated with what they see as unacceptable classifications of Japanese culture by the West (Iwabuchi 1994: 7-11). The important point is that globalization brings about mutual influence of different societies on each other, which results in the emergence of new cultural forms, instead of cultures remaining 'pure' in their difference (see Steger 2003). This makes it more likely that one culture can understand the other. But more needs to be said about Nietzsche's reflections on nihilism.

Returning to my earlier line of argument, the 'true world' according to Platonism and Christianity is one supposedly beyond the perceivable world of the senses. Nietzsche also believed that skepticism is decisive in finally reaching the perspective of a nihilist, in that once someone has attained insight into the falsity of the claim that there is one 'true world' (Melchert 1993: 492-497), the person would be skeptical and suspicious of any value system claiming to be the only one for interpreting the world. I agree in part with Nietzsche; the end of the pervasiveness of Christianity was the end of the single most dominant value system in that era in Europe and America, one that was probably the greatest bearer of the rising nihilism in those societies - but I also believe that similar developments have come about as a result of the history of other religions (the relevant one here being Japanese animist or 'nature' religion), or even the fall of cultural value systems unrelated to any religious beliefs (in this case the 'samurai' value system).

Nietzsche believed that the awareness, on the part of people, of a nihilistic cultural condition demands a reaction. He classifies the first consciousness and experience of nihilism as 'radical nihilism': '… the conviction of an absolute untenability of existence when it comes to the highest values one recognises; plus the realisation that we lack the least right to posit a beyond or an in-itself of things that might be 'divine' or 'morality in cold' (Nietzsche, 1968: 9). This radical nihilism must be reacted to or, alternatively, acted upon; Nietzsche described two types of nihilism to explain the different responses to the loss of value systems (1968: 17).

One of the two classes is passive nihilism. Again Nietzsche explains this as a reaction to our failure to realize our notion of the 'true' world beyond language and appearance, precisely because we have constructed this notion while it is not applicable, and it results in our falling into despair. One could explain passive nihilism as being a kind of 'ostrich' reaction (closing one's eyes to something undeniable), and an inability to cope with the enormity of the realization that we are a tiny and an unimportant part of existence, that we do not hold a greater significance and central importance in some greater scheme. The passive reaction is to search for an already constructed set of values, or dogma, found in something such as religion. In both modernity and indeed postmodernity there are many such religious constructs to be found – the typical modern version is known as a 'metanarrative' (Lyotard 1984: xxiii) and its less presumptuous postmodern counterpart, in Wittgenstein's terms, as a 'language game' (Lyotard 1984: xxiv; 14-17), which has to compete with other such limited practices and discourses for people's allegiance. All that is left in postmodernity of the grandiose claims of modern metanarratives are 'little stories' that appeal to limited audiences. These include archaic or premodern religions that have belief systems which are outdated and incompatible with the technological and informational character of the postmodern era (yet still find massive numbers of adherents and converts who seem to be too insecure in their own existence to cope without the idea that there is some kind of massively powerful 'parental figure' around which everything revolves, and by association everything revolves around individuals who have 'faith'). Many of the 'newer' religions are still in fact based on the same moral framework as the archaic religions, supposedly revitalised by being formulated in a modern (or postmodern) context, and hold to those same ancient ideals that simply do not fit in with the way today's society is able to understand the world.

Even consumerism appears to fit into the same framework as the religions, only the deity is replaced by consumer goods – not specific goods, but whichever goods are in greatest demand, or seem to promise the greatest satisfaction (which always stays just out of reach). These systems of belief are numerous and varied, but they all share a common principle: they have ready-made values which any person can just adopt, and suddenly 'fit in' - no longer will they feel lost and alone in a hostile world. This reaction is a denial that tries to ignore or just bury the ideas that are part and parcel of the 'realisation' of radical nihilism. Megill describes passive nihilism as the adoption of a 'passive and anaesthetic attitude' towards the reality of crisis in the 'null' of nihilism, 'null' referring to the value system's failure (Megill, 1987: 33).

The other type of nihilism (or action in the face of nihilism) as identified by Nietzsche is active nihilism (1968: 17). Active nihilism can be seen as being the 'courageous' response to the consciousness of radical nihilism, as opposed to the 'cowardly' or 'reactive' response of passive nihilism; a passive nihilist hides from existence behind the sham 'belief' in some greater, supposedly pre-existent purpose, whereas active nihilists decide that the best way to face the grim reality of the 'nullified' world is to create meaning for themselves through specific activity. This can be seen and achieved in many different ways: creating art of some type that embodies meaning for an individual, and meaning for anyone who would behold it (as with any interpretive art); writing a book; working to help people, in medicine, social services, or in a myriad other ways; striving constructively for excellence in some endeavour.

Sometimes it can be difficult to distinguish between positive (active) or negative (passive) nihilistic behaviour, and the easiest way (though not the only way, and not an infallible way) to ascertain if something is passively nihilistic or actively nihilistic is to ask the question, whether the values held by a specific person are personally constructed, or are values people merely 'buy into' on a massive scale. It is impossible for an individual to hold values unaffected by the society in which that individual has been raised and now resides; these kinds of influences are what shape our perspective on the world, and will always affect us. It is the ability to interact critically and creatively with these values, and decide for oneself whether specific beliefs are to be upheld or not, that makes the difference between being passively nihilistic or not. An orthodox Christian or Jew does not question the faith – indeed, that is exactly what religious faith is, a belief in something without any proof, or indeed in the face of proof against all that it espouses. The important question is whether there could be a Christian, or Muslim, or Jew, who is an active nihilist, if their lives are constantly tested against the traditional values that these religions promote.

A strong case can be made that consumer capitalism is a form of passive nihilism (Olivier 2004) because of the nature of consumerism itself – people living and participating in this economic system passively 'consume' the products and services available to them, without creating alternative values for themselves. However, it may be more accurate to argue that at least some 'consumers' live lives that are partly passively nihilistic, but partly actively nihilistic, if their lives are not restricted to 'consuming' (writers, artists, surfers, wilderness hikers, etc.).

Colebrook (2002: 12-13), commenting on Deleuze's thought, speaks about his view of philosophy, art and science in a way that clarifies the concept of active nihilism.:

> Philosophy, art and science need to be seen as distinct moments of the explosive force of life, a life that is in a process of constant becoming. It is not that we have a world or life that philosophers or writers then describe or interpret. Each act of art, science or philosophy is itself an event and transfiguration of life. And each transformation changes life in its own specific or singular way…If we understand the power that drives this production then we will be able to maximise our creativity, our life and our future.

Colebrook (2002: 18-19) also talks about the strong link between Nietzsche and Deleuze where she emphasises that, for both of them, philosophical concepts were supposed to be 'active' – they should create connections in the world, and not only function as 'labels' of the way the world is already organised. I think this statement is very valuable – for philosophy, but also for art that goes further than repeating the same old formulas over and over. The artist's (or film director's) aim should also be to create new connections in the world (which is very difficult in today's world with its never-ending stream of especially popular art). In this article, then, I focus on the question, if a particular kind of film art, known as Japanese *anime*, can be labelled nihilistic in any sense of the word. This seems to be an interesting question because *anime* is a popular artform (the origins of which lie in *ukiyo-e* and manga, which will not be discussed here; such origins merit a separate investigation) that appeared in a 'foreign' culture – one that did not share the historical development of Western culture.

Japan and nihilism

Nietzsche maintained that the main cause of what he called European nihilism was what he referred to as the 'death of God' (1984: 95). He did not mean the literal death of God and destruction of the Church as an institution, or its physical destruction by any antireligious group, but the death of Christian values, or of the Church as the seat or metaphysical anchor for societal moral values. Japanese culture has only been influenced by Christianity in the most minor of ways, with the latter only arriving on Japanese shores in 1542, brought (ironically

along with gunpowder) by the Portuguese. It was banned, in one instance 26 members of the Christian clergy being executed as an object lesson; it was actively opposed by the government until 1873, when religious freedom was adopted as a reform after the fall of the Tokugawa government. Today less than 1% of the population of Japan is Christian.

Despite the fact that they have had little contact with Christianity, however, the Japanese exhibit much in the way of a nihilistic attitude; as I will show, it is displayed very strongly through their media (www.japan-guide.com). Obviously they could not have been affected by the 'death of God' in far away Europe (Japan was almost completely isolated from the rest of the world during the Tokugawa era); therefore, another set of events concerning value systems (possibly originally also religious in nature) must have conspired to bring about the presence of nihilism in their culture. Delving into the history of Japan allows me to speculate and suggest which events were collectively responsible for the sudden devaluation of the internalised value systems of the Japanese population, parallel to the Nietzschean 'death of God' in Western culture. I am using the Nietzschean model only as a parallel, a useful structure to aid in my reasoning concerning Japanese nihilism, keeping in mind the earlier contention that all cultures lend themselves to being understood as a fusion of Apollinian and Dionysian elements, which here apply to the outward form of the cultural events in question (the Apollinian) and the underlying 'unity' among people as well as between humans and nature (the Dionysian).

When one looks at the religious history of Japanese society two major religions stand out: Shintoism and Buddhism. Shintoism, which is still (in the same way as Christianity in Western countries) a widely held religion in Japan (www.japan-guide.com), has no scriptures or sutras equivalent to the Bible. It is the indigenous religion of Japan, and is deeply rooted in the people and traditions of the society. Shinto stands for 'the way of the gods', and the Shinto gods are referred to as Kami. These gods are not gods as traditional Western religions would know them, rather, to describe them in a way that will shed more light than a direct translation of the word used to refer to them, one should describe them as spirits; spirits of things that are important in human life, including abstract things such as concepts. Examples of these spirits would be the spirit of a river, like the one in *Spirited Away*, referred to earlier (each river would have its own spirit), or the spirit of the rain, the spirit of a mountain, or indeed the spirit of fertility. Humans become Kami when they die, and are then worshipped and revered as ancestral spirits. The Sun Goddess Amaterasu is the most important and influential Kami in the Shinto belief structure. Shintoism is an animistic belief system, animistic meaning that the religion is predicated on the belief that everything is 'alive' or permeated by a life-principle, perhaps describable as a 'soul' in some way, which would then make it a very nature-friendly religion (in the case of Shintoism 'life' would be the Kami). Because this religion, though perhaps not constantly practised by the Japanese people, maintains a deep-seated presence in Japanese culture as a result of its intertwinement with many Japanese traditions and their way of life, I believe this lingering connection to nature (ironically) plays a part in the nihilism inherent in contemporary Japanese culture.

In contrast with most monotheistic religions, including Christianity, there are no absolutes in Shintoism, no concrete right or wrong, and people are not regarded as being (potentially) perfect. (Admittedly in Christianity 'sinful' people are considered to be decidedly imperfect, but there it makes some sense to strive for supposed 'purity'.) Christianity derives much of its power through the cultivation, in its faithful, of a heavy sense of guilt, which is arguably designed to make Christians feel constantly guilty about almost anything they do, and there seems to be very little that is not considered sinful in the Christian belief system. In fact, in Christianity people are considered to be full of sin from birth, a situation they are assured is impossible to change (for example by the 20th-century Christian theologian Karl Barth; see

Baumer 1977: 443-445) – quite different from the far more optimistic Shintoist perspective. A very important difference between Christianity and Shintoism is, to my mind, the fact that Christian values are supposed to be rigidly adhered to, and often firmly imposed in certain religious communities, whereas the Shintoist value system would be far more particular with regard to each individual as a result of the flexibility in its beliefs (www.japan-guide.com).

The peaceful religion of Buddhism is far better known than Shintoism, and has many millions of adherents around the world. Started in India by the Buddha, Gautama Siddhartha, Buddhism was introduced into Japanese culture in the sixth century C.E. (www.japan-guide. com) as a gift from the Korean kingdom of Kudara (Paikche). It was welcomed by the nobles of Japan, and was adopted as the new state religion, but did not initially filter down to the peasants. At first there was some conflict between Shintoism and Buddhism, but the nature of these two religions resulted in them soon being able to coexist harmoniously, in many ways even complementing each other. Buddhism deals with the idea of Karma as one of its central themes, which essentially is the belief that any action will be revisited on the perpetrator at some other point on the 'wheel of life'. The first branch of Buddhism to enter Japan was one of the main branches, the Mahayana or Greater Vehicle Buddhism. There are many different Buddhist sects which made their way into Japanese culture through the course of history. Zen Buddhism is one of the most popular forms of Buddhism outside of Japan, but not in Japan itself. As pointed out earlier, Buddhism is also a very nature-friendly religion, making both of the major religions in Japanese culture closely tied to nature. Both Buddhism and Shintoism have a lot more moral flexibility than Christianity, making it very difficult for either of these religions to be responsible for the rather sudden loss of internalised value systems in the way that the historical failing of Christianity does, given its relative rigidity as a fundamental belief system. The more personally unique adherence to Shinto and Buddhist spirituality relies far less on external constraints than Christianity. The connections between these religions and the rise of nihilism is found in their relationship with tradition (Japanese culture is historically very formal and traditional) and nature, in the context of the massive changes in Japanese culture during Japan's industrialisation.

Japanese society underwent a significant social upheaval at the end of the isolationist Edo era, an era in which 'samurai culture' held sway, and the hierarchical division of Japanese society was the dominant value system of the time. This era ended rather abruptly, due to the corruption and stagnation of Japanese society. The transition to the forward-thinking Meiji era was swift – spectacularly so, which always seems to lead to a stronger cultural backlash than a gradual process.

This transition had a similar axiological effect on Japanese culture and society to the effect Nietzsche suggests the waning of Christian moral influence had on European culture and society. Up to that point Japanese societal value systems had been based on the strict, hierarchical segregation of social classes, along with the very formal and traditional nature of Japanese society. In the space of a few years these traditionally held value systems gave way to the new westernising influence on society. As I mentioned earlier, both Shintoism and Buddhism were nature-friendly in their values, and industrialisation (as we well know) relegated nature, by contrast, to the status of mere resource. This transition, which therefore occurred at two important levels (from premodern, nature-religion orientated, and hierarchically ordered society, to modern, secular, technologically developed society) is one of the most important phases in Japanese history, and is often thematised in the Japanese media, specifically forming the basis for many a plot in Japanese *anime* films. This era also served as the backdrop to Zwick's film *The Last Samurai* (2003), which documents (in fictional form) the struggle by the now disenfranchised samurai to retain the honoured status they had previously enjoyed. This aspect

of the film is interesting - the conflict between traditional values and what is generally thought of as progress. Unfortunately, the film serves a passively nihilistic function, as it exemplifies old traditional values (those of the Samurai era). Instead of allowing people to realise that it is possible to create meaning for oneself, it suggests that assuming the already constructed values of an outdated system is acceptable and axiologically sufficient in a new age.

An interesting commentary on Japanese culture compares it to the Borg in the popular sci-fi series *Star Trek* (www.thejapanfaq.cjb.net). In Japanese culture less emphasis is placed on individual effort and in industry the society functions in a collectivist way. Company managers and owners do not get paid ridiculous amounts of money as their Western counterparts are, making all the workers far more economically equal. Company loyalty is very important to Japanese businesses, and a huge amount of effort is put into ensuring such loyalty from employees. This collectivist way of thinking is very possibly partially generated by the enforced close proximity of everything in Japan. The country is slightly smaller than California, with about 75% of the available land being uninhabitable. A further 15% is used for agriculture, leaving only 10% to be lived on by the population of 126 million people, almost half that of the United States. Adding up the mix of incredible population density, strong economy, a taste for technology, and very high per capita income, one gets Japanese consumer culture. It is unlike any other consumer culture around the world. With the removal of the traditional value systems, combined with rampant technophilia, consumerism and the capitalist perspective have taken the place of these values. Yet even with the degree to which Japanese society has answered the need for new values with the development of technology and consumerism, the society is conflicted in its search for more meaningful values than the empty, confining, and glitzy values offered by consumer culture; this casting about expresses itself through the very popular form of media in Japan focused on here, which is also increasing its popularity at an exponential rate throughout the rest of the developed world – *anime*.

Anime

Anime is Japanese animation – 'cartoons'. It is not, however, a film-category of cartoons in the sense that most Western television or film viewers are familiar with. Most Western cartoons, such as *The Smurfs*, are for children only, whereas *anime* exists for almost any demographic group you could imagine; there is even a category for previously delinquent single mothers. *Anime* deals with some very serious topics, even children's *anime* deals with serious issues, such as death; Western cartoons and adaptations by Western-style media of *anime* tend to steer very clear of any such issues. *Anime* is based on the popular comic book type publications known as Manga comics, with successful Manga comics being converted into *anime* series. Manga is characterised by its own particular style, and to become a Manga artist takes a lot of hard work and a large amount of time. Manga itself is a derivative of the older art discipline of *ukiyo-e*, 'pictures of the floating world', a genre of woodblock prints. Manga, and by association *anime*, tend to have a large amount of 'reality' in their stories; I do not mean that there are not fantastical creatures in fantastical settings - the largest number of *anime* films have an extremely fantastical thread in the plot - what I mean by 'reality' is the fact that they deal with issues that are very 'real', or socially relevant, such as the nature of the relationship between 'good' and 'evil', showing that in fact good and evil are far less clearly defined than the dictionary definitions would have us believe. *Anime* shows both sides of a conflict, first portraying one side as being 'good', and in the very next instant showing the motivations and reasons of the supposedly 'evil' group's actions, demonstrating that despite the fact that each side may view the other as being 'evil' it is a matter of perspective and identification that will decide which is which. The 'reality' extends further in that the Japanese work ethic (which is unusually strong by Western

standards) is a definite thread in most *anime*, with the characters going to school or to work amidst the less mundane happenings of the series. It deals with consequences of the actions by the characters portrayed, something which I find sadly lacking in most Western media.

The characters in an *anime* show are truly '3-D' characters, with the plot being generated by the characters, not the characters being inserted into a plot. These characters will learn and grow over time and through experience – reminiscent of the Western *Bildungsroman*-tradition – another 'reality' that increases the interest factor of *anime* shows. Something which ties in with (largely active) nihilism through *anime* is the message (involving the work ethic) that if one tries hard enough it is possible to achieve a result which is meaningful. The most important aspect of *anime* for the present research is the fact that it serves as expression of the tensions in the culture that produced it, in this case Japanese culture. Analysis of certain themes and the *anime* shows which express those themes gives great insight into Japanese culture. In this way I will show the nihilism inherent in this culture. Something which one must be aware of, and at the same time beware of, are the adapted versions of *anime* series released in places such as the United States – this includes *Dragon ball Z* and *Pokémon*, which have been altered to fit Western cartoon style. I wish to stress that *anime* is one of the most popular forms of media entertainment in Japan, which caters for almost any conceivable audience, to such an effective degree that (as mentioned earlier) it is growing in popularity outside of Japan at an incredible pace.

The first theme I will explore is that of the conspicuous tension between technology and nature. As a result of an affinity for nature derived from the ingrained and deep-seated, although most probably unconscious, connection through the Shintoist and Buddhist belief systems, judging by *anime* themes, the Japanese population displays a significant degree of collective guilt for the ruin that humanity and technology have brought upon the planet Earth. This theme is explored in many *anime* series and movies. The first example of such a series is *Blue Gender* (1999). The series takes place in a post-apocalyptic world in which all humans of Earth have had to escape into space stations orbiting the planet, as what seems to be an alien race appeared almost out of nowhere and has managed to put humanity on the endangered species list. The action centres on a group of human resistance fighters who use enormous mechanical robots to fight the supposed alien threat. In the course of the campaign to try and rid the world of the fearsome creatures the group finds out that these creatures are not alien at all, but are in fact part of a drastic response by nature to rid itself of a dangerous infection that is destroying it at a massive pace (much like the human body's defence against infection). This threat is humanity itself. This is an obvious expression of the guilt-backlash resulting from technological and industrial development which has caused so much destruction in natural terms. The nihilism here is 'active' in so far as, at an Apollinian level (graphics and narrative) the series gropes towards a way of addressing the crisis, which takes the form of the Dionysian 'unity' between humans and nature at a very fundamental level having been destroyed, with the result that nature has become openly hostile to humans.

This theme is repeated in *X(TV)* (2001), in which seven champions for the Earth and seven champions for humanity must decide whether humanity will perish in order for nature to survive, or whether humanity will survive at the probable cost of nature, which could lead to the destruction of humanity at the same time (though this outcome would give humanity the chance to redeem itself and possibly reverse the course of natural destruction – this could be construed as being a 'fictional' warning suggesting that our chances for preventing a catastrophic breakdown of nature may be running out). The ultimate decision is left to a very ordinary young man who must become the final champion for one side or the other. The interesting thing about the series is the fact that the argument for humanity's destruction and humanity's salvation are both put

forward very convincingly, leaving you with the sense that maybe it would be better if humanity were to be destroyed (and possibly emerge again in primitive form in the course of natural evolution). This can be seen as a clash between the more deep-seated innate beliefs that come with the animist-spiritualist Shinto background, a belief system which tends towards living in harmony with nature, and the consumerist value system with which Japanese urban culture is inundated, a value system that Japanese society does not seem to be entirely comfortable with. The fact that the final decision is made by an ordinary young man, no different from any other young man in Japanese culture, seems designed to let the ordinary folk who watch the series identify with this character, and thus feel his perilous responsibility so as to make a warning message so much more powerful and emotive. In the final analysis it may be seen as an attempt to come up with an active-nihilistic response to the awareness that competing, passive-nihilistic belief systems are not convincing by themselves, and that something axiologically new has to be devised to attain a meaningful life once more.

Another *anime* movie dealing with the destruction of nature at the hands of humanity is *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*, (1983) which is set in a time after an apocalypse known as the 'Seven Days of Fire' (caused by war) has ravaged the planet and left very little habitable space for human existence. And of course humanity continues to wage war despite its precarious position. A princess, Nausicaa, tries to mediate between the various factions and at the same time understand the strange new vegetation covering the ravaged landscapes. As in *Blue Gender* this is a mechanism of nature designed to return the Earth to its original natural state, yet again allowing glimpses of Shintoist values to be seen, in so far as suggesting that a certain type of life inhabits the planet Earth is in line with animistic spirituality. The interesting thing about this *anime* is that it was released in 1984, in an era in which the ecological crisis was in no way very topical – even now, despite the disastrous effects of global warming on natural weather patterns, this crisis is generally sidelined in mainstream media. In terms of nihilism the fact that these *anime* productions exhibit a certain lack of faith in contemporary capitalist value structures (especially in so far as the destruction of nature is exacerbated by capitalism; see Kovel 2002), and offer other possible value structures (although as often as not these alternatives would be just another passively nihilistic construct) can be seen, paradoxically, as an actively nihilistic reaction on the part of those responsible for producing the *anime*.

The powerlessness of the average person caught up in the consumer culture which overwhelms the globe in the contemporary capitalist era is also expressed in some *anime* elaborating on this theme. One of these shows, *Earth Girl Arjuna,*(2001) has a main character who becomes nature's champion, actually battling the malevolent spirits of industrial or technological constructs (such as a nuclear power plant or factory), and thus attributing blame to clearly identifiable ecologically dangerous culprits. Once again identification with the main character is generated through the normality of her everyday existence, her fantastical double life notwithstanding. The fact that the audience will identify with this character allows a vicarious catharsis for members of the audience by allowing them to feel empowered by the destruction of the spirits generated by dangerous technology; this is not, however, necessarily a good thing, because generating this cathartic reaction in the audience may remove the need they feel to act against these forces, rendering them once again docile and malleable. The sheer amount of *anime* productions which thematize this conflict between technology and nature demonstrates very effectively that this is a very prominent tension in terms of nihilistic awareness in Japanese culture. Still, *Earth Girl Arjuna* can be seen as an example of active nihilism in its programmatic attempt to deal with technological threats to life.

The volume of *anime* produced is staggering, and as such a massive amount is just consumerist trash. These can be seen as being kitsch, with all the nihilistic qualities attributed

to kitsch, such as the anaesthetic effect it has on viewers (see Olivier 2004). Many of these productions are pure escapism, where various formulas are used to create the same story with different characters and a slightly altered plot. It is very difficult to feel a sense of importance and individuality living in such an incredibly dense population as can be found in Japan, and an escapist formula exists in many different forms to deal with this frustration in the form of an apparently meaningless existence. As I said earlier, the identification facilitated through mundane 'normal elements' of a character's existence is very common, allowing the audience (of course depending on which demographic group each particular animation project is aimed at) to place themselves in this character's shoes, and then, because identification has already taken place, the concomitant effect is that the rest of the character's life becomes shared qualities as well. This includes fantastical abilities and secret double lives, allowing the audience to share the secret and all the experiences that go with it. This then allows the audience to experience the abnormal and totally different life of the *anime* character vicariously, which satisfies many needs and urges created by the confining consumer-capitalist existence of contemporary urban workers, while removing any true motivation to change the life that they lead. It is therefore not difficult to see that *anime* – especially the kitsch variety – is a double-edged sword: it offers a kind of vicarious fulfillment, but at the cost of this acting as an anaesthetic concerning the very real problems of capitalist society. The irony is that, while the *anime* sometimes appears to embody active nihilism (which should lead to appropriate social or ecological action), it easily encourages passive nihilism on the part of audience members.

There is a specific genre in the group of passively nihilistic *anime* series to which I would like to pay closer attention. This is the genre that deals with the concept of samurai in this 'passive' structure. The samurai was the epitome of a Japanese man, and the pinnacle of Japanese society for many years, a society in which structure and social status are incredibly important. These traditional ways were discarded in favour of a far more liberal individual-centered set of values. The new ways demanded self-determination, whereas the old ways have a ready-made structure into which one would slot, making it a far simpler way of life in which – for want of a better phrase – one did not have to 'make' one's own destiny. Thus in an era of rampant nihilism and lack of readily available internalised value systems this tried and tested blueprint serves the same function as any fundamentalist religion with the same passive structure, such as Christianity. Anyone who has watched their share of martial arts or samurai movies knows what I mean when I speak about the samurai code; it has much to do with honour, justice, and honest one-on-one battle to sort out one's differences. In samurai culture one's skill speaks for one, as it is believed that one can only be strong in this fashion if you hold true to the values of the samurai, such as the belief that true strength comes from fighting not for oneself but rather to protect others, even to the point of self-sacrifice, and a lack of emotion that would make the Roman Stoics proud – all that matters to a samurai is his own skill and justice. These values are not necessarily bad values. Some of them seem humane compared to the cutthroat amoral outlook cultivated because capitalism functions on a very self-centred level, pitting person against person - as Kovel aptly points out, the soft-hearted are kicked off the corporate ladder early in the process of 'capitalist-selection' (Kovel 2002: 38); nevertheless, these value systems are archaic and outdated, unable to function in today's society. These *anime* series also serve to remind the essentially patriarchal society of Japan of a time when women were 'properly' behaved. This kind of *anime* narrative generally takes place during the transition between the Tokugawa era and the industrialized Meiji era – in fact a large number of *anime* series focus on this time period. This is an expression of regret by contemporary culture, a mourning of the loss of these ancient traditional ways – a knee-jerk reaction to the meaninglessness of modern life. The horror and tragedy of these years under the rule of the samurai are forgotten, the era in retrospect seeming full of a goodness of life lacking today, despite the fact that human life

was worth very little in that time. This is similar to the rambling of grandfathers about how the world was a much better place when they were young. The people yearning for the 'simpler' way of life in samurai days are not truly engaging with the values inherent in it, rather they are yearning through the medium of *anime* in a sense similar to the evoking of memories through kitsch.

An interesting *anime* series which takes a far more actively nihilistic approach to contemporary society and ancient samurai society is *Rurouni Kenshin* (1996). The series deals with the travels of a one-time samurai at the beginning of the new, less socially hierarchical, industrial era in Japan. The particular samurai, once one of the most feared and deadly warriors, travels with a reverse blade sword – the special sword is symbolic of his oath never to kill again, as he has accepted the death of the old era and has chosen to use his skills in a non-lethal manner to help the transition between the two eras. The new era holds human life to be intrinsically valuable, trying to ensure that people like the one he used to be are no longer necessary. He is repeatedly goaded to relinquish his new-found respect for life, but he clings to his new principles, creating new meaning for himself in place of the old samurai virtues of death before dishonour. He finds meaning through relationships and the cultivation of those relationships, ignoring social status and the old hierarchy, demonstrating the possibility of exactly this kind of meaningful existence in the new era. This series tries to show that it is possible to find meaning in one's life without clinging to value structures created by other people. The main character shows his 'strength of spirit' in the form of his active nihilism in the face of the passively nihilistic 'idea' of the samurai, which is the idiom he is challenging -- Nietzsche supports this (Nietzsche 1968: 17-18):

> It can be a sign of strength: the spirit may have grown so strong that previous goals ("convictions," articles of faith) have become incommensurate (for a faith generally expresses the constraint of conditions of existence, submission to the authority of circumstances under which one flourishes, grows, gains power).

An *anime* series which I believe engages with the complex theme of self-determination in a very enlightening manner is *Scrapped Princess* (2005). In this series the plot centres on a young princess who is being hunted through the realms of a theocratic feudal world. At first this is seemingly just a story about a fugitive with a mysterious past and an even more mysterious future, on the run because of her birth as royalty. The reasons for which she is being chased are not clear, and as her adventures continue strange hints and stranger occurrences make the viewer realise that there is far more going on here than meets the eye. It turns out that the story is in fact taking place 5000 years into the future, and humanity is existing within a controlled environment situated on a small part of a continent created specifically to keep humanity from destroying itself through constant technological progress. It does not seem to have the wisdom to control this progress without destroying itself and nature. It is the same concept as when people in contemporary society create a nature reserve in order to prevent the extinction of certain natural species. This is also very similar to the concept of *The Matrix* in the movie of the same name, the fictional object of *The Matrix* being a computer programme which keeps humanity docile through the imposition of a fake reality. In *Scrapped Princess* the 'human conservation' is administered by a computer programme which has placed itself in a position of power by turning itself into a religion which is in turn controlled through various super high-tech robotic agents. This is the perfect example of a passively nihilistic system keeping an entire populace docile through specific values, even going so far as to suggest that religion in any fundamentalist fashion serves to stagnate society. The controlling programme keeps humanity in the feudal age, thwarting any technological or philosophical advance that would lead to insight into the stagnation of society and from there the encompassing imprisoned status. The question being dealt with in this series is whether free will is worth the risk of self-destruction

through self-determination. The creators of this *anime* series answer this question by letting the character of the hunted princess, who is faced with the decision between safe continued existence of humanity and self-determined risky existence, choose self-determination -- the writers have opted for the actively nihilistic existence in which humanity will be responsible for its own future, even if it has none because of this choice, rather than continue 'safely' (but meaninglessly) without any true free will or internalised self-created values.

Ghost in the Shell, (2002) a futuristic *anime* series which is very significant for my present purposes, engages with the question of 'what makes a human human'. The series is a continuation of narratives set in a fictional reality created in one of the most popular and groundbreaking *anime* movies to date, also called *Ghost in the Shell,* directed by Mamoru Oshii (1996). In this reality cybernetic technology is very advanced, as is artificial intelligence. The protagonist is a woman (the 'Major') who leads a team of agents who investigate cyber crime, which in this setting involves people hacking into other people's cybernetic brains, as one of the most popular products at this time is a cybernetic brain which, theoretically, would increase one's mental faculties exponentially. Of course, the threat of people electronically fiddling with personalities or extracting information from these electronic brains is very serious and unsettling. The protagonist is an entirely cybernetic person, having been transformed into one because of being too sick to survive longer than a short while in her original body. She was transferred (at least her personality was transferred) into the cybernetic body when she was a small girl, and she has existed her entire life without a single human body part. Part of the narrative deals with her constant debate and uncertainty about her own humanity, as she is not sure what constitutes humanity -- only her mind is human, and there are artificial intelligence programmes which seem just as human, if not more human, than she does. The acute Japanese dilemma in the form of a conflict between nature and technology is addressed here in an attempt to fuse spirituality and technology. The title *Ghost in the Shell* refers to the soul, and the question of what constitutes a soul. There is a group of artificial intelligence machines called *Tachikoma* which, in the course of the narrative, engage critically with their own self-awareness, and in so doing start questioning exactly what the nature of their existence is. All of the questioning concerning the nature of existence in this series is representative of a quest to find the meaning for one's own existence, a particularly active nihilistic endeavour. Perhaps one should add that the idea of the separability of soul (mind, spirit, ghost) and body (machine) which undergirds this series is debatable. It reminds one of Western philosophical dualism (or 'interactionism') such as that of Descartes (see Melchert 1991: 287-304), but the implications of such dualistic thinking are not what interests me here.

An interesting facet of the original film (on which the series is based) is the way in which it seems very optimistic about the future of human and technological 'symbiosis', with no real nature-guilt involved at all – rather a vindication of technology as humanity's vehicle to realize its future potential fully. There is a scene near the end of *Ghost in the Shell* where gunfire destroys all the indications of evolutionary pre-historical (that is, natural) stages on the wall of a museum, leaving only the reference to humanity (hominid) intact. This is a graphic way of saying that humanity's natural past is now obsolete, and the fusion between humans and machines is the next important stage in evolution. The *anime* film *Metropolis* (Rintarô 2001) argues (narratively) the opposite point, that the fusion between humanity and technology is very dangerous. The film-narrative gradually shows the robot, Tima, who is virtually human, to be a source of destruction as much as of wonder, and the film ends on a pessimistic note. Comparing *Ghost in the Shell* with *Metropolis* one cannot avoid the conclusion that, as far as active nihilism goes, the first of these films enthusiastically embraces the chance to create new values for the future – reminiscent of what was referred to earlier on the part of Ishihara (Iwabuchi 1994: 12), that Japan 'is of the future' – while the second (*Metropolis*) is wary of

the potential destructiveness of technology when it is glorified too easily. The active nihilism in *Metropolis* is similar to that of *Ghost in the Shell* when it comes to the promotion of the development of simulated humans in the form of robots (and therefore creating new values for a technological society), which are able (like Tima) to discover their ability to perceive colours, for example, with as much pleasure and wonder as humans do. The film raises all kinds of questions of a moral and social nature in the light of these possibilities, however, given its emphasis that robots' 'humanoid' capabilities, wonderful as they are, do not come without their dark, destructive side.

The last *anime* film I want to consider here is *Akira* (1988), directed by Katsuhiro Otomo, because comparing it to *Ghost in the Shell* and *Metropolis* as far as its stance on nihilism goes, one gets the distinct impression that it embodies a deep doubt in the face of technological developments that may already have tampered too much with the primal forces of nature. It is set in Neo-Tokyo, in the year 2019, after World War III, and reveals a chaotic, volatile situation involving a corrupt government, insurgent terrorists, street gangs and the military. When monitored at a government laboratory, one of the motorcycle gang's members, Tetsuo, is discovered to have genetic properties similar to those of Akira – an experimental subject who was placed in cryonic suspension because of his colossal, virtually uncontrollable 'natural' potential. As Tetsuo becomes more and more powerful (and volatile), the narrative moves towards a final reassertion of nature's awesome, uncontrollable powers, in the face of which puny humans can do nothing. The nihilistic element here is difficult to identify, because there is hardly any promotion of new values (that is, active nihilism) for a future society. Nor does it seem to advocate passive nihilism as the falling back on old value systems – these appear to be corrupt and self-destructive. In fact, it seems to assert radical nihilism in a pessimistic way as far as human society is concerned, but with a hint that nature will have the last word – in the end the creative process will start all over again.

The broad picture painted by the *anime* familiar to me is therefore one of a society filled with tensions concerning intrinsic human values, a culture that is torn between the more 'liberal' and personal value systems that constitute active nihilism in a world critically aware of the falsity of passively nihilistic ideological structures, and the safe, simple security of retreating into those very passive-nihilistic, preconstructed moral systems. As I have tried to show, *anime* serves as a medium for expression of these tensions.

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